



**WILCO**

Welfare innovations  
at the local level  
in favour of cohesion

# Social Innovation Research in Horizon 2020

## Position paper

June 2013

### 1. The importance of social innovation

Social innovation has become one of the major topics on the European research agenda. Although wider interest in social innovation seems to be quite a recent phenomenon in Europe, researchers in universities and beyond have been involved in building a European corpus of knowledge on the subject for the past twenty years. The role of the European Commission in building this knowledge has been crucial through the Framework Programmes. There are several reasons for such attention.

***It is clear that new ideas and approaches are needed to tackle the severe and wicked problems with which contemporary societies are struggling, such as climate change, social vulnerability, long-term unemployment and ageing.*** Especially in times of economic crisis, social innovation is regarded as one of the crucial elements needed to move forward. New approaches and instruments cut through administrative thickets and make more of existing assets, partly by reinterpreting them in terms of new discourses. In addition, new resources can be found where nobody had looked before and new actors can be empowered to become agents of change. Of course, innovation, like luck, cannot be ordered at will. It is not a process that can or should be controlled. However, a better understanding of how it works and how it can be effectively encouraged and supported can be of great use to civil society, businesses and governments.

***Social innovation is increasingly seen as a necessary complement to technological innovation.*** While most research funding has been channelled towards the latter, it is in itself insufficient to solve society's problems. While the improvements in areas such as energy, health care and transport have traditionally been strongly shaped by technological innovation, it is now increasingly recognised that social innovation is crucial for addressing pressing challenges in each of these areas. For example, a shift towards renewable energy sources is unlikely to succeed unless accompanied by initiatives to change social habits and ingrained ways of working. A further exploration of how different types of innovation interact can significantly add to the effectiveness of both.

***There are still many barriers to social innovation in European societies.*** Indeed, innovation inherently goes against the grain of existing practices. Barriers range from regulations, organisational rigidities and scarce resources, to prevailing discourses and practices, to resistance within local communities. This means that many good ideas end up unrealised. Research can be useful in describing the barriers to innovations and discovering ways to overcome them.

***Finally, many social innovations that arise are only weakly disseminated and transferred.*** Many innovations are not picked up because their relevance is not recognised or they fail after they have been introduced,

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because they were not suitable to the different conditions, in another place, in another context. Without sufficient awareness of local conditions, instruments and approaches transferred from elsewhere can do more harm than good unless carefully adapted. This amounts to an enormous waste of talent and resources. Governments and markets must be sensitised to inputs from outside their system, for example through openness to alternative forms of deliberation or partnership, and through evidence-based knowledge of the critical factors that determine why innovations are adopted from elsewhere or not.

**European Union-funded research can play a crucial role in encouraging social innovation.** There is hardly any other funder that supports comparative research on this scale. Moreover, the European Union encourages both academic excellence and practical application of the results, whereas other funders tend to lean heavily towards the former (e.g. national science foundations) or the latter (businesses and governments). Yet it could be even more useful if certain aspects of the funding process were reconsidered.

**Therefore it is important that the European Union should devote sufficient funds for social innovation in Horizon 2020.**

## 2. The state of European research on social innovation

On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, representatives of several European Union-funded projects came together to discuss the potential for collaboration and to determine where we stand as a community of researchers. As part of this effort the European Commission, in collaboration with the WILCO project, commissioned a study to map the state of the

art of the current projects.<sup>1</sup> The recommendations presented here are the outcome of the study and of discussions during and following this seminar “Approaches to Research on Social Innovation: Learning from One Another for the Future”<sup>2</sup>, as well as the results of our collective research experience.

Knowledge of the dynamics of social innovation has significantly progressed, thanks to an abundance of studies on social innovation. However, despite the valuable research conducted over the past years, the study shows that the systematic analysis of social innovation - its definitions, theories and impacts - is still contested and incomplete. The study showed that lack of clarity remains in important areas, as does a high degree of conceptual fragmentation and confusion. While diversity can itself be regarded as a strength in academic debate, more collaboration between the different projects is needed to develop shared points of reference and to allow more cumulative knowledge-building. That is also relevant for the question how European research funding for social innovation should be allocated.

