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European Competence Centre for Social Innovation: Communities of Practice

ESF+ Community of Practice on Social Innovation Interactive Online Workshop “ESF+ Programmes: Social Innovation in Practice”

23 February 2023, on-line event

SUMMARY REPORT

The first on-line event of the Community of Practice (CoP) on Social Innovation took place on 23 February 2023. It welcomed 75 participants from 26 EU Member States (MS). The interactive workshop was designed for ESF+ Managing Authorities (MAs) and focused on the Social Innovation priorities in ESF+ programmes (2021-2027). The aim of the event was to share the first EU level analysis of the Social Innovation priority programmed in ESF+ programmes, to allow all ESF MAs to position themselves in this overall picture, and to discover the variety of approaches across the EU as well as some practical tools from the recent EU publications: [Social experimentation: A practical guide for project promoters, aimed to support project promoters preparing social experimentation proposals](#), and [Scaling up Social Innovations: Seven steps for using ESF+](#) designed to help ESF+ MAs implement the Social Innovation Priority efficiently.

In the opening speech, Risto Raivio from the European Social Fund+ (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission) congratulated the audience with the participation in this Social Innovation CoP event, recalling the fundamental mission of a Community of Practice: *“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”*. The real value of Social Innovation CoP results from the constant exchange of insights and information in the form of continuous mutual learning, and *“is an opportunity for authorities and other relevant stakeholders to ask questions and share experiences, to become a unique and authentic learning platform in the social field,”* Mr Raivio said. He also reminded of the call for volunteers from ESF Managing Authorities for chairing the CoP. Due to their key role in the effective implementation of the Social Innovation Priority, ESF Managing Authorities could significantly help the experts to design activities that would best correspond to the needs of MS.

Asta Jurgutė, Head of Social Innovation Competence Group at the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation, noted that the people present were those who really care about Social Innovation priority programming in ESF+, the subject of the day's discussion. *“Together, everyone will take what has*

been done over the past 2 years and build on the results and achievements". "We hope that the overview of the programmes presented today will allow ESF+ Managing Authorities to position themselves in the wider social innovation ecosystem", said Ms Jurgutė.

Živilė Čimolauskaitė, the coordinator of the CoP on Social Innovation, introduced the supporting team of social innovation experts, Armelle Ledan and Vera Barracho. She underlined again that the purpose of this CoP is to help Member States create a community at EU level, practicing mutual learning and sharing. She then reminded the key objectives of the work programme, stressing its "practice-oriented" aspect: (1) Building a practical common understanding of social innovation and social experimentation across Member States, from projects to public policies; (2) Social innovation ecosystems and governance models of National Competence Centres (NCCs); (3) Transferring, upscaling and mainstreaming social innovation (the event PPT presentation is in Annex).

SOCIAL INNOVATION PRIORITY IN ESF+ PROGRAMMES: DESK RESEARCH AND SURVEY RESULTS – BRIEF EU OVERVIEW

Armelle Ledan, thematic expert in the field of social innovation, presented the preliminary results of a desk review on Social Innovation Priority in ESF+ Programmes and an online survey "ESF+ support to social innovation" performed in the framework of this CoP.

- Since the ESF+ regulation imposes on Member States to dedicate at least one priority to social innovation, it is easier to identify how ESF+ supports this area, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, although social innovation is also supported by ESF+ in other priorities where this support is less visible. **A total of 45 ESF+ programmes include a social innovation priority, 25 at national level and 20 at regional level.** The ESF+ figures shown during the meeting (ESF+ budget allocated to dedicated social innovation priorities, and their proportion compared to the total ESF+ for each MS) are currently reviewed by the EC on the basis of the latest official data available. They will be included in the report analysing the content of the social innovation priorities in all MS (desk review).
- **The review shows a wide variety of approaches adopted by Member States, depending on their legal, social, cultural and political contexts.** The content of ESF+ social innovation priorities, specific objectives supported, territorial approaches, target groups, co-funding rates used, and integration with ERDF are very different across Member States and programmes. The majority of programmes support only one of the 13 ESF+ specific objectives (article 4(1)), mainly focusing on:
 - > "Access to employment and activation measure for all" (article 4.1(a), 14 programmes),
 - > "Active inclusion and employability" (article 4.1 (h), 21 programmes), and
 - > "Equal access to quality social and healthcare services" (article 4.1 (k), 12 programmes). However, the desk review showed that even behind the same specific objective, Member States have chosen different approaches, policy areas and measures.

