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SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE EU-MISSIONS

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executive summary

Social innovations encompass new practices, social relations, forms of organisation, and institutional arrangements to address societal challenges in new ways. They are a relatively novel approach to address complex problems in health, social care, education, energy, and environmental challenges which has been embraced increasingly by stakeholders and communities on the local, regional, and national level throughout the last two decades. Next to the realisation of new ideas and practices, there is also a re-discovery and re-establishment of once widespread, forgotten practices like multigenerational housing. Political leaders around the world have acknowledged that societal challenges cannot be solved with technological innovations alone and have started initiatives to design and implement policies for social innovation, often embedded in a new and more comprehensive understanding of innovation opening up to society. The European Commission, too, has broadened the traditional understanding of innovation in terms of goals, processes, and content since the financial crisis in 2008. In this respect, the implementation of mission-oriented innovation policy designed to tackle the five challenges of climate-neutral cities, climate change adaptation, clean oceans and water, healthy soils, and cancer marks a paradigm shift in innovation policy. Mission-oriented innovation policy was rolled out through dedicated funding calls in the 9th Research Framework Programme Horizon Europe (HE). With the publication of the first HE work programme dating back to 2021, the first batch of projects funded to particularly contribute to one of the EU Missions is coming to an end and many more are in the process of implementing their activities. So far, the role of social innovation in the five EU Missions has not been reviewed systematically. A structured strategy to implement and understand social innovation could boost the EU Missions on the second half of their trajectory. There is an important analogy: Just like the EU Missions, social innovations deal with different challenges in different thematic areas and often local contexts. To establish an empirical basis of how social innovations are contributing to the EU Missions, a selected set of central databases was reviewed for this report. EU Mission projects funded under Horizon Europe and listed in CORDIS were reviewed regarding their incorporation of social innovations in their activities.

The review of all mission projects listed in the EU research grant database CORDIS revealed that social innovation has been predominantly regarded as an important means to open up research and innovation processes to society. Social innovations as a solution in itself, in the sense of initiating new practices, establishing new social relations, new forms of organisation and institutional arrangements to solve

complex challenges, is a more neglected perspective in the EU Mission projects. This is reflected by the fact that only 11 of 280 projects refer to the concept explicitly in the description of objectives or list of characterising keywords. Of these 11 projects eight are funded within a topic that explicitly calls for social innovation suggesting that a more focussed call for social innovation in work programmes sparks the establishment and support of social innovations in locally implemented projects. However, employing a keyword search, allowed us to identify projects that do not refer to social innovation explicitly, but employ a socially innovative approach including experimentation with new practices, social relations and forms of organisation to tackle the mission areas in a systemic way. Hence, the EU Missions could benefit from calling more explicitly for social innovations as providing solutions to the complex societal challenges that goes beyond a re-structuration of the research and innovation processes.

However, to get a more holistic understanding of how social innovations contribute to achieving the EU Mission goals, we also looked beyond the immediate scope of projects funded through the HE programme, complementing the overview of EU Mission projects with cases from four social innovation databases (SI-databases) *Social Innovation Match Tool*, *Social Innovation Driving Force of Social Change (SI-Drive)*, *Critical Turning Points Database* and *Social Innovation in Energy Transition (SONNET)* were reviewed additionally.

The review of SI-databases shows that social innovations primarily contribute to the EU Missions by tackling underlying systemic causes of societal challenges, thereby enabling progress towards Mission objectives rather than directly targeting headline EU Mission indicators. Consequently, social innovations represent an essential element within a wider solution mix for addressing wicked problems, highlighting the importance of designing EU Missions with broad scopes and long-term horizons that accommodate systemic transformation processes. However, specific domains like energy stand out as fields where social innovations frequently make direct and tangible contributions to EU Mission objectives, most notably to the Cities Mission. Alongside their function of addressing root causes and strengthening the self-organisation and problem-solving capacities of local communities, social innovations offer approaches that can be adapted in local and regional contexts to support the implementation of EU Missions. For example, initiatives aiming to improve care practices by educating family members could be adapted to the needs of cancer patients. Moreover, social innovations such as eco-housing prefigure alternative practices in a variety of areas aiming simultaneously to solve ecological challenges and to satisfy social needs. Hence, the EU Missions could be boosted by exploiting the potential of these more systemic social innovations. Providing spaces for experimenting with these new practices creates enabling ecosystems that provide social, cultural and technological support to

achieving the missions' targets. To fully leverage this potential, social innovation needs to be explicitly recognised and targeted within EU Missions and the EU framework research programme in general, for example through dedicated instruments and evaluation criteria in mission-based research and innovation (R&I) programmes and the build-up of support structures that enable their local and regional development, adaptation and integration. **Consequently, social innovation *as an object* of innovation has to be further pursued and explicitly requested an essential component of mission-like R&I approaches.**

A closer examination of the five EU Mission areas reveals differentiated patterns in the contributions and potentials of social innovation:

The review of EU Mission projects and SI-databases for the **EU Mission Cancer** revealed that social innovation activities in EU Mission projects can contribute to the creation of new practices, social relations and forms of organisation in primary prevention and improvement of quality of life. By engaging patients and survivors in the research and innovation process and focussing on co-design in creating new solutions to the challenge, EU Mission projects contribute to experiment with social innovations in a stakeholder- sensitive manner. The two projects *4P-Can* and *e-Quol* are presented as examples how social innovation activities can contribute to a systemic approach in cancer prevention and after-treatment care. In addition, the scrutinisation of the SI-databases proves the potential of social innovations in the energy sector to simultaneously contribute to the Cancer and Cities Mission, as e.g. initiatives improving air quality by reducing emissions contribute to primary prevention, as well. Moreover, social innovations in the health sector often address issues of improving the quality of care by bringing different stakeholders and family members together. These social innovations could either be adapted to the specifics of cancer or already tackle cancer specifically, as the case of 360° Cancer shows.

The scoping review of literature and the databases on social innovation and mission-related EU funded projects shows that there are multiple avenues through which social innovations contribute to the goals of the **EU Mission Climate Neutral and Smart Cities**. Two key avenues that were particularly evident in the analysis include: one, new forms of engagement and organisation among actors at both local and regional levels to address urban challenges such as greenhouse gas emissions, access to clean energy, mobility, and waste management; and two, new ways of planning and governing cities to align with climate neutrality. These avenues are illustrated through five inspiring social initiatives: UP2030, which expands climate-oriented behavioural and spatial changes from the neighbourhood level to the wider city; REALLOCATE, which links low-carbon urban transitions with more inclusive mobility and public-space solutions; Berliner Energietisch, which gives

citizens a direct role in renewable-energy decision-making; Tiganokinsi, which strengthens climate literacy through innovative educational approaches; and Repowering London, which develops community-owned clean-energy projects that distribute benefits locally. Together, these initiatives demonstrate the diverse ways in which social innovation contributes to Mission objectives - both through short-term improvements in participation, awareness, and capacity, and through more transformative changes in governance structures and social practices. In doing so, they support Mission targets related to accelerating urban decarbonisation, strengthening citizen engagement, and developing replicable pathways for achieving climate neutrality by 2030.

For the **EU Mission Climate Change Adaptation**, co-creation, participatory planning methods, and mutual learning are inherent to the way the EU Mission is structured. Social innovation in this mission is often used synonymous with co-creation and regarded as a planning tool used in the implementation of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS), whose dominant approach rather demands changes in the built environment than changes in practices, social relations, forms of organisation or institutional arrangements. The two EU Mission projects presented in this report, *MountResilience* and *adaptation Agora*, however, show the potential of social innovation in this EU Mission by emphasizing the importance of a change in practices to deal with climatic hazards like heatwaves (adaptation Agora) or setting up new relations to plan and implement climate change adaptation measures in an inclusive manner (MountResilience). They also make clear that successful climate change adaptation needs systemic, all-encompassing transformations towards climate resilience. Additionally, our analysis of the SI-Databases suggests that social innovations seldom focus on direct adaptation to climatic changes, as they rather address mitigation than adaptation. Yet, there are projects in the SI-databases that help the EU Mission's objective by co-creating shared visions towards climate change adaptation and enabling conditions to deal with climate risks, such as ecovillages and integrated circular economy approaches. In addition to these two examples, projects focusing on increasing the resilience of social economic or political systems can support the mission indirectly, fostering community coherence especially of vulnerable regions.

Social innovations in the **EU Mission Soil** are primarily evident in the application of participatory process designs, which were strongly demanded by the calls for proposals themselves. Participatory research methods were often involving stakeholders from across the quadruple helix (businesses [often farmers and small producers], policymakers [mostly at local and regional level], science and citizen representatives [often in the form of NGOs or users such as schools]). New forms and constellations of cooperation have sometimes also led to new approaches in governance and policymaking for regional and spatial development, mostly at the

local level. For example, 34 Territorial Management Agreements which focus on systematic problem-solving, were jointly adopted in the HuMUS project. At the social innovation object level, approaches to changing soil management practices were particularly evident, although these were often linked to the use of new technologies or farming approaches. Changes in social practices were less prominent in this respect; however, initiatives that focused e.g. on the introduction of sustainable management approaches did contribute to the reconfiguration of social relations, for instance through new forms of interaction and coordination in product marketing. In this context, newly emerging business innovations are also worth mentioning.

The scoping review of literature and the databases on social innovation and mission-related EU-funded projects reveals several avenues through which social innovation contributes to the goals of the **EU Mission Restore Our Oceans and Waters**. The analysis revealed three key avenues through which social innovation contributes to the EU Mission: the development of new governance arrangements for water resources, the involvement of new actors who introduce alternative perspectives to water management, and the adoption of ecological value-based approaches that challenge dominant economic logics. These avenues are illustrated through three social innovation initiatives: EcoDALLI, which strengthens collective stewardship of the Danube Basin through a new ecosystem based governance approach that connects diverse stakeholders around shared goals for ecological resilience; Tidal Arts, which transforms participation by mobilising artists alongside scientists and citizens, using artistic engagement as a medium for reimagining relationships between people and water; and the North Atlantic Salmon Fund, which advances ecological value frameworks for the protection of marine and freshwater ecosystems. Together, these initiatives create new relationships between humans and aquatic environments, broaden the groups involved in water management, and highlight the potential for society to take a more active and responsible role in caring for water resources at both local and regional scales. In doing so, they contribute to Mission targets related to restoring aquatic ecosystems, promoting sustainable blue-economy practices, and enabling basin-level transformations through inclusive and participatory governance models.

In conclusion, the scoping search has shown that key elements of social innovation already play a major role in many projects today: Social innovation contributes to EU Missions by foregrounding changes in social practices, social relations, organisational forms and institutional arrangements that shape how solutions in specific thematic areas are developed, adopted and sustained in society. By complementing technological innovation with an explicit call for social innovation, the EU Missions have a strategic concept at their hand to truly roll out R&I policy in

a systemic view and enhance the effectiveness, uptake and durability of EU Mission interventions. This helps to address limitations of purely technical approaches that often overlook societal dynamics and also emphasises the importance of integrating social innovation more explicitly into the R&I framework of the EU, and especially mission-driven policy in order to support systemic, socially grounded pathways towards solving the challenges of the EU.

Moreover, the presented EU Mission projects focus on a bundle of activities and measures in which not only technological and social innovations are developed, but at the same time new forms of governance are promoted; they encourage citizen participation in an inclusive and co-creative way. Importantly, a focus on systemic problem-solving, which requires synergetic interaction between the actors, aims to eliminate the underlying causes of the problems, not only the symptoms.

The analysis reveals a substantial yet underutilised potential of social innovation for EU Missions: while few initiatives align narrowly with Mission targets, many social innovations contribute in broader and more systemic ways that are highly relevant not only for achieving EU Mission objectives, but for EU R&I policy in general.

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abbreviation list

Ctp	critical turning points
MOIP	Mission-oriented Innovation Policy
R&I	Research and innovation
SI-database	Social innovation database
SIE	Social Innovation in the Energy Sector
SIMF	Social-Innovation-Mission-Facility
SI-Drive	Social Innovation Driving Force of Social Change
SONNET	Social Innovation in Energy Transitions
TRANSIT	Transformative Social Innovation Theory

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1 INTRODUCTION

Mission-oriented Innovation Policy (MOIP) is a novel framework in innovation policy to direct research and innovation to solving societal challenges (Edler et al., 2025). The five EU Missions Cancer, Climate change adaptation, Climate neutral and smart cities, A Soil Deal for Europe and Restore our oceans and waters are one specific example of such a mission-orientation at a supranational level. As one key policy instrument under Horizon Europe, a variety of topics has been published and many projects have been launched since 2021. The EU Missions focus on bridging activities on the local level experimenting with local solutions suited to the specific local environment with a supranational strategical orientation.

Just as a mission-orientation in innovation policy, social innovation is a relatively novel approach to address complex problems in health, social care, education, energy, and environmental challenges that have been embraced increasingly by stakeholders and communities on the local, regional, and national level throughout the last two decades. Political leaders around the world have acknowledged that societal challenges cannot be solved with technological innovations alone and have started initiatives to design and implement policies for social innovation, often embedded in a new and more comprehensive understanding of innovation opening up to society. Even though the importance of social innovation to solve societal challenges has been recognized by the EU since the financial crisis and specific funding programmes have been published continuously throughout the last years, social innovations' role for the EU Missions has not been systematically approached, so far (see e.g. Larrue, 2025). This gap becomes particularly salient in light of challenges identified for the scaling-up phase of the EU Missions, where limited societal awareness, acceptance and behavioural change risk becoming major barriers to achieving Mission objectives. As highlighted by the Expert Group report on the EU Missions (2024), current Mission implementation remains strongly anchored in scientific and technological models, while their influence on citizens' practices and behaviours has so far been limited. In this context, social innovations offer important leverage by directly engaging with social practices, relations, organisational forms and institutional arrangements that shape societal mobilisation and readiness for transformation. A more strategic integration of social innovation into EU Missions therefore responds directly to the need to move beyond narrowly defined R&I and policy actions and to strengthen societal readiness, dissemination of good practices and long-term Mission impact. Taking the similarities the EU Missions and social innovations share in dealing with different challenges in different thematic areas and often local contexts in a targeted manner suggests that the EU Missions could benefit from exploiting the potential of social innovations strategically.