**There is a risk that, in its current form, competition for funding fragments the research community rather than bringing it together.** There is little incentive for researchers, who will be today’s or tomorrow’s competitors, to collaborate. Also, the combination of high costs and low success rates discourages many talented researchers

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison, Dennis & Jenson, Jane (2013), *Social innovation research in Europe: Approaches, evidence and future directions*. Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>2</sup> In collaboration with the European Commission, the WILCO project organised this seminar with the following goals: 1) to encourage the exchange of ideas and best practices among EU-funded research projects on social innovation through a process of mutual knowledge building and discussion; 2) to promote networking among members of different research projects on social innovation; and 3) to produce a publication that summarizes the tradition of social innovation research in Europe and outlines key questions/issues for future research. More information at [www.wilcoproject.eu](http://www.wilcoproject.eu)

from applying at all and leads to a waste of resources and energy among those who do. A lot of intellectual energy and capital are wasted in 'winner takes all' competitions, where the losing consortia receive no recognition. This means many good ideas are never realised. Highly competent partners are not involved, because they happened to be part of the wrong consortium.

The nature of the calls for applications affects the approach taken by research. As the study notes, "(the) emphasis on broad-based rather than narrow within-discipline research groups and projects is laudable. It corrects the tendency present in too many disciplines to focus on their own internal battles using their own theoretical jargon to the exclusion of others. Nonetheless, it is a practice that discourages a tight theoretical focus in a project" (p. 16). It also pays to cover as many aspects of social innovation as possible, an unintended side-effect of which is that there are major overlaps between the different projects.

***The challenge is how to combine the added value of European Union-funded research (the broad interdisciplinary and comparative perspective, the combined emphasis on academic excellence and practical application) with a more coherent approach to the study of social innovation.***

A solution is to encourage more collaboration, exchange and adjustment between projects. Seminars and gatherings like the one on which this paper is based are an obvious start. However, if it is to be a truly effective strategy, it has implications for how projects should be organised. Specifically, it requires that project managers have scope for adjusting projects after the award of funding, intervening in the original design. It also calls for mechanisms to involve more researchers within this community.

Another point raised in the mapping exercise is the need to increase collaboration between

academics and practitioners. Especially in the area of social innovation, which emanates from the joint actions and creativity of different parties, the co-production of knowledge would have a distinctive added value. Such collaboration could take the shape of consultation, experimentation, demonstration or incubation. The absence of "demonstration activities" in the Social Sciences and Humanities projects encourages a risk-averse attitude of both researchers and Commission representatives when implementing these projects. Thinking through the practical repercussions of projects and different ways to demonstrate them (e.g. by pilot-testing) could be a huge step forward for social innovation research. Involving the target audience as co-researchers could be another way to ensure that research objectives are translatable into practice. Again, the question is whether the current structure of projects allows such activities to be realised effectively. In calls for the social sciences and humanities, such activities are usually not asked for and therefore usually not included, as they constitute a risk factor. Also, the research design and consortium are contractually fixed from the outset. This has clear benefits when it comes to accountability for awarding public funding. However, during the research process often new opportunities or ideas arise that might make it beneficial to include new partners or develop a new line of research within the project. Indeed, when research is coupled to experimentation, demonstration and incubation, it is very likely that new questions will arise in the course of the process that requires new research activities. Researchers have relatively few means to respond to emerging needs and questions, because the allocation of their resources is largely fixed. Therefore ***the limited flexibility of research projects is an obstacle to more effective collaboration between academics and practitioners.***

Evidence-based policy-making has traditionally relied on scientific research as a way of identifying relevant information for problem solving and understanding underpinning dynamics of given phenomena. The two poles involved in this knowledge creation process and its translation to the policy-making field were clear: researchers and policymakers. However, the way social innovation originates, spreads and evolves makes it more important to involve civil society partners and other practitioners in the design of the research project and of public policies. By doing so, not only will research results be easier to share and apply, but public policies will also be more likely to effectively address problems and support social innovation. The third consequence is related to the process: by doing so, citizens and civil society may be empowered into the very processes of research and policy-making. The ultimate goal would be to allow citizens to build on the results of research directly, rather than (only) through a series of intermediaries.

Suggestions to address these issues include:

1. Allowing project managers to keep a floating budget in their research project that can be allocated on the basis of interim results and/or interaction with stakeholders.
2. Creating a separate budget for small follow-up projects that can be incorporated into running research processes at short notice (e.g. to cover the activities of a new partner).
3. Creating smaller consortia which are then given the means to set up joint research activities on specific themes (e.g. several consortia of five partners coming together to organise a Europe-wide survey, while operating separately in other areas).
4. Investing more deliberately in collaborative efforts, not only by organising meetings, but also by facilitating an effective follow-up. This

could include the creation of a more formal social innovation research network, building on existing resources such as the [siresearch.eu](http://siresearch.eu) platform.