One key aim of the new programming period 2021-2027 is to enhance the transfer and upscaling of successful social innovations, in order to maximise their social impact, and to expand their benefits to a larger scale by covering more people, organisations and territories. **Besides the need of improving the supply** (the number and quality of implemented social innovation projects and pilot initiatives) **and increasing the policy demand** (understanding and appetite for SI to reform policies), **it is highly important to better bridge and connect the supply and demand sides.** The ESF+ programmes show two main approaches to implement the social innovation priority:

- (1) one which is more “supply-driven”, focusing on the ecosystem to improve and increase social innovation initiatives, using a bottom-up approach to identify the unmet social needs (e.g.: Sweden, Denmark, France, Poland); and
- (2) the opposite one, more “policy-demand driven” where the unmet social needs are identified by policymakers for a specific policy area, using a top-down approach (e.g.: Finland, Cyprus). Both approaches are valuable and can be combined, as demonstrated in many programmes. However, they have different advantages and limitations, notably in terms of projects selection and projects potential for further transfer and upscaling. These approaches were illustrated by two testimonials from Member States.

TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES RELATED TO THE SOCIAL INNOVATION PRIORITY IN THEIR ESF+ PROGRAMMES: CYPRUS AND SWEDEN

Two speakers from Sweden and Cyprus, Johnny Karlsson (National Coordinator, Swedish ESF-council) and Socrates Melis (Planning Officer at the Government of Cyprus, DG GROWTH – Ministry of Finance), presented different approaches to the social innovation priority in their ESF+ Programmes.



In **CYPRUS**, the ESF+ Social Innovation priority supports the specific objective SO4.11 “Equal access to quality social and healthcare services”, focusing on their national Disability Strategy and action plan 2018-2028. The ESF+ resources are concentrated on needs and gaps identified in this policy area (policy-driven approach), and the innovative measures and actions planned are described in a quite detailed manner (see PPT presentation).



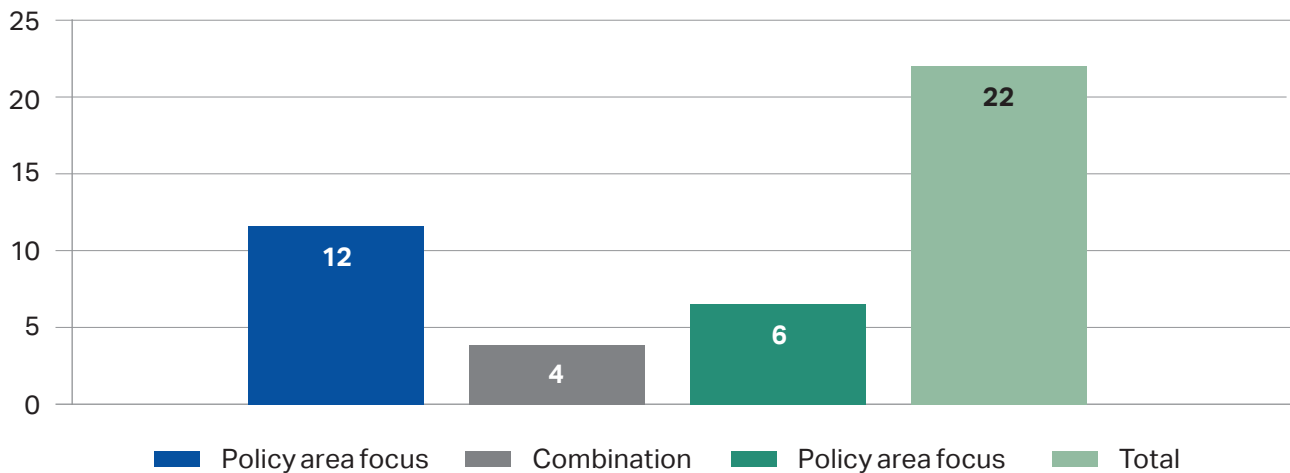
SWEDEN on the contrary, has opted for a more open, systemic and bottom-up approach, consistent with the national plan and four prioritised areas. No single topic approach and needs are formulated at macro and mezzo levels. It focuses on organisations and structures, on sustainable cooperation between actors and new methods to reach the target groups, and on strengthening the conditions and capacity of social innovations and innovators. Forum for social innovation will cluster projects into coalitions (see PPT presentation).