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This report of the project Social Innovation Mission Facility (SIMF) aims at providing a first look at the potential of social innovations to contribute to the success of the EU Missions and conceptualise social innovation against the background of the EU Missions. To this end, the report is organised as follows: Chapter 2.1 discusses the role of social innovation in the context of public policy and suggests a working definition to distinguish social innovation from other forms of innovation and highlight its intention against the background of the EU Missions. Chapter 2.2 provides a short overview of results and challenges of the five EU Missions and explores how social innovation can contribute to their success. Chapter 3 lays out the rationale and results of a scoping search and an in-depth review of EU Mission Projects listed in CORDIS in August 2025 and social innovation initiatives compiled for the following four Social Innovation databases (SI-databases) *Social Innovation Match Tool*, *Social Innovation Driving Force of Social Change (SI-Drive)*, *Critical Turning Points Database* and *Social Innovation in Energy Transition (SONNET)* contributing to empirically informing the conceptual considerations of chapter 2. Chapter 4 subsequently showcases the potential of social innovations for the EU Missions by compiling a brochure of inspiring social innovations. For each EU Mission, two exemplary Projects funded under an EU Mission topic including socially innovative approaches are presented. Additionally, projects from the SI-databases contributing to EU Mission objectives are highlighted in this chapter. Chapter 5 concludes the results from the scoping search providing an overview of key findings of how social innovations support the EU Missions.

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2 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR THE EU MISSIONS

To understand the potential of social innovations for the EU Missions, it is paramount to describe the understanding of social innovation underlying this report. Chapter 2.1 sets out to provide a brief overview of social innovation in public policy before presenting the definition guiding SIMF's activities and reflecting on scaling and diffusing successful social innovations. Upon this brief overview on social innovation, chapter 2.2 describes the EU Missions against the background of Mission-Oriented Innovation Policy (MOIP) and based on an overview of the five EU Missions, their achievements and short-comings, summarises the potential contribution of social innovation to the EU Missions. Against this conceptual background, Chapter 2.3 outlines the rationale for the scoping search, which reviews projects funded under EU Mission topics to identify social innovation activities, as well as social innovation databases to identify initiatives contributing to the EU Missions. Chapter 2.4 then presents an overview of the key results of the scoping search.

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL INNOVATION

As *a relatively novel approach to address complex problems* in health, social care, education, energy, and environmental challenges, social innovation has been embraced increasingly by stakeholders and communities on the local, regional, and national level throughout the last two decades. As the Atlas of Social Innovation has shown, countless approaches and successful initiatives have emerged in an international context that demonstrate the strengths and potential of social innovation in overcoming societal challenges (Howaldt et al., 2018; Howaldt et al., 2019).

Social innovations are emerging in all societal sectors: in civil society (e.g. urban agriculture), in politics (e.g. parental leave), and in the economy (e.g. timebanks). Although not always consciously, social innovations are omnipresent and contribute to the development of new solutions and social change. For example, the establishment of new practices, the formation of new social relations and the set up of new organisational arrangements to solve societal challenges play a prominent role in making mobility more environmentally friendly, diseases less frightening or the energy transition more successful. Alongside the development

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of *new* ideas and practices, we are also observing a re-discovery and re-establishment of once widespread practices and organisational forms, such as sharing initiatives or multi-generational housing (Howaldt et al., 2018; Howaldt et al., 2019; Eichler & Schwarz, 2019; European Commission, 2020a; Wittmayer et al., 2022)

2.1.1 SOCIAL INNOVATION AND PUBLIC POLICY

The dynamics in the development and dissemination of social innovation in the international arena are reflected in the increasing number of (public) programmes that initiate and support social innovation at local, regional, national, or global level. Interest in social innovation in the political arena has grown, particularly since the mid-2000s. While the promotion of social innovation had previously been largely limited to the support of social entrepreneurs by private organisations, social innovation has increasingly become a topic of broader public policy (Franz et al., 2012).

Thus, since the mid-2000s, many governments worldwide have recognised the importance of social innovation in the development of a sustainable innovation policy (Steiner et al., 2021). The two volumes of the Atlas of Social Innovation describe the spread of social innovation as a universal concept in more than 20 regional and country studies and reflect the variety of policy approaches chosen (e.g. in Australia, Canada, China, Colombia and New Zealand) (Howaldt et al., 2018; 2019). In many countries in Europe and beyond, the promotion of social innovation has served as a driver and opportunity for various actors to develop new ways of working, access new sources of funding, and leverage supporting infrastructures. It has also stimulated a general debate about the future direction of innovation policy. Over the last 20 years, national governments in different countries of the world have started initiatives to design and implement policies for social innovation (Mulgan, 2024). They have created and supported agencies and foundations, have changed regulations, have created new legal forms and funding sources and have taken measures to address social problems and help social innovators in bringing their ideas to life.

For the larger part of the last two decades, the European Union has also been experimenting to embed social innovation into its innovation policy and political DNA. Starting with the financial crisis in 2008 and up until today's climate and biodiversity emergency, European leaders have discovered that the traditional concept of innovation policy is insufficient to address the multiple, complex and interrelated global challenges that affect contemporary and future societies and for which the old political instruments and strategies were too blunt, too narrow, or

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too fragile (Bureau of European Policy Advisers 2010). Taking these shortcomings into account, the European Commission has broadened the traditional understanding of innovation in terms of goals, processes, and content, i.e. recognising the importance of social innovation in addition to technological innovation to exploit their potential synergistically, although seldom systematically (Franz et al. 2012). At the same time, new approaches for inventing, implementing and diffusing innovation by opening up the process of innovation towards society were developed: open innovation, crowd sourcing, social entrepreneurship support programmes, co-creation, citizen involvement, and public–private partnerships for the common good (Bureau of European Policy Advisers 2010; a more detailed description of social innovation in innovation policy at the European and national level can be found in Annex I: Social Innovation in the European Union). Hence, social innovation has triggered the development of a *new and more comprehensive understanding of innovation that opens up to society* and is supported by the interaction of diverse actors from civil society, business, politics and science. These diverse actors work on the ideation, implementation and diffusion of new social practices, new forms of organisation and institutions – from different sectoral perspectives and with diverging objectives, but often in a co-creative way (Franz et al., 2012; Howaldt et. al, 2016). This fundamental change is also reflected in the development of mission-oriented innovation policy (MOIP), which aligns with socially desirable goals (Cantner et al., 2023; Edler et al., 2025; see also chapter 2.2). In this sense, social innovation can be seen as a new mode of social change and social transformation that is relevant especially in view of market, policy and system failures (Schubert, 2016).

2.1.2 ESTABLISHING A WORKING DEFINITION

Even though there are a wide range and variety of definitions and initiatives in the field of social innovation, the contours of the concept can be framed sufficiently to generate analytical and policy relevant guidance. To guide the conceptual development of a sound understanding of social innovations against the background of the EU Missions in SIMF, we propose the following working definition: **Social innovations encompass new practices, social relations, forms of organisation, and institutional arrangements to address societal challenges in new ways** (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Avelino et al., 2019; Wittmayer et al., 2022). In this sense, social innovation is multi-directional; i.e. their impact is not necessarily beneficial for all by default of actors' intention. Just as the societal impact of other forms of innovation must be evaluated, the actual contribution of social innovations to societal challenges is subject to a comprehensive impact analysis. Even though new technologies and digital tools, such as apps, can play a

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role in social innovations and contribute to solving a societal challenge, social innovations are distinct from technological innovations in that their primary problem-solving element rests in new practices, social relations, forms of organisation, and institutional arrangements that depending on the societal challenge at hand might include an embedded application or even development of new technologies.

Social innovations arise in society and are developed by a wide range of actors from all sectors developing new ideas how to deal with societal challenges and their reflections in local problems without purely turning to the development and implementation of technological fixes. While new ideas challenging the status quo are critical for the initiation and diffusion of social innovations, an innovation emerges if a new idea is put into practice. These new ideas might result in new practices, bridging a change in behaviour with adequate structural changes prefiguring the performance of these, necessitate the formation of new relations and forms of organisation to understand a problem from multiple angles, co-design the solution and build the necessary momentum to implement it. Therefore, cross-sectoral collaboration plays a key role especially in unlocking potential and increasing social impact (Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2010, Eckhardt et al., 2021).

An overarching characteristic of innovative social initiatives is the *systematic involvement of beneficiaries and citizens*. Many initiatives aim to *empower stakeholders and certain social groups*, increase their skills and provide them with agency (Bureau of European Policy, 2010; Avelino et al., 2023). There are various forms of user involvement, from agenda setting to (co-)developing or improving the solution by providing feedback, suggestions and knowledge, to adapting and re-framing it for other contexts. Through numerous efforts and initiatives, social innovations contribute to promote and utilise the innovation potential of different actors and sectors in society (Chesbrough & Minin, 2014; Boni et al., 2023). This concerns new forms of stakeholder engagement focussing on the inclusion of (potentially) affected groups in the research and innovation process, as it is important to incorporate their views. On the one hand, this enables researchers to deliver better results, products or services already adapted to the beneficiaries' needs. On the other hand, the empowerment of (marginalised) social groups by giving them a voice, agency and ownership is a central element of social innovation (Avelino et al., 2023; https://europeannetforinclusion.org/). The inclusion of affected social groups beyond the academic realm in research and innovation processes can itself be understood as a change in the social practices determining the conduct of research and innovation, and can thus be considered as a social

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innovation in this realm (Howaldt, 2019; Schuch & Šalamon, 2021). Alongside the growing importance of social innovation and the variety of actors within the research and innovation community, the requirements for the management and governance of such innovation processes are changing, in general. Regardless of the type of innovation, innovation has to be developed in a process of co-creation for and with society to unfold its problem-solving capacity.

Figure 1 summarizes the main components defining social innovation as an important part of a new innovation paradigm (Howaldt, 2019) against the background of the working definition and the EU Missions. In this sense, the new innovation paradigm is characterized by broadening the object of innovation beyond technology (described as *Content* consisting of new practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements), the direction towards solving societal challenges (described as *Mission* consisting of challenges underlying the EU Missions as well as their set objectives) and a specific *process* of designing the associated research and innovation process (drawing attention to the necessity of opening up to society, employing co-creative methods and focussing cross-sector collaboration) (Howaldt & Schwarz 2010; Howaldt et al. 2016) .

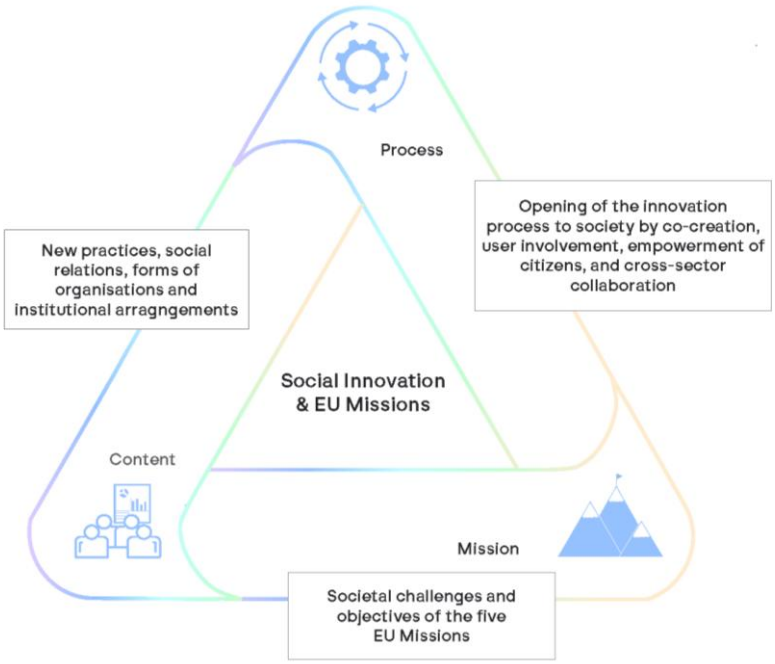

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUALISATION OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR THE EU MISSIONS (OWN ILLUSTRATION ADAPTED FROM HOWALDT, 2019)

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Last but not least, there is a strong relationship between the grand societal challenges and processes of social change and transformation (Moulaert et al., 2017). This implies the involvement of various institutions, a change in multiple norms and practices, as well as the introduction of several kinds of complementary innovations to cope with the high complexity of challenges and the interconnectedness of the diverse problems (Kemp & Pel 2023). In view of the increasingly crisis-oriented nature of social development, it is becoming ever clearer that social innovations will play a decisive role in determining "what kind of world the next generation of citizens of free societies will live in" (see Dahrendorf 2009; own translation from German).

2.1.3 HOW SOCIAL INNOVATIONS REALISE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL

Considering the diversity of social innovations the mechanisms through which social innovations realise their potential and contribute to societal impact also vary broadly (see e.g., Wittmayer et al., 2022). One core aspect that is broadly agreed upon by scholars is that social innovations not only provide new solutions to complex problems but also contribute to societal impact by engendering or contributing to change in society or societal sub-systems. Social innovations not only contribute to the identification and (re)framing of problems in society, but also to a prefiguration of alternatives, that can be taken up or be drawn upon by policy makers for addressing societal challenges. For example, urban commons experiments in mobility or housing show tangible low-carbon, inclusive futures which can generate learning and build legitimacy for low-carbon alternatives in these systems. In the context of this example, social innovations contribute to change through prefiguring socio-material configurations that are distinct from the current unsustainable ones. Other key mechanisms through which social innovations contribute to societal impact include through contributing to change in economic systems, social relations, and institutional arrangements. They do so by changing social practices, which in turn reshape economic behaviour, resource flows, and institutional arrangements, including governance. q

The extent of the societal impact motivated by a social innovation can range from localised, short-term effects in relation to a societal challenge to longer-term, systemic and transformative changes. The societal effects of SIs typically include direct and mediated effects across three nested orders including: first-order effects which arise directly from a social innovation's activities and are expected within its temporal or spatial context, second-order effects which occur close to the innovation's context and arise from first-order effects and additional external factors (e.g., when an innovation is replicated in other settings); and n-order effects

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which unfold far beyond an innovation's immediate sphere of influence (e.g., broader shifts in laws, or regulations or societal norms) (see Nagy & Schäfer, 2025). While social innovations often begin with a focus on generating first-order effects, they can be expanded to achieve broader and deeper impacts.

