



**Enabling Social  
Innovation**



# **CONFERENCE REPORT**

**Enabling Social Innovation:  
Concept, Frameworks and  
Organisational Changes**

## Acknowledgements

This is a report of the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD).

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European Association of Service providers  
for Persons with Disabilities

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## 1. Introduction

The term “social innovation” as a qualifier for a novel idea, product, or service with social purpose, has been widely used to such an extent that, today it seems to encompass everything and, in doing so, ends up covering nothing at all. The meaning of social innovation has become so blurred and vague that “social innovation” in practice – and, in turn, the ability of support services to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) – has been hampered.

A common understanding of what Social Innovation entails for persons with disabilities is therefore necessary, as a revitalisation of what the concept means now. In this context, promoting, guiding, and supporting innovation through a European definition – in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, that allows and boost creativity and more tailored-made services that inspire and promote cooperation among stakeholders.

Essentially, social innovation in the field of disability is a topic of vital importance to generate social transformation that enables the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all areas of society. To this end, reflection, and analysis on a common understanding at European level about the meaning of “social innovation” is required.

This document provides an overview of the key elements in the discussions during the EASPD International Conference on **Enabling Social Innovation: Concept, Frameworks and Organisational Changes**, which took place in Helsinki, Finland between October 12 and 13, 2023 and co-hosted alongside the Service Foundation for People with an Intellectual Disability ([KVPS](#)). During the conference, discussions ranged from the meaning of social innovation and concrete examples, to how to improve organisational, structural settings to facilitate innovation and the methodology for transferring innovation taking into account contextual differences. It represents the very first step that will lead to an EASPD Declaration on Social Innovation.

## 2. Social Innovation in Disability Support Services

In the last decades, social innovation has been talked about more and more frequently in reference to new products or social market models, new educational methodologies, technology with a social purpose, and improvements in the organisation, provision, and delivery of social and public services. More specifically, in the field of disability, the definition is a matter of debate and reflection. Beyond an exact definition – which until now had been lacking –, the concept of social innovation has been linked to a process that seeks the transformation or generation of positive changes in society through models that allow addressing and satisfying the needs and desires of persons with disabilities. But questions remain on what are the factors and characteristics that constitute social innovation in the field of disability and from there, how could it be defined?

In first place, the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) must be at the centre of discussions on social innovation in the disability field, as it is the landmark that introduces the paradigm shift from the medical to the social model and rejects the idea of dependency of persons with disabilities by reinforcing, protecting, and promoting the empowerment, autonomy and full enjoyment of the human rights of persons with disabilities in equal conditions to others. In this sense, the principles of the UN CRPD are the guiding point for providing human rights-based support services.

Essentially, the transition from the medical to the social model leading to human rights-based disability services under the principles of the UN CRPD, requires greater reflection on “support” and, more particularly, a redefinition of “care” – that until now has been associated to the idea that persons with disabilities are “passive beings” recipients of compassion. To finally break away from that, it is intrinsically necessary to include persons with disabilities, families and representatives in a co-productive process that drives the development of their support. Predominantly, this can be summarised by responding to their willingness to have more **agency, autonomy, and independence over their decisions and lives, equal to others.**

Consequently, support services play a fundamental role in the full implementation of the UN CRPD and in enabling the inclusion of persons with disabilities, as expressed in the Article 19 on “Living independently and

being included in the community”. This means moving away from the old segregating settings of the medical model and sponsoring and promoting the transformation of support services to restores voice and power to persons with disabilities. In this sense, social innovation in the field of disability is to generate ideas and solutions that accelerate the transition from the medical model to the social model based on human rights and achieve, step by step, the full implementation of the UN CRPD, by empowering persons with disabilities. Furthermore, social innovation in disability field requires identifying and addressing the needs and wishes of persons with disabilities to improve their welfare. This implies addressing their desires and aspirations as a bigger concept, rather than just ‘problems’; it is about creating and providing persons with disabilities with tailored and person-centred support to enable them to live more fulfilling lives in a more inclusive society and with opportunities for learning and employment on an equal basis to others. As such, it requires the involvement of persons with disabilities on design, conception, implementation, evaluation, and impact measurement of their support. This will ultimately enable new social relationships and collaboration, inclusion in the community and empowerment.

To ensure a successful co-productive process that provides person-centred innovative solutions, it is therefore needed the development of inclusive and accessible methodologies to allow the participation of persons with disabilities in the development and implementation, as well as in the decision-making process for products or services that affect their lives. In this sense, social innovation is the result of a process of cooperation and partnership involving and including relevant stakeholders to achieve high-quality support services that adequately respond to the needs of persons with disabilities, based on the principles framed in the UN CRPD.

In sum, social innovation in disability support services encompasses the generation, development, implementation, and evaluation of ideas and/or projects and services that are person-centred and human rights-based – therefore, co-produced with persons with disabilities, their families and representatives –, as means for inclusion and social transformation capable of generating new (or optimised), more effective, efficient and more impactful solutions to respond to the needs and wishes of persons with disabilities, by providing them with voice, choice and control over their lives and the support they receive.



