

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE DISABILITY FIELD

Executive Summary

For many decades disability rights movement has been fighting for the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities and the redefinition of their role in the society. While the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 marked a major milestone for this movement, the translation of the compromises adopted in concrete changes is still a work in progress. The transformation process involves not only the reform and development of an appropriate legal and policy framework but also the creation of new services and products, the adaptation and re-design of infrastructure, the modification of societal perceptions on disability and other complex social challenges.

Social innovation emerges as a crucial tool in addressing these challenges enabling the exploration of innovative and novel solutions to respond to the needs and aspirations of individuals with disabilities, while amplifying their voices, preferences, and desires.

However, the concept of social innovation is still under construction, with ongoing debates about its definition among academics and researchers. Meanwhile, the actors involved in the necessary transformation, such as service providers or policy makers, seek for guidelines and clarification of what constitute or not a social innovation or how to promote these social innovations in the field of disability.

In this context, this study aims to construct a working definition of social innovation applied to the disability field and identify drivers for its adoption by the public sector. The proposed definition is based on literature review, field research, and expert interviews. The study identifies key drivers for the public sector to facilitate and enable social innovation, drawing from interviews with experts and social innovators.

The document explores the concept of social innovation in relation to disability, examines the legal and policy landscape influencing it in Europe, presents drivers and enablers for public sector involvement, and concludes with findings and recommendations for future action.

Social innovation in the disability field

Although social innovation is not a new concept, it is still in construction phase, looking for consensus among academia and scientific literature. Different literature and systematic reviews (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2017; The Young Foundation, 2012) have analysed how social innovation is defined in the scientific literature, finding a large number of definitions that vary according to the discipline or the context where they are used.

Since there is no common/agreed definition of social innovation, to understand the meaning of social innovation in the framework of support services for people with disabilities on a cross-European basis, this study proposes a working definition of what social innovation in the disability field:

“Social innovation in the disability field refers to the generation, development, testing and implementation of groundbreaking ideas and practices in a specific context that respond to people with disabilities’ needs and wishes. These practices must be person-centred solutions that enable people with disabilities to fully enjoy all their human rights, respect their voice, choice and control, promote their independent living within the community, and ensure their participation in every area of life including public affairs. In addition, people with disabilities have to play an active role, not only in the design of these new practices and solutions but also in their implementation, validation, and other stages, creating new partnerships and collaborations, while transforming social relations and empowering people with disability’s capacity to act.”

The proposed working definition is based on:

1. The identification of key ingredients of social innovation according to the analysis of different definitions from some of the most salient institutional actors, and academics based on the review done by The Young Foundation (2012), Hernández-Ascanio et al. (2017) and the SEED project (Seed, n.d.).
2. The identification of current needs, demands, and aspirations of people with disabilities reflected on key documents (CRPD, “Transformation of services for persons with disabilities” and “Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2021-2030”).
3. Feedback from experts in the field of disabilities.

The working definition of social innovation in the disability field contains various concepts that require clarification to ensure a better understanding. The following table presents an overview of the criteria that should be considered when evaluating a social innovation in the disability field. A more in-depth view of these concepts is provided in section 3 of the study.

Table 1. Social innovation in the field of disability: minimum requirements, criteria and best practice principles

Minimum requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A social innovation in the disability field has to respect all human rights of people with disabilities including respect the voice, choice and control of people with disabilities, moral agency, informed consent, respect for privacy, accessibility, promotion of inclusion.
A social innovation in the disability field is a practice that¹:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents Novelty • Effectively improves welfare and wellbeing of people with disabilities • Proposes person-centred solutions based on a human rights based approach • Proposes solutions that are gender, sexual and culture sensitive • Empowers people with disabilities, their families & communities

¹ Adapted from EAPN briefing “Through social innovation to better social inclusion in the EU” and taking into consideration the European Quality Framework for Social Services (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=6140&langId=en>)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates new social relationships or collaborations • Enhances people with disabilities capacity to act • Follows a bottom-up approach • Is driven by people with disabilities • Contributes to positive changes in attitudes, mindsets, and values
Good practice principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability • Accountability • Affordability • Transferability/Scalability

About the promotion and support of social innovation: main drivers

The European Union has implemented several programs and initiatives to support social innovation projects which find solutions to different social challenges including the inclusion of people with disabilities at all levels: employment, education, etc. The ESF+ and its ESF Social Innovation+ are part of the strategy followed by the European Union to promote and support social innovation and social enterprises. A revision of the most important initiatives and programmes that provide a supportive environment for social innovation at European Union level is presented in section 4 of the study.

Meanwhile, section 5 is focused on the identification of drivers and enablers of social innovation that should be implemented by the public sector. The identification of these drivers and enablers is grounded in desk and field research, which involved interviews with experts and social innovators who provided valuable insights and perspectives.

The list of drivers identified during field research is presented in the following figure.



Figure 1. Main drivers of social innovation in the disability field that should be adopted by the public sector

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EASPD is the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities. We are a European not-for-profit organisation representing over 20,000 social services and disability organisations across Europe. The main objective of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.