Although many approaches to scaling and diffusion exist (Lam et al., 2020), Westley et al.'s (2014) distinction of different forms of scaling in regard to social innovation contributing to systemic change are of special importance. Building up on this distinction Moore et al. (2015) further elaborated on the differences between scaling out, where a social innovation is replicated or adapted in new geographical or organisational contexts to extend its reach; scaling up, where a social innovation informs or shapes policy, governance, and institutional change[1]; and scaling deep, where a social innovation fosters shifts in cultural norms, values, and relationships (see Moore et al., 2015). In addition to institutional and policy change, scaling up is often supported by organisation-related or operational scaling, through which social innovation organisations develop standardized processes, shared infrastructures, and organisational capacities that stabilise and sustain expanded activity (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; van Wijk et al., 2019). Such meso-level arrangements can enable more efficient delivery and, in some cases, economies of scale, thereby facilitating the embedding of social innovations in broader institutional contexts. Scaling terms are used differently across fields such as economics, public policy, and sustainability transitions. However, the emphasis on the underlying dynamics of replication, institutional embedding, and cultural change is shared across varied interpretations. Social innovations often progress through combinations of these modes, guided by learning, partnerships, and windows of opportunity. It is worth noting that social innovations are very context dependent. Therefore, facilitating their diffusion and enhancing their impact requires adaptation to the applicable innovation form and social, economic, political, and environmental circumstances within which it is embedded.

An important factor here is the adaptive capacity of society (Howaldt et al., 2025). Policy can support scaling and diffusion by investing in capacity-building, cross-regional learning, and flexible funding mechanisms that enable adaptation. The aim is to create learning governance formats that open up a multi-actor, inter- and transdisciplinary experimental space for the development of new practices in various, especially ecologically relevant, fields of need. Supporting intermediaries such as networks of cities, EU Mission platforms, or social innovation hubs can

[1] The authors deliberately deviate from more commonly used conceptualisations of the notion of "scaling up" to describe e.g. an increase in size, amount, production, or scope of something to emphasize the role of policies and institutions in taking up social innovations and affect more people by the subsequent change in policy or governance. This conceptualisation does not exclude the relevance of scaling-up in an economies-of-scale sense, which may also apply to certain forms of social innovation, such as specific social business models.

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facilitate diffusion while preserving diversity. The enabling condition is a policy environment that recognises diversity as a strength, viewing scaling as learning and adaptation rather than standardisation.

2.2 MISSION-ORIENTED INNOVATION POLICY IN THE EU & SOCIAL INNOVATION

The integration of social innovation in European and national research and innovation policy is just one expression of the recognition that more traditional, economic-oriented policy approaches are not sufficient to address the multiple societal challenges. In the words of Marianna Mazzucato (2018): *"To find ways to bring together the triple objectives of smart innovation-led growth, inclusion and sustainability, we must first answer the critical question of how to direct innovation to solve the pressing global challenges of our time"* (p. 2). To steer the direction of research and innovations has become the aim of many policies, today (Edler et al., 2025). One prominent example and policy practice is Mission-oriented innovation policy (MOIP). MOIP defines certain goals in one area of action, which have to be attained to solve societal challenges. According to Edler et al. (2025) the goals formulated for these often transformative missions are "broad [...], of a more long-term nature, and involve a great number of societal actors"(p.2). The mission itself contains a "portfolio of actions", is open to a variety of solutions and employs different forms of funding instruments (Mazzucato, 2018). Hence, missions contain a broad set of goals to be attained, as well as instruments to design a variety of solutions to attain these goals. Governments, in this type of policy, are the main actor in providing the directionality, but they also build the necessary governance and administrative structures. Examples of MOIP can be found in a lot of countries spanning a variety of thematic areas from environmental degradation, reduction of pesticides to fostering more forms of preventive healthcare (Edler et al., 2025; see also the MOIP dashboard developed by OECD).

For its current Framework Programme Horizon Europe (2021-2027), the European Union (EU) strategised early on to integrate MOIP into its funding scheme and policy strategy (Mazzucato, 2018) resulting in five EU Missions. Thereby, each EU Mission tackles an overarching problem in a specific way, each with an ambitious set of objectives and interventions (European Commission, 2024). In addition to their respective objectives and their significance in the EU funding scheme, the

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declared aim of the EU Missions' approach is to broaden public visibility of complex societal problems, create possible solutions via participation and spark inspiration for private investments for long-lasting transformations. In this sense, the EU Missions do not only focus on technological inventions and innovations, but also aim at breaking up governance silos, reshaping research and innovation funding and integrating citizen participation in an inclusive, co-creative way. In a system that strongly builds on top-down policy habits, this novel approach unfolds new opportunities as well as, predictably, creates new challenges.

2.2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE FIVE EU MISSIONS

The EU launched five EU Missions to define targeted goal-oriented research and innovation activities for the societal challenges associated with cancer, climate neutral cities, climate change adaptation, soil and ocean and waters. Since each EU Mission tackles a unique problem, it implemented its own governance structures and addresses a specific group of stakeholders. Yet, all EU Missions share a similar governance structure in that they aim to bridge implementation on the local level with the strategical orientation of the EU Missions (see figure 2). However, the EU Missions differ not only in their specific areas of action, but also in the design and workings of Mission platforms. Thus, the implemented approaches and the progress that EU Missions have achieved so far vary. This also produces individual opportunities and challenges. To understand the potential of social innovations for the EU Missions, it is critical to understand the rationale underlying the single mission, the progress that has been made and the challenges that have arisen since their implementation. In the following, these individual opportunities and challenges of all five EU Missions will be presented, building on findings from the assessment study reports of the single EU Missions, the Commission's expert group report for monitoring the EU Missions (European Commission, 2024) and the European Regions Research and Innovation Network's input on the Missions (ERRIN, 2023).

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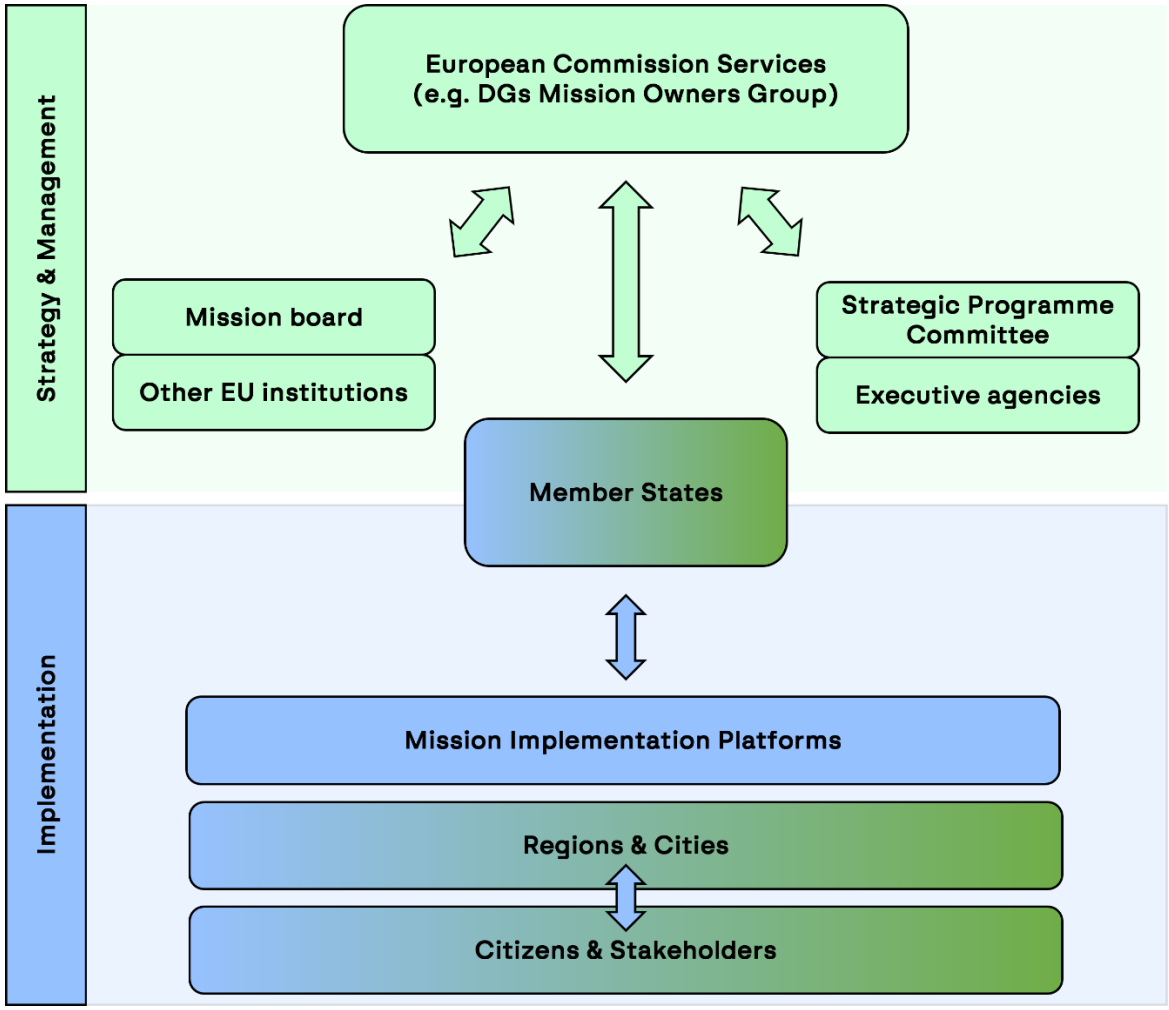

FIGURE 2 STYLISED GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK FOR THE EU MISSIONS. SIMPLIFIED ADAPTATION FROM REID ET AL., 2023.

EU Mission: Cancer (Cancer Mission) tries to beat cancer diseases by improving prevention, diagnostics, treatment and supporting the quality of life of patients and survivors, all with the aim of improving the lives of more than 3 million people by 2030. So far, it has achieved to bring together a well-balanced mix of stakeholders in a multi-level governance structure, successfully facilitating research into risk factors, promoting behavioural changes and implementation of population-based screenings (European Commission, 2025b). The EU Mission Cancer also benefits from pre-existing structures and is the only EU Mission linked directly to the European Parliament via *Europe's Beating Cancer Plan*. Since the EU Mission's governance was well pre-organised from existing structures, the Cancer Mission mainly suffers from a lack of expertise on transformative and system innovation as well as a lack of time to co-create new

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approaches. This evokes a feeling of top-down governance within the stakeholder groups and makes inclusion of regional and local levels difficult (European Commission, 2023b).

Cities cover 3% of the Earth and yet produce 72% of greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, cities are often ambitious to make a change. To harness this potential, the **Mission: Climate Neutral & Smart Cities** (Cities Mission) sets out to deliver 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030 and ensures that these cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs to enable all European cities to follow suit by 2050. In 2025, the EU Mission Cities lists 112 cities that signed a Climate City Contract, a legally nonbinding declaration of intent also signed by local stakeholders, to achieve climate neutrality by 2030 (European Commission, 2025c). National support structures to facilitate the implementation of the Cities Mission in municipalities are in development. The Cities Mission benefits from a pre-existing network that has been organised in the multi-stakeholder Mission Implementation Platform *NetZeroCities.* The Cities Mission has the highest number of member states reporting progress on its objectives (European Commission, 2024). However, the translation of the Cities Mission logic for participating cities remains a challenge. City administrations often do not have the resources to understand and integrate the Cities Mission implementation fully into their strategies. In particular, more vulnerable cities struggle to reach the ambitious agenda. Citizen engagement is a core component of the Mission, yet there is still a need for "new innovative methods to involve citizens" (European Commission, 2023c). At last, the incentives and opportunities for municipalities signing the Climate City Contracts are often not clear and thus the Cities Mission partially misses out on local commitment (ERRIN, 2023).

The objective of the **EU Mission: Climate Change Adaptation** (Climate Mission) is to accompany at least 150 regions and communities in the EU towards climate resilience, through understanding climate risks and developing pathways for preparation. So far, the EU Mission Implementation Platform *MIP4ADAPT* is widely assessed positively, has a strong Community of Practice and offers support to 145 regional and local authorities. The so-called *Mission Charters*, legally nonbinding declarations of intent to support the Mission, have been signed by 326 regions, cities and local authorities (European Commission, 2025a). The Climate Mission benefits from pre-existing governance structures in the member states, such as national strategies for adaptation to climate change, and achieves to find ways to involve citizens in their projects. Challenges remain in the management and communication between the European Commission and national levels, which sometimes result in a lack of engagement on the regional level (European Commission, 2024). Moreover, there is an innovation divide: Regions less involved in EU projects also struggle to take

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part in the Climate Mission (ERRIN, 2023). At last, there is a trade-off between breadth and depth of the projects: The EU Mission must hold the balance between supporting all regions (breadth) and successfully focusing on single lighthouse projects (depth) (European Commission, 2023a).