5. Encouraging the involvement of stakeholders (e.g. civil society) from the start and a more active dissemination of results to the general public.
6. Fostering the face-to-face meeting of researchers to reflect upon the research completed on social innovation, by organising meetings where recently completed and on-going research projects on social innovation and related issues are discussed.
7. Setting up a small but active “office” or “point of contact” within the European Commission that can assist with practical advice (e.g. what is legitimate to use floating budgets for) and organisational support in real time to help orchestrate the above activities in a non-preferential manner.

### 3. Future research themes

Of course, research in Horizon 2020 should build upon the outcomes of previous Framework Programmes. In order to do so, the stock-taking effort should be continued in collaboration with the scientific community. During the consultation carried out in the WILCO seminar, several important themes have been identified:

1. An important theme is the ***impact and outcomes of social innovations***. Previous projects funded by the Framework Programmes have primarily examined the dynamics of social innovation itself; future research could also focus on the problems that innovations address. Specifically, they could address how innovations have an impact on social problems at different levels. Of all the aspects of social innovations, outputs and outcomes have been studied the least systematically.

Taking a more problem-focused perspective would not only address a gap in our knowledge base, but also allow research to take a longer-term perspective, addressing the issues of the future.

2. In turn, studying impacts requires the ***measurement and evaluation of social innovation***. This type of innovation is generally hard to measure. It often starts at a small scale, informally and based on voluntary contributions, so it may therefore not be regarded as sustainable or replicable in other contexts. In addition, many innovations focus on activities that do not easily translate into quantifiable benefits (e.g. empowerment). Yet measurement and evaluation have become increasingly important in our contemporary 'audit society'. For the process of scaling-up and diffusion of social innovations, it is crucial that innovations manage to speak the language of governments and markets in a dialectic process whereby new measurement approaches (e.g. added social value) are refined and taken into account. Future research can contribute to this 'translation' of social innovations.
3. Another important theme is the symbiotic ***relationship between technological and social innovation***. Where traditionally technological innovations have had a pervasive role in shaping social practices, there is now widespread acknowledgement that the reverse is also true and that social innovation is equally important. Indeed, past technological innovations are reflexive: once heralded as solutions, they have often become part of the problem themselves. Whilst recognising that new technology can in many ways become a game changer, especially through its accessibility and empowering potential of which there is already much evidence, technological and social innovations must be better combined if innovation impacts are to mean progress for all citizens. Key areas in which this is demonstrated include energy, health care, environment and climate change, employment and transport.
4. There should be ***more encouragement of the co-production of knowledge between scholars and communities of stakeholders*** from civil society, business and government. There is currently a sharp distinction between research and capacity-building, which in research projects rewards conservative approaches to dissemination and discourages experimentation, demonstration and incubation. Yet innovators, incubators, practitioners, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders will all benefit from working on the basis of balanced evidence concerning what works, why and in which circumstances.
5. ***The ambition of research should be not only to examine discrete local examples but focus more on systematic scaling, policy experimentation and longitudinal approaches which address the critical challenges facing Europe***. Sometimes social innovation researchers take a risk averse stance by ploughing existing academic furrows and remaining pre-occupied with 'puzzle solving' existing conundrums. Social innovation research must itself become more innovative and attempt to break new ground in addressing these challenges head-on, whilst retaining a strong practice-based focus and academic rigour. This will involve greater attention to societal level and systemic changes, and more focus on the scaling and financing of social innovation.
6. ***There should be greater cooperation with non-European researchers and***

**more focus on global issues.** There are two reasons for this. First, because Europe shares many ‘social needs’ with the rest of the world. Second, because this will strengthen Europe’s existing global leadership role in social innovation, as

well as facilitate important learning from other countries.

**We therefore urge the European Union:**

- 1. To devote sufficient funds for social innovation in Horizon 2020, including funds for transfer and dissemination.**
- 2. To involve all stakeholders (the scientific community, civil society and the public and private sectors) in identifying and defining research topics on social innovation, whilst ensuring that social need and open processes remain paramount.**
- 3. To address the following key themes in its research funding:**
  - **The clarification of the relationship between technological and social innovation.**
  - **The impact and outcomes of social innovations on urgent problems in contemporary society.**
  - **The measurement and evaluation of social innovations.**
  - **The link between research and capacity building.**
- 4. To encourage more collaboration, both between European Union-funded projects and between academics and practitioners.**
- 5. To increase the flexibility within projects, to allow project managers more scope for responding to stakeholders and addressing emerging needs on an on-going basis, through a combination of small scale experimentation and strategic thinking.**



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We welcome your feedback about this position paper. If you want to send your comments, please contact Taco Brandsen, coordinator of the WILCO project, via email at [t.brandsen@fm.ru.nl](mailto:t.brandsen@fm.ru.nl)