Both approaches include the upscaling and transfer of social innovations in other ESF+ priorities, and in the case of Cyprus, even in the next programming period.

PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSIONS

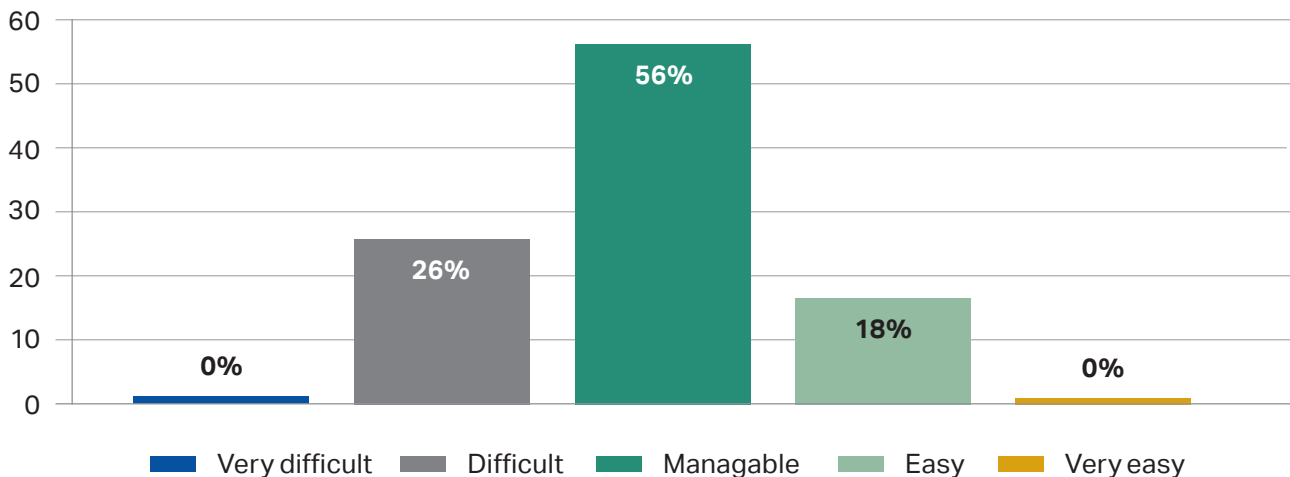
Parallel breakout sessions were organised around the 3 main policy areas (ESEF+ specific objectives) supported by the Social Innovation Priority, with pools and discussions to better identify the approaches chosen by the Member States, their challenges and advantages concerning, in particular, the policy makers involvement and plans for upscaling and transfer.

Which of the two policy approaches presented is closer to the one you chose to program your ESF+ SI priority (number of responses)?