60-70% of the European soils are unhealthy due to current management practices, pollution, urbanisation and extreme weather events (European Commission, 2020b). To foster awareness for soil health, co-create sustainable agricultural practices, and promote Soil Literacy, the **Mission: A Soil Deal for Europe** (Soil Mission) aims at establishing 100 living labs and lighthouses to lead the transition towards healthy soils by 2030. In 2024, the first 25 living labs were established with 250 real-life sites. Moreover, 600 legal entities and 2,600 individuals signed the *Mission Soil Manifesto*, a declaration of intent that displays the EU Mission's values. In an important step towards soil health monitoring, the EU Soil Observatory Dashboard lists 19 Soil Health Indicators that help measuring progress (European Commission, 2025a). Yet, the Soil Mission lags behind the other EU Missions in terms of tangible implementation of projects (ERRIN, 2023). The national and regional governance levels are not fully aware of the implementation logic and thus many stakeholders call for a more bottom-up approach with clearer and more accessible intervention logics (European Commission, 2023d).

Due to climate change, oceanic acidification and loss of biodiversity, the hydrosphere is under enormous pressure. By preventing pollution, promoting ocean literacy, and revamping governance structures, the **Mission: Restore Our Ocean & Waters** (Ocean and Waters Mission) aims at protecting and restoring European ocean and waters through innovation and action by 2030. It thereby follows a two-fold approach. Firstly, four *Mission Lighthouses* are established as hubs or platforms in four ocean and riverbed regions to structure cooperation and provide spaces for transformative innovation[2]. Secondly, the *European Digital Twin of the Ocean* collects and streamlines knowledge on the ocean and waters in the EU and enables sophisticated simulations. The Mission achieved to bring together a great variety of stakeholders beyond the pre-existing governance structures, overcoming institutional fragmentation (European Commission, 2024). The *Mission Lighthouses* enable strong vertical cooperation between the EU and regional level. Moreover, the Mission constitutes strong synergies with national and international policy efforts (e.g. the UN Oceans Forum). 480 organisations signed the respective *Mission Charter* by 2023 (European

[2] More information about the Mission Lighthouses can be found here: https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/restore-our-ocean-and-waters/mission-lighthouses

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Commission, 2023e). Despite the strong connection of the regional and EU levels, vertical communication of valorisation of the mission's projects and the intervention logic remains a challenge (ERRIN, 2023). In particular, the complex governance structure involving 14 Directorate Generals is highly demanding (European Commission, 2023e).

In 2025, the EU Missions have reached the halfway point of their ambitious paths. As the assessment of the study reports of the single EU Missions, the Commission's expert group report for monitoring the EU Missions (European Commission, 2024) and the European Regions Research and Innovation Network's input on the Missions (ERRIN, 2023) make clear, the ambitious nature of the EU Missions creates traction at the EU governance level as well as in the EU Missions' projects at the local level. All EU Missions have achieved to streamline previously separated groups of stakeholders and governance structures, such as the EU Directorate Generals. With their ambitious objectives and novel MOIP-approach, the EU Missions convey a new sense of urgency and coherence. Nevertheless, communication between governance levels and organisations of bottom-up initiatives often remains challenging.

All EU Missions invest substantial resources in technological innovations. However, much of the potential of social innovation for bottom-up re-organisation in a policy context remains untapped, despite the declared intention of the EU Missions to implement transformative societal changes (European Commission, 2024). A structured strategy to implement and understand social innovation could boost the EU Missions in the second half of their trajectory.

2.2.2 EXPLOITING THE FULL POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR THE EU MISSIONS

As mentioned above, social innovation plays a key role within innovation policy if the social, economic, political and environmental challenges of the 21st century are to be successfully addressed. Similar to a mission-orientation in policy, social innovation places the need to overcome societal challenges and social problems at centre stage, driving the actors involved in the innovation process. Just like the five EU Missions, social innovations thereby deal with diverse challenges in different thematic areas and local contexts, mobilising a variety of actors. From an innovation policy perspective, implementing a mission-oriented approach specifically calls for collaboration and a societal needs-based direction of innovation. Changing the practices structuring innovation policy and paying attention to new forms of social relations and organisations, thereby, can be

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regarded as a social innovation in innovation policy itself. In her ground-breaking report, Marianna Mazzucato (2018) pointed to the pivotal role of social innovation in implementing the EU Missions: "[]as missions are cross-actor and cross-discipline, social innovation will be a key element of implementation. Citizens can possibly be mobilised to become active participants in missions, for example by cleaning plastics from beaches or by providing real-time monitoring data as enabling technologies develop and become more universally present in society" (p.20). The wide application of co-creation in 90 % the EU Missions' projects (European Commission, 2025) relates to the systematic involvement of a variety of stakeholders and especially beneficiaries that is characteristic for social innovation (see 2.1.2) and could be a further reflection of the social innovation elements embedded in MOIP itself. In a nutshell: the importance of stakeholder engagement exemplified by social innovations, has been recognised and is often mentioned as a tool to make the EU Missions more inclusive (see e.g. Rizzo & Komatsu, 2025).

Yet, social innovations that in themselves offer a potential solution to a challenge, is a more neglected perspective of social innovation in MOIP in general and the EU Missions in specific. Larrue (2025) notices for Mission: Cities: "While mission managers often claim that social innovation is as important as technological innovation in their mission and far more prominent than in other STI initiatives, the social components are mainly limited to advocacy, information and communication campaigns, and various studies conducted at individual and societal levels to prepare for technology scale-up and market transition." (p.134). Hence, similar to a view of social innovation as an instrument to engage citizens, social innovation runs the risk to be reduced to a tool to support the diffusion of technologies regarded as key solutions to the challenges at hand. While innovations in practice often take the form of socio-technical configurations that combine technological and social elements, social innovation represents a distinct mode of innovation centred on changes in social practices, social relations, organisational forms and institutional arrangements. These dimensions are critical for achieving innovation policy objectives, particularly in the context of research and innovation and green transition policies that aim to be socially inclusive and aligned with principles of justice and leaving no one behind, even where such social dimensions are not always made explicit in policy design. To unfold social innovation's full potential for the EU Missions (and to solve their underlying challenges), rather than considering the social as an afterthought to technology (as in information and communication campaigns) it is crucial to acknowledge their pivotal role in providing systemic solutions themselves.

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As described under chapter 2.1.2 social innovations encompass among other changes, a change of practices as a means to solve the challenges. A focus on practices thereby implies not only changing behaviours but also anchoring these behavioural changes in institutional and technological settings. Only a sound institutional embedding ensures that a behavioural change can become a routinised practice and reach the necessary level of aggregation to make an impact. Hence, the EU Missions should ask "the question which new social practices could be initiated to achieve mission goals" (Schuch 2024, p.13) and provide spaces for experimenting with these new practices in governing the process and finding solutions to the challenges. The living labs of the Soil Mission could be just one example of such an experimental space, which could be broadened to test technological and social innovations on an equal footing.

For the EU Missions, it is necessary to acknowledge the transformative potential of social innovations in a way that offers value for achieving the EU Missions' ambitious objectives while recognizing their often locally and social embedded activities that cannot easily scaled or diffused. This becomes especially challenging in initiating social innovations top-down. Relying on established routines, actors in mission implementation often do not have experience with systemic instruments (Wittmann et al., 2025). Here, a social innovation perspective can help with building this knowledge by making systemic transformation more tangible and visible, benefitting from process innovations like co-creative participation processes or living labs. This visibility helps building understanding and knowledge structures and can facilitate cross-regional exchange and learning necessary for successful mission implementation (Kattel and Mazzucato, 2025).

For scaling and diffusing existing or newly established social innovations in the EU Missions, the most important challenge is the context-dependency of both social innovation and mission-oriented innovation policies (Bresciani et al., 2025). Social innovations depend on an enabling ecosystem that provides social, cultural and technological support (Manzini, 2015) and ample room for experimentation and learning when adapting social innovations to new contexts (see chapter 2.1.3). The EU Missions rely on international and national governance structures, as well as political interests, cultural contexts and even individual interpretations on implementation level (Wittmann et al., 2025). Against this background, the crucial scaling and diffusion of social innovations becomes a daring task. Several strategies and pathways for scaling social innovations exist today. The "Social Innovation Actionable Pathways" for Cities Mission (Bresciani et al., 2025) is one example for such a strategy within the EU Missions. These strategies could be widened and modified for each EU Mission, underpinned by an ongoing formative

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evaluation process, to successfully implement and leverage socially innovative and transformative practices for the EU Missions.

Consequently, social innovation contributing to solving the challenges underlying the EU Missions and to their targets has to be further pursued. Despite the early recognition of social innovation's pivotal role in making the innovation process of the projects funded under the EU Missions topics more inclusive, co-creative and citizen-oriented, looking at the shortcomings of the five EU Missions described in chapter 2.2.1 shows that there is often a gap between the European level formulating the EU Mission targets and activities and regional action (e.g. Cities Mission) and striking a balance between lighthouse projects and wider diffusion processes (e.g. Climate Mission). Thus, the EU Missions could further benefit from both social innovation as a means to structure the innovation process and as an object of innovation in itself.

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3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IN AND FOR EU MISSIONS

To establish an empirical basis of how social innovations are contributing to the EU Missions, a selected set of central databases was reviewed. To this end, projects funded under Horizon Europe in a topic assigned to the EU Missions and listed in CORDIS (short: EU Mission projects) were reviewed in terms of their incorporation of social innovations or elements thereof. Doing so, an empirically informed overview of how many projects in each Mission Area have been funded so far and how many of these projects incorporate social innovation activities or mention social innovation explicitly could be established. To complement this overview of EU Mission projects referencing social innovations with cases of social innovations that already contribute or could contribute to the EU Missions if scaled or diffused accordingly, four relevant social innovation databases (SI-databases) were additionally reviewed in a scoping search (see Annex II).

While chapter 3.1 briefly introduces the criteria developed to identify EU Mission projects referencing social innovations and the rationale for reviewing initiatives listed in the SI-databases and thereby directly builds upon the conceptual considerations of chapter 2.1 and 2.2, a detailed description of the sequential analysis of projects and social innovation initiatives can be found in Annex II.

3.1 HOW TO IDENTIFY SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IN EU MISSION PROJECTS

To classify EU Mission projects as relevant in terms of considering social innovations sufficiently and to determine if social innovations listed in the databases contribute to at least one of the EU Missions, criteria for reviewing EU Mission projects and social innovation initiatives were developed. Following the definition outlined in 2.1.2 and the associated characteristics of social innovation with regard to essential content and processes, the following project activities served for reflecting the multiple, possible manifestations of social innovation and thus form the basis for identification of relevant EU Mission projects. Just as social innovations intent to solve social problems and societal challenges, EU projects

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funded under the EU Mission topics aim to solve challenges in the areas of climate change, pollution of soil and water bodies and cancer. Hence, a problem-solving orientation of the activities was not chosen as an indicator but assumed as inherent to the EU Mission projects.

The central criterion here is, according to the definition,

1. The project or critical project activities focus on novel changing practices, new social relations, new forms of organisation, and institutional arrangements to address societal challenges in new ways rather than the development/ diffusion of new technologies.

In addition, as described in section 2.1.2, social innovations are usually associated with a specific approach to coming up with a solution engaging various actors and focussing the perspective of beneficiaries. Transferred to the context of research and innovation activities, in which the process of coming up with a solution to a specific challenge is consciously designed, these characteristics of social innovation are reflected in the design of the innovation processes. The remaining indicators two, three, four and five capture the social innovation activities in research and innovation processes, which primarily (with the exception of criterion five) concern new forms of stakeholder engagement including the involvement of (potentially) affected groups in the research and innovation process to incorporate their views.

However, these process criteria do not exclusively mark the development, testing and diffusion of social innovations, as these new forms of stakeholder engagement are also becoming increasingly important in the design of technological innovation processes. Nonetheless, as the majority of research and innovation actions (RIA) funded within the EU Missions contributes to the development and implementation of innovations, looking at the process might reveal a change in practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements that can become a social innovation in itself. For example, bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders can lead to the formation of new social relations that contribute to addressing societal challenges in new ways.

2. The project engages different stakeholders in a new manner and explicitly addresses civil society
3. The project focusses on the inclusion of (potentially) affected groups in the research and innovation process
4. The project focusses on new forms of governance and collaboration within existing institutions for creating new solutions

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5. The project creates room for experimenting with social innovation or builds upon existing social innovations and opens up opportunities for scaling/ diffusion

The first criterion serves to identify project activities that aim to establish new practices, social relations, forms of organisation, and institutional arrangements to address societal challenges in new ways and to explicitly solve the specific challenges underlying the EU Missions. Activities that fit this criterion refer to the object of innovation explicitly. Criteria two, three and four emphasise activities in the research and innovation process are characteristic for but not limited to social innovation but depending on their context of implementation and degree of institutionalisation can represent an innovation in itself. However, these process criteria are not clearly defined, as they are also becoming increasingly important in the design of technological innovation processes especially when, as in the EU Missions, they are geared towards achieving socially desirable goals. In this respect, it is not surprising that 90% of the EU Mission projects enable co-creation (European Commission, 2025). Against this background, co-creation as such cannot be regarded as a suitable indicator for selecting social innovation-oriented EU Mission projects but reflects that the EU Missions themselves represent a social innovation in the way research and innovation policy is designed and implemented. The same applies to the last criterion (5), which does not describe social innovation activities as such but emphasises the importance of creating spaces to experiment with social innovations and different mechanisms of scaling and diffusion. Hence, EU Mission projects that are making use of ideation challenges or support the development of a wide variety of unspecified innovations can be seen as an important pillar to experimenting with social innovations for the EU Missions.

In this respect, the process criteria mentioned can provide indications of social innovations, especially since they themselves can be regarded in part as social innovations in the design of innovation processes. However, they are not a clear-cut criterion. The keywords “social innovation”, “behaviour”/”behaviour”, “inclusion”/”inclusive”, “practice” and “social” were chosen to represent the characteristics of social innovation as an object of innovation or as activities in designing the research and innovation process and applied to the EU Mission projects listed in CORDIS in a keyword search (see Annex II for a detailed description of the sequential analysis). Working with key terms served to narrow down projects with probable potential for social innovation. Based on this approximation, the identified project summaries were examined in a next step by

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means of content analysis. Interviews, internet research and document research were also employed in the selection of showcase projects (see Chapter 4).