Additionally, social innovation recognises other different variables that also constitute minimum requirements: bottom-up approach, social impact, accountability, scalability and transferability, economic sustainability, intersectoral collaboration and type of innovation that allow its analysis and assessment.<sup>1</sup> On more concrete actions, innovative solutions in disability field aim at designing mechanisms and breaking barriers to enable and support inclusive living and participation in all areas of society and avoid re-investing to ‘refurbishing and reforming’ settings that are segregating in their core and remain as isolating spaces.

### 3. Enabling Social Innovation in Disability Support Services

Coincidentally, social innovation is also a focus of interest at the organisational level among service providers for persons with disabilities, that are looking for optimal solutions to improving their internal structure to achieve their objectives more effectively.

Developing more innovative organisational models can facilitate the development of more innovative forms of support. Organisational innovation plays a crucial role in enhancing an organisation’s effectiveness by implementing of new methods for organising work routines, procedures, building external relations, and revising practices to increase the organisation's performance by reducing structural barriers, strengthening internal trust, and encouraging staff autonomy and engagement. Organisations that embrace a culture of innovation among management and staff members inspire passion, commitment and inevitably operate at an advantage.

From this perspective, leadership and intrapreneurship have a significant impact in driving the innovation of an organisation. In the case of intrapreneurs, these are the innovators that exist and operate within the organisations whose contributions stands up by energising them, solving problems, streamlining processes, and generating social impact from their activities. For instance, staff members working on the field and with more direct interaction with persons with disabilities can listen to the needs and wishes of persons with disabilities and identify mechanisms and solutions for adapting to their demands and improve the forms of support.

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<sup>1</sup> EASPD. (2023) [The Concept of Social Innovation in the Disability Field](#). Brussels.

Similarly, competent leadership with a visionary and inspiring attitude can be a crucial agent of change, which from any vocation can generate innovation that positively impacts the organisation and the lives of persons with disabilities receiving support from it. Among other things, innovation-oriented leadership is reflective and skilled in seeking new horizons by building partnerships and promoting cooperation at all levels, involving stakeholders and persons with disabilities.

The entrepreneurial and creative culture within an organisation, in addition to being recognisable in its dual function of creating and implementing ingenious ideas that address social needs, has also become an objective to ensure sustainability and the business model of an organisation. In this sense, innovation within the organisation is aimed at designing a process that improves internal practices and external outputs, as well as allows the impact measurement, the generation of partnerships and support networks to transform society. Furthermore, the innovative practices of one organisation should be inspiring to others. The improvement and optimisation of a known practice or even its implementation in a different context, – in either case, leadership and intrapreneurship play a fundamental role in making it happen.

In practice, social innovation can emerge in complex contexts with sufficient or limited access to resources, but it is manifold, non-linear, and highly context specific. This means that transferring innovation is not a copy/paste procedure, but local realities are also key to set expectations and enable discussion to bring in concrete outcomes and adapting the innovative practice to the local needs. Transferring innovation from one context to another could positively support the implementation of the UN CRPD across Europe and beyond. Therefore, more than competition, social innovation in the disability field should be about inspiration and collaboration.



#### 4. EASPD's Role on Social Innovation

EASPD wants to guide and support innovation through a European definition – in line with the UN CRPD -, and promoting creativity, fairness, and more person-centeredness, based on individual and local needs and wishes that can help drive the transformation of support services by giving it a sense of direction and clarity over what is innovative, and what is not innovative. To this goal, EASPD commits to continue leading the debate on “social innovation” in the disability field to achieve a common definition that resonates with disability support sector and our objectives as social services to empower persons with disabilities by giving them back their voice, decision, and control.

EASPD reaffirms its commitment to continue working to promote and support the full implementation of the UN CRPD and achieve high-quality services that support persons with disabilities to live independently in the community, with education and fair employment opportunities. To deepen its efforts in leading and promoting innovation from the Secretariat and together with members and partners, building innovative projects with social impact, as well as identifying and actively circulating innovative practices to enable peer-learning, transfer of knowledge, inspiration, and deepen its advocacy work. Similarly, continue to assist and boost innovation through EASPD's Member Fora in essential areas affecting the lives of persons with disabilities, such as Early Childhood Intervention, Arts and Culture, Employment, Person Centred-Technology, Education, Inclusive Living, Service Providers' Workforce and Development, and Social Policies.

Finally, EASPD will continue building, strengthening, and engaging in long-term partnerships with key actors at the level of the EU, national and international institutions and stakeholders to promote intersectoral cooperation and encourage wider society to take action through awareness raising campaigns and initiatives. The objective is promoting an agenda of innovation and social impact for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, the opportunities for growth and transformation of service support that ultimately leads to the full implementation of the UN CRPD.