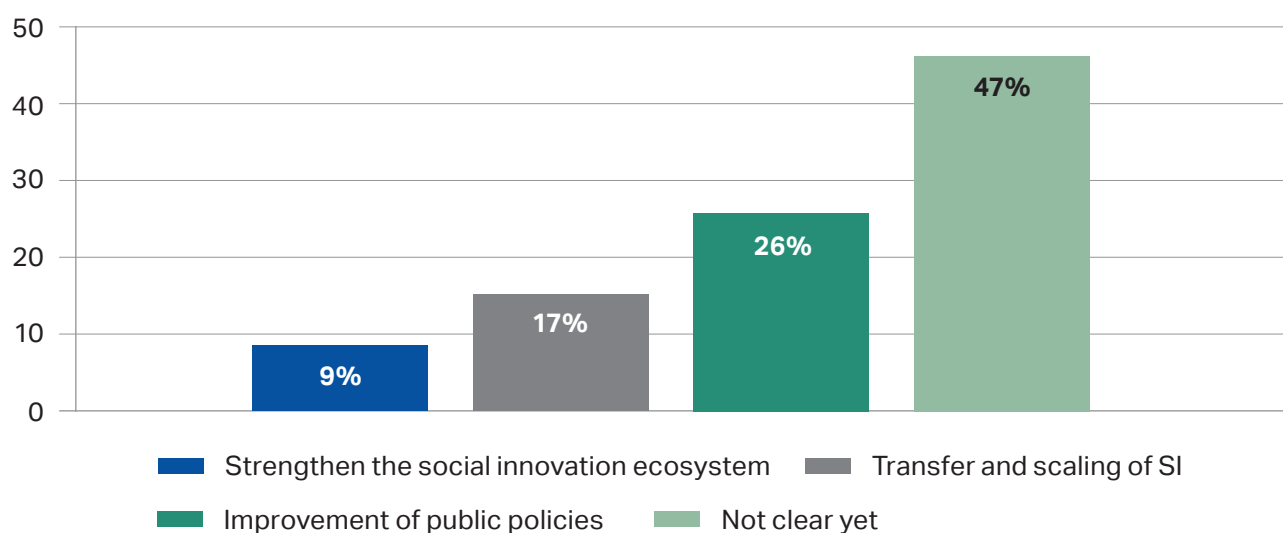
Irrespective of the specific objective supported, the policy-driven approach is chosen in the majority of ESF+ programmes, with a defined political orientation. The discussions provided additional insights. In particular, some countries (e. g. Lithuania and Poland) explained the benefits of a combined approach, which starts with a large policy focus but leaves some space and freedom to adapt to the new needs emerging during the ESF+ implementation period.

How difficult was it to get the relevant policymakers involved in your programming process (%)?



Policymakers were involved during the ESF+ programming exercise. However, the real challenge was to attract the **relevant** ones to the design and programming of Social Innovation Priority, because ESF+ and social innovation are still perceived as a complex area. Social innovation usually requires involvement of numerous Ministries and responsible policymakers, which brings up classical coordination issues: relevant policy-level officials are quite hard to reach, not familiar with social innovation, and naturally reluctant to tackle the "risk dimension" intrinsically associated with it. Social innovation, and more precisely ESF+ support to social innovation, is a rather new phenomenon in most countries still hampered by a lack of common understanding. When it comes to programming, policymakers are involved at a very general level, especially in the case of open and supply-driven approaches. Later, in the process of calls, specific policymakers will be reached out, depending on each call, and may pose another challenge, especially when these policymakers are not project partners. Once the programmes are designed, another difficult task is setting up selection and eligibility criteria.

How do you plan to use the results of your SI priority to expand them at a wider scale (%)?



Nearly half of the respondents have not yet decided regarding the upscaling and transfer of social innovation, which is not very surprising. As previously said, supporting social innovation is a rather new field for ESF MAs, and this step is the most challenging one. It seems to be even more challenging for ESF+ programmes that have a more open approach not focused on a specific policy area: the process being bottom-up, innovative solutions are still unknown and potentially cover a wide array of fields. However, it is interesting to note that a quarter of the responses indicated that social innovation results would be used to improve public policies. The example of Sweden, which uses an open policy approach but has a quite clear process, raised interest. Their model, while eventually aiming at impact on policy level, uses a step-by-step approach, from project coalitions to transferring successful innovative projects to other ESF+ priorities as a test bed, before upscaling them at policy level. Again, the question was raised how to select successful social innovation projects suitable for upscaling and transfer. In particular, what evaluation methods should be used, and how to assess their innovative value.

The distinction between social innovation and social inclusion priorities appears quite blurred to some participants.

The polls and discussions during the 3 breakout sessions revealed that the implementation of Social Innovation priorities is still in a very early stage for most ESF MAs. Although upscaling and transfer are taken into consideration in most programmes, more support will be needed in future SI CoP activities.

INTERACTIVE PRESENTATIONS FOCUSED ON TWO SPECIFIC KEY ISSUES:

Armelle Ledan and Vera Egreja Barracho, thematic experts in the field of social innovation, made interactive presentations focused on two key issues: "Framing social needs and selecting relevant, innovative projects", and "Planning, upscaling and transferring successful projects". The speakers identified and examined interesting examples from ESF+ programmes. They also discussed resources and tools from the EU guides "[Social experimentation: A practical guide for project promoters](#)" aimed at supporting project promoters in preparing social experimentation and social innovation proposals, and "[Scaling up Social Innovations: Seven steps for using ESF+](#)" designed with some ESF MAs in the framework of the previous Social Innovation CoP. Some countries are already translating these guides into their national languages to ease their dissemination and increase the outreach. Both contain many tools and can help a lot in preparing calls, selecting proposals and evaluating project results.