3.2 HOW TO IDENTIFY SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR EU MISSIONS

The review of social innovations listed in the SI-Match tool, Critical Turning Points, SI-Drive, and SONNET databases was guided by the question if a case could contribute to one or even multiple EU Missions.

The **SI Match** tool is an on-going project, which allows social innovators to list their initiatives to the database. It was chosen, as it presents the most recent and interactive SI database established by an EU institution and the identification of inspiring cases from the Social Innovation+ initiative could foster valuable synergies between the EU Mission areas and National Competence Centres for Social Innovations funded under the ESF+. The **SI-Drive case studies** (compiled between 2015 and 2016) were investigated, as they form part of the SI Drive global mapping of 1,005 cases of social innovation: one of the most extensive mappings of social innovation initiatives, so far. The initiatives listed in the **Critical Turning Points database** (set up in 2017) were studied, as they present one of the most important collections of transformative social innovation networks relating local initiatives to their international umbrella organisations lobbying for and prefiguring specific ways of transformative changes. Since four of the five EU Missions tackle challenges related to environmental and ecological challenges, the **SONNET** database (set up in 2019) comprising cases of social innovation relating to the energy transition presented itself as potentially valuable.

Since all four SI-databases employ a slightly different understanding of social innovation guiding the compilation of cases, the criteria for social innovation activities were considered, as well. However, given the broadness of the outlined criteria and the concept of social innovation as such, as well as the pre-selection of cases for a specified social innovation database, it was assumed that most cases are widely regarded as social innovation. Hence, the formulation of review criteria for social innovations focuses more on the case's (assumed) impact against the background of the EU Missions' targets. Since the description of the social innovations' actual impact differed in the SI-Databases and if available followed different analyses, cases were not reviewed in light of their actual impact but in terms of their fit with the EU Mission's targets and key interventions.

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For reviewing the contribution of the social innovation cases to the EU Missions "Cancer", "Climate Change Adaptation" and "100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030" a distinction was made between direct and indirect contributions to the EU Missions. The former referring to social innovation's contribution to the EU Mission targets directly and the latter taking into account contributions to either other strategies mentioned by the EU Mission (e.g. the Zero Pollution Action Plan which is presented as a key instrument contributing to the prevention pillar of the Cancer Mission) or underlying challenges mentioned as the main problems underlying the Mission. As the EU Missions "Restore our Oceans and Waters" and "Soil" cover the majority of underlying challenges in their targets already and do not refer to other areas of action, a distinction between direct and indirect would not have reflected the specific design of these EU Missions and, thus, was not applied here. Taking into account the description of the main problems, goals and objectives, as well as implementation steps of the five EU Missions, an extensive list of review criteria determining a social innovation's contribution to the EU Mission was formulated. The scoping search was slightly modified to scan each of the databases for inspiring cases of social innovations for the EU Missions. Both the detailed list of criteria and specific review of the single SI-databases is described in Annex II.

3.3 RESULTS OF THE SCOPING SEARCH

Applying the keyword search to all 280 EU Mission projects listed in CORDIS in September 2025 revealed that only 11 projects[3] make use of the concept of social innovation explicitly in the description of their objectives or keywords. The explicit reference to social innovation is rare and a comparison of projects mentioning the concept reveals that eight of the 11 projects answer to a call explicitly calling for social innovation. The specific use of social innovation in the topics ranges from asking for the development of social innovation alongside technological, governance or business innovations (e.g. HORIZON-MISS-2022-CLIMA-01-06 under which the project MountResilience is funded) to making active use of social innovation to ensure that social needs are met by innovative ideas (e.g. HORIZON-MISS-2024-OCEAN-02-01 under which the project SoS2LearnDBS is funded) or engaging citizens through participatory means including the use of social innovation (e.g. HORIZON-MISS-2021-SOIL-02-06 under which the project HuMUS

[3] The 11 projects mentioning social innovation explicitly in their keywords or objectives are HuMUS, TERRASAFE (EU Mission Soil), Re-Value, UPPER (EU Mission Cities), EcoDaLLi, SoS2LearnDBS (Mission Ocean), 4PCAN, PREVENT, MAYA (EU Mission Cancer), MountResilience, and URBREATH (EU Mission Climate Change Adaptation).

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is funded). This high overlap suggests that projects referring to social innovation explicitly echo the needs voiced by the calls and further reflects the diversity in understanding social innovation as either an innovation in itself or as a means to broaden the innovation process.

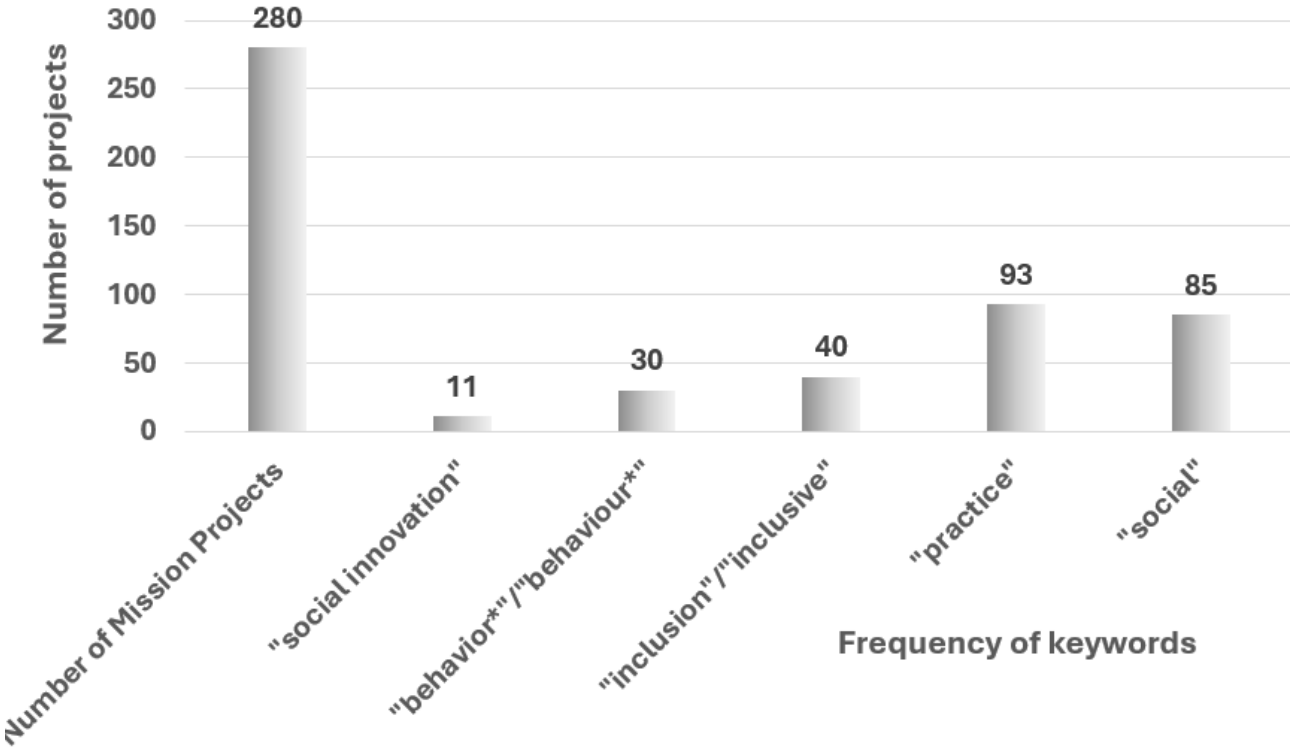

FIGURE 3 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF ALL EU MISSION PROJECTS IN CORDIS.

Although the usage of other keywords varied across Mission Areas - for example, more than half of the projects funded under the Soil Mission referred to 'practice(s)' while on average one third to one fourth of the projects funded in the other EU Missions used this keyword - the keyword search enabled us to identify social innovation activities in projects that do not explicitly refer to social innovation.

Looking at the project objectives of the EU Mission projects with two or more matches with the keywords showed that many projects refer to social innovation implicitly by e.g. opening up the research and innovation process to new stakeholders including potentially affected groups. One example here is the Cancer Mission project CO-CAPTAIN that actively involves cancer patients as co-

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researchers. It appears that from a process perspective, social innovation seems to play an implicit role in a variety of EU Mission projects. However, only few projects mention the development, implementation or scaling of social innovations understood as new practices, social relations, forms of organisation or institutional arrangements explicitly or beyond the scope of the project. Hence, social innovation as new practices, social relations, forms of organisation or institutional arrangements actively contributing to the EU Missions does not seem to be the focus of many EU Mission projects. Yet, the inspiring examples presented in chapter 4.1 - 4.5 highlight that a social innovation orientation in EU Mission projects is possible and promising if the challenges are approached in a systemic manner. However, if social innovation is explicitly mentioned by the projects, it risks appearing as one concept of innovation next to technological or business innovation that has to be considered without further specifying what is meant by the term within the scope of the project. This impression is reinforced by finding that neither the project objective nor the additional investigation of selected project homepages specified what is meant by social innovation and what its specific role in the project is.

The scoping search of the SI-databases further proved that social innovations are contributing to the EU Missions not just by innovating processes but providing solutions in their own right. They thereby often address the complex problems underlying the EU Missions contributing to the much needed set of different solutions to solve these. Social innovations matching the EU Missions' targets one-to-one are rare. For example, we found multiple examples of social innovations in the Cancer Mission that either contribute to the EU Mission by tackling environmental pollution or integrating physical movement in students' school curricular thereby contributing to the primary prevention of cancer or experimenting with new forms of care that could be adapted to the special situation of cancer patients or survivors and their families contributing to the improvement of quality of life. Especially the first type of social innovation contributing to the EU Mission by reducing exposure to environmental risk emphasises a pattern observed in all SI-databases: Social innovations contributing to the EU Missions more indirectly thereby contribute to multiple EU Missions. For example, all cases listed in the SONNET database contribute to the Cities Mission with three simultaneously contributing to cancer prevention (through a contribution to health in general), one to the Soil Mission and three to the Ocean and Waters Mission. Looking at the topics in the work programmes shows that cross-cutting projects are the minority even though EU Missions refer to strategies that have cross-cutting character, like the reference to the Zero Pollution Action Plan by the Cancer Mission.

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Scanning the SI Match Tool, we found six initiatives contributing to the EU Missions: Climate and Cities, two each that could be attributed to the Climate and Soil Mission or Cities and Soil Mission and one contributing to all three. Social innovations focussing on the circular economy in particular contribute to climate resilience (specified as a target of the Climate Change Adaptation Mission), the prevention of pollution (specified as a target of the Soil Mission) and climate neutrality in cities. By organising social innovations in specific local settings and often in an inclusive, bottom-up manner, many of the social innovations listed in the SI-database could indirectly contribute to social resilience.

Despite the overlap of many social innovation initiatives contributing to multiple EU Missions, the specifics of the different EU Missions suggest that social innovation in each area is shaped by different factors. What is innovative for one area could be standard for another. While the prevention of cancer and restructuring of urban mobility often takes into account the necessity to change individual behaviours and routines (as reflected by the wide-use of the keyword “behavior*”/”behaviour*” by Cancer Mission projects), climate change adaptation initiatives often focus on technical or nature-based solutions in the built environment, yet might incorporate social innovation on a process level more widely to structure and broaden planning processes.

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4. A CATALOGUE OF INSPIRING SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

To take into account the specifics of social innovation's potential for and empirical evidence of its traces in the single Missions, chapters 4.1-4.5 outline the characteristics of social innovation in each EU Mission individually. On basis of the review of EU Mission projects listed in CORDIS and scoping search of SI-databases, two inspiring EU Mission projects as well as inspiring social innovation initiatives were chosen as inspiring examples. Rather than providing a full catalogue of all EU Mission projects relating to social innovations and social innovations contributing to the EU Missions, the selection of projects and initiatives serves to display the variety of how social innovations contribute to the EU Missions.

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4.1 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR CANCER

To analyse the role of social innovation in EU Mission projects contributing to the Cancer Mission the projects listed in CORDIS and social innovations collected in the SI-Databases were assessed. The results of the sequential analysis of projects for the Cancer Mission in CORDIS are shown in the following chart:

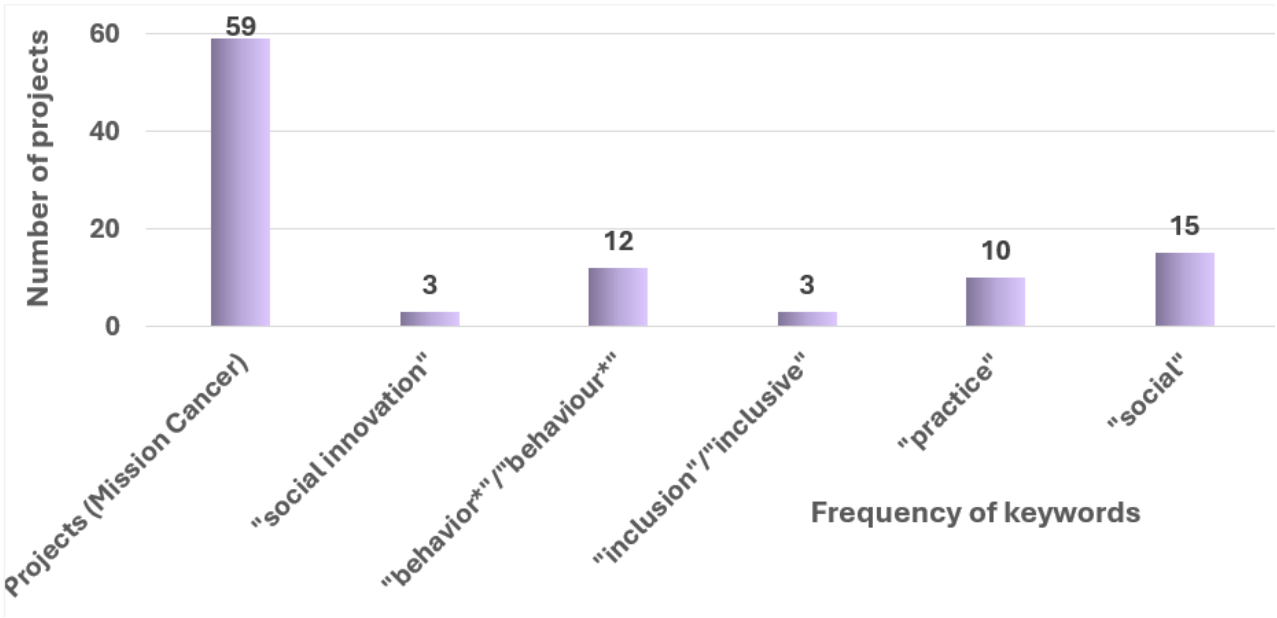

FIGURE 4 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE EU MISSION: CANCER IN CORDIS.

Hence, even though only three projects mention social innovation explicitly more than half use one of the keywords that could be used to describe social innovation activities. Looking for the use of multiple keywords, 10 projects matched with two keywords, one project matched with three keywords.

This analysis of objectives revealed that **behavioural change for cancer prevention** or for improving the quality of life of cancer survivors and the **establishment of new organisational practices**, account for the most common pattern of potential social innovations in that Mission Area. A review of the websites of five projects with the highest potential for social innovation showed that, by implementing living labs or pursuing research with cancer patients as co-researchers, social innovations in regard to structuring the research process can

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be found in multiple projects. Since the implementation of concrete interventions, like in the case of 4P-CAN (https://4p-can.eu/) or co-design of specific tools or platforms, like in e-quol (https://equolproject.eu/) or iBeCHANGE (https://ibechange.eu/) have not started yet, it is more difficult to assess if social innovation as new practices, social relations, forms of organisation or institutional arrangements providing a solution in itself is as widely acknowledged. To assess this development, it is useful to further investigate if these tools will tackle behaviour individually and independent of structural influences, as the project iBeCHANGE building a platform for behavioural change used by individuals, suggests or if it takes a more systemic approach bringing together environmental/structural and individual levers for change, as suggested by the policy analysis of 4P-CAN. To exemplify how social innovations could be taken into account by EU Mission projects, the two projects 4P-CAN and e-Quol will be further described.

Given the broad scope of the Cancer Mission, which spans cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment and the quality of life of survivors, social innovations with potential relevance to this Mission extend across a wide range of thematic areas and approaches. This is reflected by our findings from scoping the above introduced SI-Databases. In total, the SONNET database lists three social innovations mentioning a contribution to health by reducing emissions. One initiative contributes to post-hospital care in the Critical Turning Points database. Of the 82 in-depth SI-Drive cases, 16 indirectly contribute to Cancer or healthcare more generally, the SI Match database lists eight initiatives supporting the Cancer Mission in a broad way and five initiatives funded under Portugal 2020. On Cancer specifically, we found only one case in the SONNET database linking to the topic of Cancer, namely a project lobbying for stricter regulations for air quality, while three initiatives funded under Portugal 2020 centre on challenges associated with cancer explicitly. Social innovations listed in the SI-databases that contribute more indirectly to the Cancer Mission either focus on the prevention or better collection and treatment of (hazardous) waste or changes in energy production, improving air quality minimising potential risks or they aim to overcome challenges in healthcare by establishing new forms of care that could contribute to improving the quality of life of cancer patients, survivors or their families. However, social innovations in the latter realm address care as such and could benefit from an adaptation to the specifics of the cancer to contribute to the EU Mission more directly.

The following section of the catalogue provides an overview of the most relevant social innovation–related projects funded under the EU Cancer Mission, complemented by selected examples from other social innovation databases.

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Together, these examples illustrate how social innovation is currently conceptualised within the EU Missions, while also highlighting the additional potential that social innovation offers for advancing the objectives of the Cancer Mission.

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4PCAN
Personalized Cancer Primary Prevention research through Citizen Participation and digitally enabled social innovation

si mission facility

About the Project: The project 4P-CAN - short for "Personalized Cancer Primary P Research through Citizen Participation and Digitally Enabled Social Innovation" 04/2027) focuses on cancer prevention by taking into account the risk factors on mi and macro level. Centring on the modifiable risk factors of smoking, alcohol con physical inactivity, excess body weight (overweight and obesity), HPV and HBV infections and environmental pollution, 4P-CAN investigates how barriers to policy implementation and individual behaviour influence each other. By applying personal network analysis in a living lab setting in South-Muntenia, Romania, the project sets out to identify influential nodes of the network and uses these to test different intervention measures.

Impressions from the Health Festival organised in Lereşti Living Lab
Photo: 4P-CAN

The Role of Social Innovation: In 4P-CAN, stakeholder engagement is put on centre stage. Based on the assumption that more than half of all cancers could be prevented by changes in lifestyle, healthcare and the environment, the project emphasises the necessity to change practices enabling these changes. In this regard, special attention is paid to the influential roles of local policy-makers and personal networks in these processes. To this end, 4P-CAN brings together 130 stakeholders in Living Labs in Romania and Bulgaria setting up new relationships between citizens, policy-makers and health officials aiming to enhance cancer literacy in the local society and establish the living labs as long-term expert councils on primary cancer prevention.

More information: https://4p-can.eu/

Successful interventions to prevent cancers have to be developed in society and with local communities. Social innovation helps to shift the focus from top-down to bottom-up processes enabling healthier lifestyles.
Dr. Marius Geantă
(Coordinator 4P-CAN)

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e·QuoL
Equality · Quality of Life · Survivorship

si mission facility

About the Project: Employing a Co-Design approach, e-QuoL (01/2024 - 12/2027) sets out to develop a psycho-social support app targeted to improve quality of life for children, adolescents and young adults (CAYACS) affected by cancer. The project focusses on the needs of survivors and their families in follow-up care. To this end, e-Quol employs participatory research methods, involving not only CAYACS, their families, as well as adult survivors affected by cancer during childhood or adolescence, but also patient associations and networks as well as health institutes and an interdisciplinary team of researchers and industrial partners from 15 different countries. Through the research, the project set up a panel of survivors that together with the research group identified the unmet needs of CAYAC families and survivors. These identified and prioritised topics that informed the development of th social support app as well as educational material aimed at communicating long-ter of cancer and survivors' needs to their local supportive networks.

Recording interviews with CAYACS & health care professionals
Photo: Résilience / e-QuoL

The Role of Social Innovation: Long-term follow-up care after the treatment of cancer during childhood or adolescence encompasses a whole range of new practices, yet to be developed and scaled. By putting the voices of survivors centre stage and setting up a transdisciplinary approach of co-design, e-Quol contributes to the establishment of new relationships and new ways to identify survivors' needs and fruitful intervention practices. Listening to survivor's needs contributes to widening the perspective of health professionals to take into account neglected symptoms such as chronic fatigue. The development of the psycho-social app, is not an end in itself, but embedded in a holistic approach to overcome insufficient practices in health care and close the knowledge gaps of survivors' local supportive networks.

More information: https://equolproject.eu/

The e-Quol Concsortium
Photo: Catherine Jouannet / CHU d'Angers

Listening to the needs of survivors and co-designing the app does not only make their voices heard but initiates small changes in post-treatment practices in a systemic way.

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The following social innovations identified in the SI-Databases serve as an example of how social innovations contribute to the Cancer Mission. To cover the full spectrum of the Mission, the presentation entails one project contributing to the prevention of lung cancer by reducing air pollution (Polish Smog Alert) and one that improves coordination between different aspects contributing to improving the quality of life of patients and their families (Cancer 360).

Polish Smog Alert

Polish Smog Alert (PAS) is a civic initiative that addresses air pollution practices in Poland by reconfiguring governance arrangements and policy frameworks related to air quality. Rather than developing technological solutions, the initiative focuses on changing socially embedded practices of fuel use and heating through regulatory reform and public mobilisation. Its activities focus on pushing for standards on fuels and boilers, empowering local governments to regulate emissions, and advocating for policies that reduce harmful air pollution from heating and mobility. Its central goal is to improve air quality to levels that protect human health and meet national and EU standards. It focuses on shifting household heating practices and fuel use away from polluting options, enabled through regulatory change. The initiative further mobilises civil society to pressure policymakers and engages local governments by advocating for tools to regulate emissions. It advocates for governance innovations by giving municipalities the authority to set and enforce emission standards for heating devices.

More information: https://www.polishsmogalert.org/

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Cancer 360

Cancer 360 addresses the fragmentation of cancer care by introducing an integrated, person-centred support model that redefines how medical, psychosocial and social care practices are organised and delivered. Cancer 360 seeks to humanise and integrate cancer care, ensuring that patients, families, and caregivers receive coordinated, person-centred support across all stages of the disease. The core innovation is the creation of a 360° integrated support model that combines healthcare, psychosocial assistance, community involvement, and digital coordination tools. It establishes a network of collaboration among hospitals, social organisations, municipalities, and patient associations, breaking down silos between health and social systems. The approach redefines cancer care as a collective and holistic process, not limited to clinical treatment.

The initiative has contributed to enhance continuity and coordination of care between health and social sectors. It has improved well-being and satisfaction among cancer patients and caregivers. It further developed new partnership protocols between municipalities, hospitals, and NGOs and increased awareness of the need for holistic, community-based cancer care, overall. In doing so, Cancer 360 demonstrates how social innovation can strengthen health system responsiveness, improve quality of life and advance inclusive, needs-oriented approaches aligned with the objectives of the EU Cancer Mission.

More information: https://inovacaosocial.portugal2020.pt/project/cancer360/

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4.2 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR 100 CLIMATE NEUTRAL AND SMART CITIES

To analyse the role of social innovation in projects contributing to the Mission: Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, the projects listed in the CORDIS database were examined using a sequential keyword-based approach. In total, 19 projects were identified through the targeted searches using the keywords as 'social innovation', 'behaviour', 'inclusion', 'practice' and 'social'.

The results of the sequential analysis of projects for the Cities Mission in CORDIS are shown in the following chart:

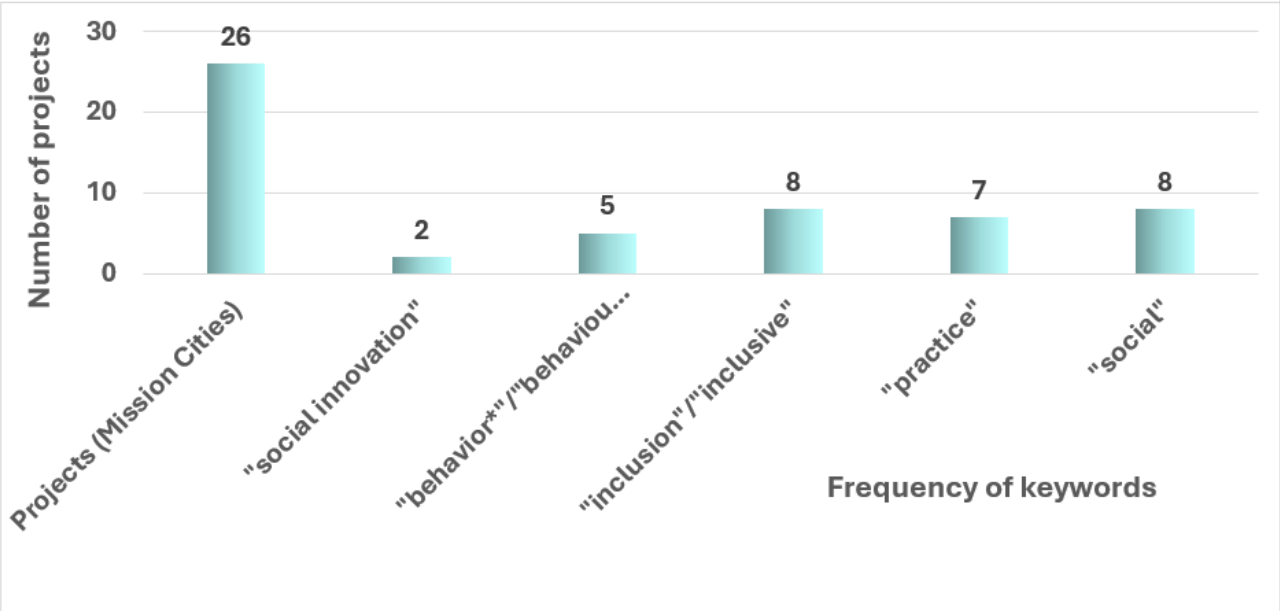

FIGURE 5 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE MISSION: CITIES IN CORDIS

The review showed that many initiatives address topics such as behavioural change, mobility transitions, shared or participatory governance and equitable access to public space. Notable is that the strength and depth of these components vary across cases. As in other Mission areas, several projects make use of co-design approaches, urban living labs and multi-actor processes. These are methods that are encouraged by Mission calls to ensure more robust and context-sensitive results. However, many projects appear to rely primarily on technical, planning or infrastructural innovations. Socially innovative mechanisms remain either implicit or secondary.

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A small number of projects stand out in their attempt to introduce systemic or socially transformative elements in their approach. Projects such as Re-Value or UPPER explore transformative potential within governance structures, value models or mobility behaviour while others such as JUST STREETS or SPINE focus on equity, inclusivity and behavioural change. However, most of these initiatives do not demonstrate sufficiently explicit mechanisms of social innovation to be included in the final selection.

Based on the full analysis, two projects considered to have the strongest potential for social innovation were thus selected for further investigation: REALLOCATE and UP2030. Both projects relate directly with behavioural change and participatory processes in relation to urban transformation. Therefore, they serve as particularly illustrative examples for the Cities Mission.

From the additional databases, numerous cases of social innovations that are in line with this EU Mission's objective were identified. For the SIMF database, for instance, nine cases aligned with the EU Mission objectives, with three additional cases identified after filtering thematically. Due to its focus on mapping energy transition-related initiatives, the SONNET database particularly yielded numerous inspiring cases of social innovation.