The presentations and discussion helped community members and guests to understand what social innovation means in practice and how it can be analysed and adopted in the ESF+ framework.

1. Framing social needs and selecting relevant innovative projects, Armelle Ledan

The definition of social innovation from the ESF+ regulation is quoted in most programmes, however, turning it into practice can be challenging. To make this task easier and help organise their thinking, ESF+ programme managers may ask themselves the following questions:

- What **differentiate** a social innovation or social experimentation project from “mainstream” ones? What are you looking for when you launch ESF+ calls for social innovation and social experimentation projects?
- How do you frame your ESF+ SI calls to get high quality proposals that really fit the social needs identified?

The following graph, an extract from the above-mentioned practical guide for project promoters, was showed to illustrate the fundamental characteristics of social experimentation and social innovation that distinguish them from “mainstream ESF+ projects”. The importance of identifying unmet or badly met social needs was stressed, because it helps to see the difference from “mainstream” projects which also answer social needs, but not those that are totally or unsatisfactorily met. Unmet social needs are the roots, the rationale, behind any social innovation. The innovative dimension relates to both the content of the solution AND the way it is produced, in partnership. Social innovation is by nature a collaborative process. Another important aspect of innovative solutions is avoiding assumptions: unmet social needs as well as the innovativeness of the solution in its implementing context shall be demonstrated with evidence.

Social experimentation pilots, mentioned in several programmes, are “policy interventions”. They have three characteristics in common with social innovation projects, and three others which are specific and compulsory for social experimentation (also valid for social innovation projects, despite being less strict.)

Social Innovation and Social Experimentation characteristics

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SOCIAL EXPERIMENTATION:

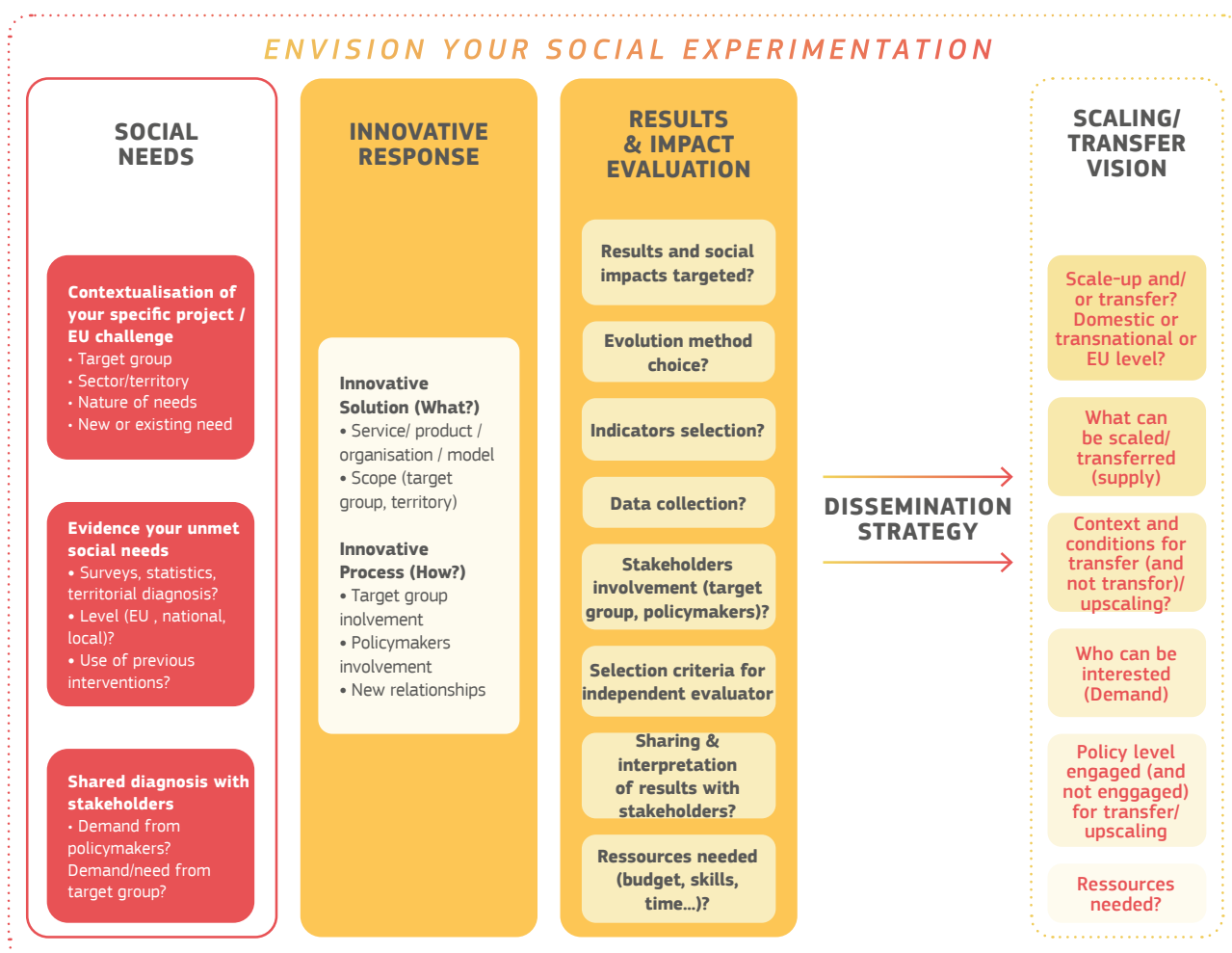
- 1) **A clear intended primary goal: to create positive social change** (social value) which is distinct from other forms of innovation with different primary aims (productivity, economic growth, profit) even if incidentally also delivering positive social outcomes.
- 2) **Identified social needs** not or badly satisfied by existing solutions from both public and private sectors.
- 3) **Innovative responses to those unsatisfied social needs; innovative in both:**
 - **the solution** produced whatever forms it takes (products, services, practices, models).
 - **the way this solution is produced**, because social innovation is **collective and collaborative**, based on the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and creating new partnerships and new forms of collaboration between various stakeholders involved.

SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL EXPERIMENTATION:

- 4) **Small-scale implementation** of the pilot given the uncertainty of its effects (risks), not tackling the entire social needs at the pilot stage but a significant proportion.
- 5) **Conditions for rigorous measurement/assessment of social impact/outcomes**, in order to prove the effectiveness and efficiency of the solution tested.
- 6) **Early plans for a wider scale implementation** (transfer or upscaling) anticipating positive evaluation results.

Source: Social experimentation. A practical guide for project promoters. Page 14

Social innovation and social experimentation projects follow the same four steps and have the same four main components to be looked for in the ESF+ calls and to be found in project proposals. The social experimentation/social innovation canvas depicts these 4 steps in more details, as shown below:



Source: Social experimentation. A practical guide for project promoters. Page 14

Social innovation is a highly context-specific phenomenon, therefore, the social needs identified and the innovative solutions proposed will vary depending on the topic, as well as on the legal, cultural, administrative, demographic, or historical background. Social innovation is also relative, and a project can well be innovative in a given context, even if it has already been developed and applied in other contexts. This 4-steps canvas is meant to support the preparation of proposals but is also useful to better design and frame the ESF+ calls for projects. Social innovation projects should be relevant to the social needs identified, demonstrate that the solution is innovative, and provide a solution that is better than the existing ones, including in terms of cost efficiency, if possible.

This EU practical guide provides more information about these four steps, with a toolbox containing several practical online tools for each step. It also includes a detailed description of 35 EaSI social experimentation projects that contributed to its creation which can be useful when looking for successful proven social innovation with a view to upscaling and/or transfer. Many of them correspond to the policy areas covered by the Social Innovation Priority of the ESF+ programmes, in particular, for social and healthcare services.

A short self-reflection exercise including four questions was proposed to the participants as a kind of 'reality check' for themselves, an awareness raising exercise, irrespective whether their ESF+ calls had been already launched or not:

Q1. ***Elements to be precisely described in your SI calls (3 options, multiple choice):*** out of 14 answers, 71% of the respondents chose "the unmet social needs to be addressed (nature of needs, target group, territory)", whereas only 29% of them would precisely describe "the innovative solutions expected (type of solutions and partnerships)" and 21% "the results and impact evaluation expected".