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REALLOCATE

si mission facility

About the Project: REALLOCATE is a Horizon Europe project that aims to make European cities climate-neutral, safe, inclusive, and smart by reimagining urban mobility and street design. Through pilots in 15 urban and peri-urban areas, it experiments with the reallocation of street space to prioritise active and sustainable modes of transport, while improving safety, inclusivity, and affordability. Across these and other pilot cities, REALLOCATE combines innovative urban design, behavioural nudges, and data-driven tools to transform how people move and interact in cities. It also fosters learning across cities through mentoring, capacity building, twinning, and work shadowing.

A street in LYON that was transformed into a child friendly area (Image: REALLOCATE)

The Role of Social Innovation: REALLOCATE is a strong case for social innovation because it connects technological and spatial transformation with behavioural and cultural change. It treats mobility not just as an engineering problem but as a social system that shapes inclusion, safety, and public life. By linking cities into a European learning network, it creates spaces for experimentation and mutual learning, empowering city staff and citizens to co-design solutions. Its emphasis on justice and accessibility shows how the transition to climate neutrality must also be socially equitable — making this a compelling example of innovation that combines smart technologies with human-centred design and participatory governance.

More information: https://reallocatemobility.eu/

Project coordinators: Professor Francesco Pilla and Assistant Professor Aura Istrate (co-PC), University College Dublin

Through co-creation, municipalities, citizens, and stakeholders collaborate to develop meaningful solutions and transform public spaces for everyone.

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About the Project: UP2030 leverages urban planning and design to support the socio-technical transitions required for cities to meet their climate targets. The project introduces an innovative methodology (**5UP-approach**) to respond to implementation gaps in climate action, fostering consistent and systemic action in cities through 5 dimensions: **UPDATING** city needs aligned with actions, **UPSKILLING** knowledge and agents of change, **UPGRADING** through piloting while embedding **UPSCALING** of actions, and **UPTAKING** key mechanisms and knowledge. With cities' growing awareness of climate change impacts and persistent implementation gaps, UP2030 shows that support should extend beyond financing and project outputs. It should also guide capacity building, human agency, prototyping, and upscaling to mainstream climate action systemically.

The Climate Proofing methodology in action (photo: UP2030)

The Role of Social Innovation: Through participatory planning and design, behavioural change initiatives, and new governance models, UP2030 drives new forms of collaboration between citizens, local authorities, and urban stakeholders. It empowers urban communities to become co-agents of change alongside professional actors – co-creating actionable solutions that are inclusive, just, and sustainable. By embedding social innovation throughout its processes, UP2030 paves the way for lasting city-wide transformations towards climate neutral, just, and resilient cities.

More information: https://up2030-he.eu/

Catalina Díaz, Project coordinator, UP2030

(photo: Catalina Diaz)

Often peer exchange stops at information-sharing. What truly need is deeper learning from one another.

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The cases below were selected to form a representative yet diverse set of examples of social innovations contributing to the Cities Mission. While not exhaustive, the selection prioritised initiatives that illustrate a range of approaches, geographic contexts and thematic focuses, from sustainable mobility and circular urban practices to citizen-led energy governance and environmental education.

Berliner Energietisch

The Berliner Energietisch (Berlin Energy Table) is a grassroots alliance of over 55 local organisations advocating for a democratic, ecological, and socially just energy system. The coalition campaigned for re-municipalisation: the return of Berlin's energy networks to public ownership to ensure renewable, decentralised, and community-controlled energy provision. Its proposed legislation aimed to establish a public-law utility company guided by democratic governance, ecological responsibility, and social fairness, directly involving citizens in decision-making.

This initiative stands out as a model of democratic energy governance and collective agency. By contesting the dominance of profit-driven, centralised energy utilities, it redefines energy as a public good managed by and for citizens. The Energietisch demonstrates how institutional innovation can drive urban climate transitions. Its broad civic alliance, spanning NGOs, cooperatives, and residents, showcases how social mobilisation can reshape the political and economic foundations of the energy system, advancing both sustainability and democracy. Berliner Energietisch demonstrates how social innovation can drive urban energy transitions by transforming governance structures, decision-making practices and organisational models in ways that advance both sustainability and democratic participation.

More information: https://berliner-energietisch.net/about-the-berlin-energy-roundtable/

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Tiganokinski

Tiganokinisi ("Frying Oil Movement") is a Cypriot educational and environmental initiative addressing one of the country's most persistent waste challenges: used cooking oil. Implemented across more than 400 schools, it collects waste oil and converts it into biodiesel, using the proceeds to fund environmental education and green infrastructure in schools. The programme combines circular economy principles with hands-on learning, fostering environmental awareness, behavioural change and community engagement. It has received European recognition and Horizon 2020 support for international expansion.

From a social innovation perspective, Tiganokinisi operates by reconfiguring everyday practices related to waste disposal and resource use, while simultaneously reshaping social relations between schools, households, municipalities and local organisations. It illustrates how social innovation can emerge through education and circularity at the local level, creatively linking waste reduction with learning, showing how sustainability transitions can start in schools and spread across communities. By coupling environmental education with tangible rewards and collective action, it builds new social norms around waste, responsibility, and resource use. The project's success in mobilising students, teachers, and municipalities highlights how small-scale, community-driven innovations can produce systemic change to turn a waste challenge into a social learning process for sustainability.

More information: https://www.tiganokinisi.eu/en/

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Repowering London

Repowering London demonstrates how community-led innovation can take place in the energy landscape. The initiative enables neighbourhoods to fund, install and manage their own renewable energy systems. In doing so, it places citizens at the centre of the energy transition. Residents can directly invest in the project and also benefit from its financial return. Additionally, the decision-making processes are democratized to ensure that citizens, and not traditional market actors, drive the projects.

From a social innovation perspective, Repowering London introduces new organisational models and governance arrangements that challenge dominant, market-led models of energy provision. Repowering delivers more than just clean and locally generated electricity but also serves as an example of collective ownership and democratized decision making. The initiative also contributes to energy justice by addressing fuel poverty through targeted energy efficiency measures. Repowering London developed a replicable and scalable approach on how a new, community-centred and context-sensitive governance and financial model can be implemented across multiple neighbourhoods. It illustrates strongly how democratic participation and value-based investments can help make our energy system more fair and sustainable.

More information: https://www.repowering.org.uk/

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4.3 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

To analyse the role of social innovation in EU Mission projects contributing to the EU Mission Climate Change Adaptation the projects listed in CORDIS and social innovations collected in the SI-Databases were scrutinised. The results of the sequential analysis of projects for the Climate Mission in CORDIS are shown in the following chart:

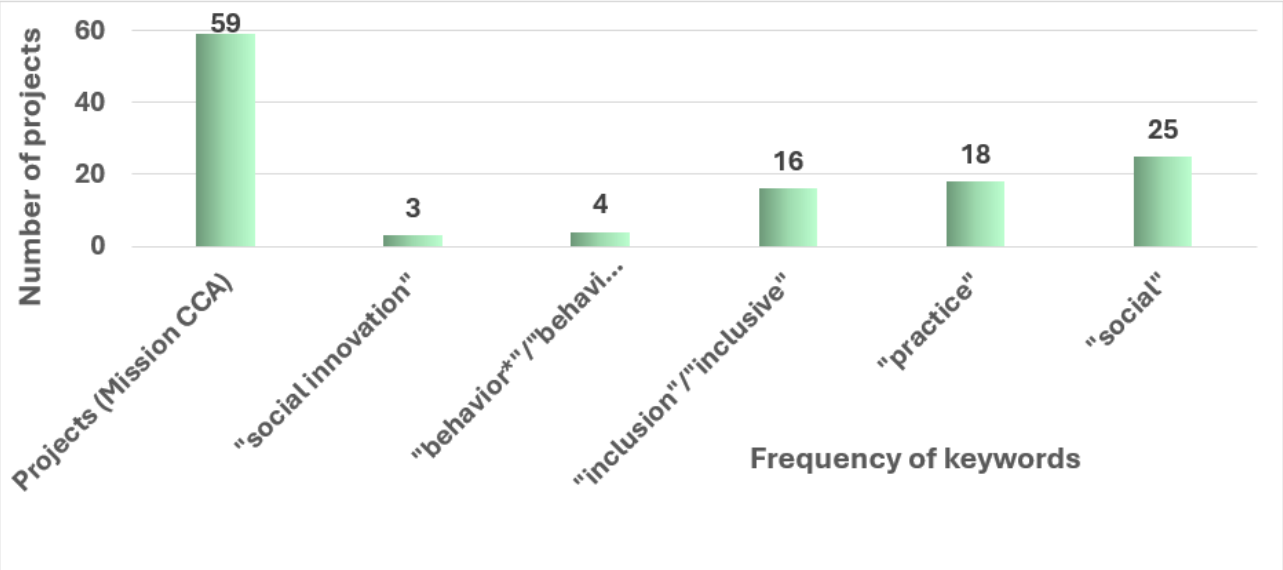

FIGURE 6 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE EU MISSION: CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN CORDIS

The analysis of project objectives shows that many projects in the Climate Mission structure the research and innovation process in line with a social innovation-orientation. For example, they design project activities in an inclusive way, engaging with all relevant actors. Nevertheless, social innovation in this way runs the risk to become instrumentalised to legitimise the implementation of changes in the built environment, changes in practices, social relations, forms of organisation or institutional arrangements beyond the design of the research and innovation process remain an exception. In this chapter, the two EU Mission projects MountResilience (https://mountresilience.eu/) and Adaptation AGORA (https://adaptationagora.eu/) exemplify how social innovations can contribute to a re-organisation of the planning and decision-making process and provide solution to the task of climate change adaptation themselves.

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The project *Mount Resilience* shows that tailored strategies for various demo regions show sensibility for the context-dependency of social innovation. This enables a systematic approach considering a wide range of possible solutions. Local councils, formative evaluation methods and a will for experimentation ensure the constant reflection of these strategies. The project *Adaptation Agora* engages vulnerable groups and neglected regions. Their focus for climate justice and social equity shows the need for community-based soft adaptation solutions in cities. Methods of citizen engagement support visible progress of a tangible implementation process. Moreover, the project has shown that digital education tools and platforms support sharing knowledge as well as accessibility and visibility of information for vulnerable groups especially affected by climate change.

The analysis of the SI-databases suggests that social innovations seldom focus on direct adaptation to climatic changes. Many social innovations collected in the SI-databases rather address mitigation than adaptation, focusing e.g. on cooperative and renewable energy production as the SONNET database and many cases collected by SI-DRIVE show.

However, the Climate Mission also calls for co-creating shared visions towards climate change adaptation and enabling conditions to deal with climate risks. Ecovillages like the *Global Ecovillage Bergen* in the Netherlands (Critical Turning Points) are intentional communities that are actively designed for climate change adaptation, low-carbon solutions and participation. Inhabitants of ecovillages build resilience actively by reducing dependency on centralised infrastructures and restoring ecosystems (Yalciner et al. 2025). Ecovillages show further synergies towards the other four EU Missions by resilient and participative urban planning (Cities Mission), regenerative agriculture or blue economy (Soil and Ocean and Waters Mission) and promotion of healthy lifestyles and quality of life (Cancer Mission).

Another example from the SI-databases are integrated circular economy approaches like the planned *Circular Economy Centre of Excellence Mall* in Longford, Ireland (SI Match) that could support the EU Mission in many ways. By reusing materials, supply chain disruptions by extreme weather events could be reduced while the reduction in resource use goes hand in with other approaches of Nature Based Solutions like the promotion of sustainable forests or water management (Çetin and Kirchherr 2025; Stefanakis et al. 2021). Moreover, the local embeddedness of both examples enhances innovation capacity and social resilience of the local communities overall.

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The SI-Mission-Facility is funded by the European Commission (EC)
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About the Project: MountResilience (09/2023 - 02/28) aims to increase the adaptation capacity of mountainous regions and communities and close the gap in shortcomings of planning and implementing adaptive measures. Together with 47 partners, transformative solutions aiming to strengthen climate resilience are developed and tested. Each of the six demonstrator regions thereby tackles a regional climatic challenge such as decline in snow cover and frequency, which causes difficulties for reindeer herders, winter tourism or agricultural practices respectively. The chosen challenges emphasise that successful adaptation planning should follow a systematic and long-term oriented approach taking into account a variety of environmental, social and economic factors and engage with a variety of stakeholder groups. Four replicator regions adapt solutions in a targeted, context-sensitive manner.

Meeting of the local council in Gabrovo, Bulgaria (photo: Municipality of Gabrovo)

The Role of Social Innovation: By focussing on transformative adaptation, MountResilience aims to strengthen the adaptation capacity of mountainous regions systematically and sustainably. To this end, the project established local councils in all demonstrator regions connecting a diverse set of actors. A monitoring and evaluation process employing formative evaluation allows for expert-guided reflection throughout. Blind spots and further relevant stakeholders for the development of place-based solutions may be identified through this. This reflexive approach ensures that the implementation of technological innovations and nature-based solutions integrates social innovations, experiments with new adaptation practices, and takes into account the perspective of vulnerable groups.

More information: https://mountresilience.eu/

Camilla Chlebna, Centre for Social Innovation (photo: Camilla Chlebna)

A focus on transformative adaptation ensures long-term orientation and institutionalisation that goes beyond immediate, isolated climate response activities.

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About the Project: With a focus on involving different societal segments, including areas and community groups that are often overlooked in climate change adaptation, *adaptation AGORA* (01/2023-12/2025) set out to promote democracy, climate justice, gender equality, and equity. Having citizen empowerment at its core, the project designed a citizen engagement process to improve decision-making processes and thereby fostering the adaptive capacity of local communities. To this end, the project designed different community engagement workshops and focus groups in four pilot regions with the aim to identify fruitful soft adaptation measures that citizens can apply themselves. Based on these local experiences, *adaptation AGORA* built a digital living environment providing access to the digital educational tools developed within the project. These tools include insights into the set-up of a citizen engagement process, as well as online academies conveying information on the interpretation of climate data and strategies to deal with disinformation campaigns.