Q2. ***Availability of clear criteria when selecting the project proposals (6 options, multiple choice):*** out of 17 answers, a majority of 71% responded "the relevance of the response to the needs", nearly half of them (47%) will have clear criteria to assess "the innovativeness of the response" and "the cost-efficiency of the proposal", and only 41% said they could clearly assess "the demonstration of unmet social needs in context" and "the upscaling/transfer plans". A little more than one third of respondents only (35%) said that they will have criteria for the "evaluation method proposed".

Q3. ***What is the most difficult to assess in a project proposal? (6 same options than for Q2., multiple choice):*** only 5 answers were provided for this question, and "the innovativeness of the response" (4 respondents) ranks first, followed by "the relevance of the response to the social needs" (3 respondents).

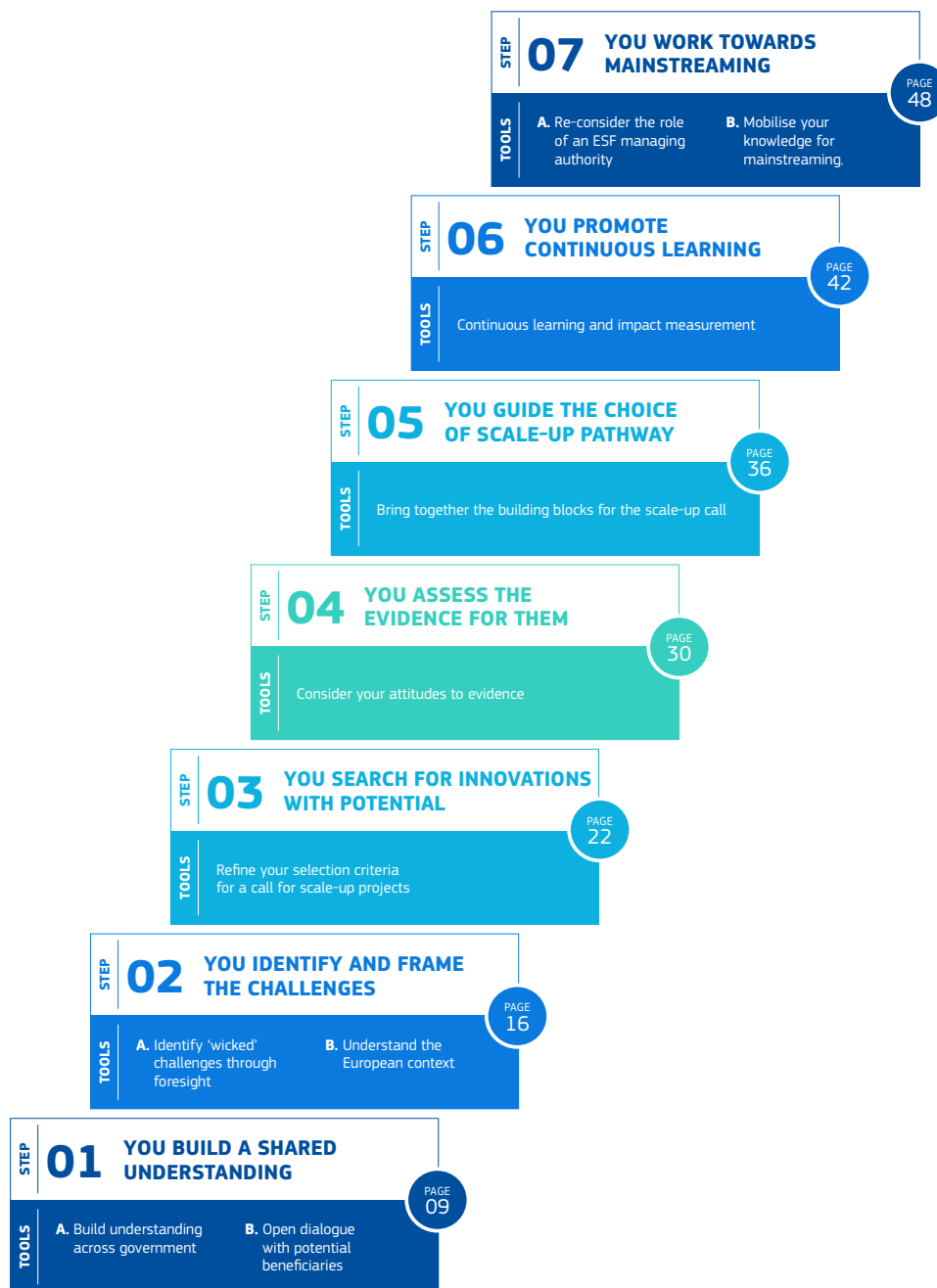
Q4. ***Will you change the composition of the selection entity according to the calls topics?*** 15 responses were given to this question, with a relatively balanced result: 47% said "yes", and 53% said "no".

The composition of the selection entity that will select project proposals can vary depending on the topic of the call, to ease the assessment of the innovativeness and relevance of the proposals in a specific field and gather the relevant expertise from thematic experts. For instance, the ESF MA from Spain explained that all social innovation projects in their country will be evaluated by an expert in the social innovation field.

2. Planning upscaling and transfer of successful projects, Vera Barracho

The "[Scaling up Social Innovations: Seven steps for using ESF+](#)" publication serves as a good source to help MA's and intermediate bodies make strategic use of their ESF+ resources since the steps are described according to and fitting into the ESF+ funding cycle phases. Despite the sequence presented below, it is important to acknowledge that in reality each step can be taken in a different order depending on the needs and potential of the context.

7 STEPS FOR USING ESF+



HOW THE STEPS FIT INTO THE ESF FUNDING CYCLE						
Programming	Programming Call for proposals planning	Call for proposals planning Proposal evaluation	Call for proposals planning Proposal evaluation and follow-up	Call for proposals planning Proposal evaluation and follow-up	Project delivery	Project delivery and post-project legacy

Considering the current programming phase, most countries haven't yet concluded their Calls for proposals planning including proposal evaluation and follow-up criteria, thus the group reflection and conversation did not go beyond step three of the guide.

An important dimension to be considered when programming and accompanying project delivery is the approach to evidence, meaning the level of evidence requested from scalable projects to prove their positive results and impact. A self-reflection exercise was proposed to participants, to make them think about the levels of evidence collection they would consider in their scaling-up calls:

Q5. *Evidence requested from scalable projects - Scaling-up Calls (6 options listed below, multiple choice)?*

- Level 0: promoters describe the need but not how it works (list of activities)
- Level 1: promoters describe why it matters and how it works (ex. Theory of Change)
- Level 2: promoters capture data but can't confirm it was caused by the SI
- Level 3: promoters capture data and can confirm it was caused directly by the SI (process-tracking, storytelling, control or comparison groups)
- Level 4: External independent assessments confirming conclusions (impact evaluation)
- Level 5: Manual, systems and procedures to ensure impact measurement (Impact Measurement and Management-IMM)

Out of 13 answers, more than half of the respondents will expect an average level of evidence, corresponding to "Level 2: promoters capture data but can't confirm it was caused by the SI" and "Level 3: promoters capture data and can confirm it was caused directly by the SI (process-tracking, storytelling, control or comparison groups)".

Which means that when funding social innovation, it is important to have criteria and funding instruments aligned with the different needs and potential of each stage of a social innovation project lifecycle.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND NEXT STEPS:

- Desk review of the priorities dedicated to Social Innovation in ESF+ national and regional programmes will be circulated in the near future.
- An upcoming induction workshop on SOCIAL INNOVATION MATCH (SIM), planned for 29 March 2023, will bring together national SIM validators of the EU Member States as well as ESF+ Committee Members.
- Managing Authorities are warmly invited to take up the opportunities offered by this Community of Practice to cooperate in the field of Social Innovation tackling both their own challenges and the common ones, matching the Specific objectives chosen for the SI priority in the ESF+ programmes.
- Managing Authorities are called for volunteering to chair the Social Innovation CoP during 2023. 2023, the Chair will be from an ESF+ MA, or from an NCC working closely with ESF+ bodies, with a solid experience in using ESF for social innovation, including operational capacity and availability to lead the work. A regular rotation of the CoP chairmanship as appropriate to the work and activities undertaken (e.g., yearly or biannually), with a transition period to ensure a smooth take over.