Participatory activities conducted in the pilot regions (photos: Pierluigi Giorgi)

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION: Since its kick-off in January 2023, *adaption AGORA* has been convening workshops and focus groups to understand citizen engagement in climate change adaptation in four pilot regions. The project focuses on the necessities of diverse communities for an equitable adaptation. For example, the project created formats to engage workers, students and multicultural groups. Thereby, social innovation does not only play a role in engaging new stakeholders in climate change adaptation and designing the planning process according to principles of just transition, but also in sharing knowledge and experiences with new adaptive practices that are crucial to deal adequately with climatic risks such as heat waves.

More information: https://adaptationagora.eu & https://voicesofclimateadaptation.dataclime.com

The adaptation AGORA consortium (photo: Pierluigi Giorgi)

Social innovation plays a pivotal role in creating soft adaptation measures, which are crucial to enhance the adaptive capacity of local communities.

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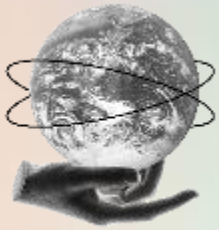

The following social innovations identified in the SI-Databases serve as an example of how broadly existing social innovations can contribute to the Climate Mission Change Adaptation:

Global Ecovillage Bergen

Ecovillage Bergen (Netherlands) is a grassroots sustainability initiative founded in 2011, inspired by the global ecovillage movement. The group emphasised building a cohesive community and adopted sociocracy as its governance model. Throughout, the initiative experimented with alternative governance, collective ownership, and translocal networking. Since 2013 the group has acquired a piece of land, which they are actively turning into an ecovillage for approximately 80 people. From a social innovation perspective, Ecovillage Bergen represents an experimental reconfiguration of social practices and organisational forms related to housing, land use and community life. Through collective ownership structures and shared governance, the initiative challenges dominant models of individualised housing and property ownership

More information: https://www.ecodorpbergen.nl/

Circular Economy Centre of Excellence Mall

Envisioned as a multi-million investment comprising a 25,000-30,000 square foot facility in Longford, Ireland, the Circular Economy Centre will operate as a multi-faceted, closed loop operation incorporating an Education and Training Centre, a Repair and Upcycling Workshop Hub, a Pioneering Circular Economy Retail Mall. Inspired by successful European models, the “Mall” will create circular economy activities in Longford and regionally, thus nurturing and encouraging small businesses/social enterprises and the creation of retail job opportunities. The Centre seeks to transform consumption and production practices by embedding repair, reuse and upcycling into everyday economic activity and therefore can be considered a social innovation.

More information: https://edilongford.ie/revamp/

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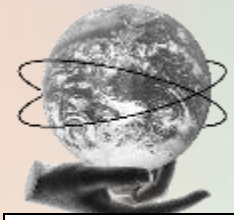

VER – *Viveiro de Emprego Regenerador* Established in 2021 under the framework of Portugal Social Innovation, *Viveiro de Emprego Regenerador* aims at capacity-building programmes for unemployed and low-skilled people for integration into local green jobs focussing on reforestation, soil regeneration, and biodiversity actions. VER is motivated by the belief that climate change adaptation can be community-driven and inclusive, creating healthy local ecosystems of actors and nature. In the sense of a social innovation it establishes new organisational arrangements that connect local authorities, environmental actors, training providers and vulnerable groups, fostering inclusive governance and collective responsibility for climate adaptation.

More information: http://inovacaosocial.portugal2020.pt/project/ver-viveiro-de-emprego-regenerador/?doing_wp_cron=1764941821.7426669597625732421875

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4.4 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR SOIL

To analyse the role of social innovation in projects contributing to the EU Mission Soil, the projects listed in CORDIS as well as social innovations collected in the SI-Databases (SI-Drive, Critical Turning Points, SONNET, and SI Match) were scrutinised. The results of the sequential analysis of projects for the Soil Mission in CORDIS are shown in the following chart:

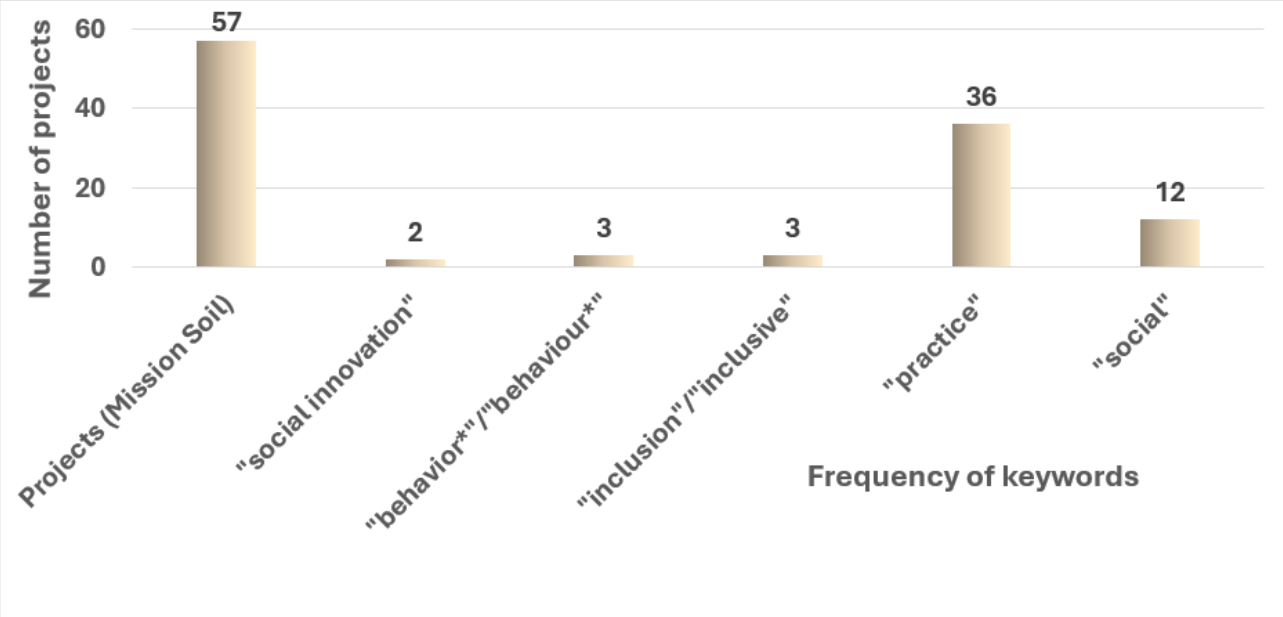

FIGURE 7 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE EU MISSION: SOIL IN CORDIS

The analysis revealed that practice changes are an important element of almost 2/3 of all Mission Soil projects selected for funding. These relate to the need for changes in land and soil use practices, particularly concerning agriculture as requested by the call. However, most of these projects focus exclusively on the use of new technologies or/and technological processes to improve the quality and structure of soil. Changes in social, organisational or institutional practices are considered only implicitly, if at all.

It should also be mentioned that many projects use co-design, stakeholder consultations and other participatory methods to achieve more robust results. This inclusive approach is also encouraged by the calls. Some projects have a strong focus on communities and regions that are used as experiment and testing grounds. Living Labs fulfil an important function in this regard.

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A few projects stand out in two respects:

Firstly, there are projects that deal with new business models that include elements relevant to practice changes.

Secondly, a few projects explicitly pursue the goal of improving society's perception of soil as an important resource for life and increasing soil literacy overall.

Many of the scrutinised projects focus on raising awareness about the diverse functions and properties of soils to stimulate a change of attitude towards soils, which should finally also lead to a change of behaviour of the targeted social groups (such as farmers, municipalities, regional planners, landowners, building developers and the society at large). The HUMMUS project (https://www.humus-project.eu/) for instance, works from an early stage on with partner territories to implement participatory processes and stimulate extensive dialogues on soil protection and soil health. The TERRASAFE project (https://terrasafe.eu/about/) takes a similar approach, although the focus here is clearly on the desertification and on identifying measures to prevent it. The aim is also to develop opportunities for new businesses.

The Gov4All project (https://gov4all.eu/),focuses explicitly on non-technological solutions and pursues a more socio-ecological systems approach, first examining personal and organisational drivers and then aligning goals and behaviours with effective collective action. Another promising aspect is the project's approach to exploring new governance and business models in living labs.

To exemplify how social innovations are taken into account by EU Mission projects the projects HUMMUS, InBestSoil and Gov4All will be further described.

Given the broadness of targets mentioned in the Soil Mission spanning from raising awareness on soil health to ensuring the long-term productivity of soils on all types of land by developing and using sustainable practices related to spatial planning, soil conservation and agricultural techniques, a broad potential of social innovation activities contributing to this Mission Area could be assumed. Thus, existing social innovation databases were further scrutinised.

The ESF+ connected "Social Innovation Match" database, for instance, highlights 10 projects with a more or less explicit focus on soils, directly or indirectly related to the Soil Mission objectives (such as through organic food banks, circular economy, organic farm management, promotion of vegan cooking, reduction of litter, social entrepreneurship with a focus on marginalised groups integrated in organic

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farming, socially innovative investment practices, re-greening and urban gardening). Half of the identified projects overlap significantly with the Cancer and Climate chance adaptation missions.

The SI-Drive database highlighted 12 cases with high relevance to the Mission Soil (two in the practice field "alternative and sustainable food", two in the practice field "community and capacity-building"[4], one in the practice field "local production of energy") and five further cases with some relevance to its objectives.

From the above mentioned SI Databases, the "Regionalwert AG" project was recognised as a socially innovative business innovation in the format of a citizen-owned joint-stock company that support businesses ranging from organic farming and food processing to trade and catering. In addition, "Soil Walks", a method for initiating public dialogue and preparing participatory planning processes with a special focus on soil sealing is showcased.

[4] E.g. the AgroSolidarity case in Colombia

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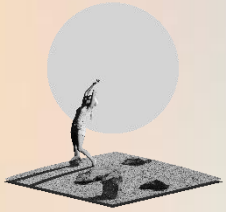

HuMUS
Healthy Municipal Soils

si mission facility

About the Project: HuMUS (Healthy Municipal Soils) facilitated the deployment of the Mission Soil at the local level by engaging municipalities and regions across Europe to identify challenges and co-create solutions to protect and restore soil health together with local communities. At its core, the project was a comprehensive, systemically operating participatory soil literacy initiative. The three-year project, which concluded with its final conference on 21 November 2025, implemented three main activities: (i) the creation of experimental spaces for social dialogue on soil health, involving public and private actors; (ii) the promotion of a shared understanding of soil health and the implementation of co-assessment exercises addressing soil challenges, considering both biophysical and socio-economic dimensions; and (iii) the enhancement of knowledge sharing among municipalities and regions.

Testing the quality of soil (photo: Landwirtschaftskammer Nordrhein-Westfalen

HuMUS supported 14 internal and 20 external pilots, selected through a financial support to third parties mechanism (cascade funding), to establish participatory processes for the co-creation of Territorial Management Agreements on soil health. The 34 HuMUS pilots confirmed the replication potential of the methodology developed by the project across additional 18 replication sites. This approach, inspired by the organic district multi-stakeholder model developed by the Region of Tuscany, could serve as a foundation for future Living Labs or Lighthouses under the Mission Soil.

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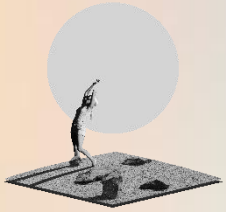

HuMUS
Healthy Municipal Soils

si mission facility

The Role of Social Innovation: The social innovation focus of HuMUS was on advancing participatory governance for soil health management at local level. A total of 34 Territorial Management Agreements were established across 26 regions from 13 EU and 3 non-EU countries. Local stakeholders from the so-called Quadruple Helix were involved in multi-stage decision-making processes. The challenges addressed included soil erosion, water storage capacity, soil compaction, loss of organic carbon, soil pollution, soil sealing, soil biodiversity, and more.

HuMUS also invested in educational and capacity-building activities, as well as in the exchange of best practices through peer learning. A Soil Steward Training Programme was developed to facilitate and moderate regional and municipal dialogues on soil health. The training programme is free on any charge and available in six European languages (EN, IT, FR, DE, ES, BG) on the project website. In summary, HuMUS was a project focused on soil literacy grounded in scientific evidence, governance experimentation, and the co-development of Territorial Management Agreements to initiate further actions promoting soil health. Beyond raising awareness and fostering changes in understanding,

HuMUS contributed to the integration of soil health into local policy agendas and planning instruments, supporting municipalities and regions in embedding soil health into their strategic plans and operational frameworks.

More information: https://www.humus-project.eu/

Meeting of the HuMUS consortium photo: (HuMUS)

The end of the HuMUS project is the beginning of the implementation of the Territorial Management Agreements at local level, a process that requires structured monitoring, stable financial support, and a progressive extension at the geographical scale in order to maximise its impact on territorial policies.

Annalaura Vannuccini, ANCI Toscana

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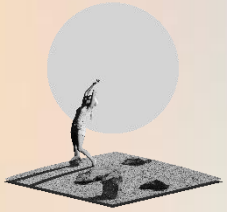

GOV4ALL

si mission facility

About the Project: Gov4All (Governance and business models for living labs: rural regeneration hubs for tackling soil health challenges in the Mediterranean region) started in June 2024 and implements the following tasks:

1) Exploration of regional needs and drivers as well as suitable governance models for operating multi-actor co-creation processes.
2) Establishment of a network of five agro-innovation hubs to be sustained by underlying business models.
3) Definition of harmonised regional baselines for 7 out of the 8 indicators found in the Soil Mission Implementation plan.
4) Testing concrete practice shifts for better soil management in more than 75 commercial farms across the living labs.
5) Facilitation of the diffusion of innovation through various communication and dissemination actions.

Planning activities in Gov4All (photo: Gov4All)

Changes occur more likely when hearts and minds align.
Tristano Bacchetti De Gregoris, Project Coordinator of Gov4All

The role of social innovation: The project's starting point is to foster awareness that both soils and humans are embedded within social-ecological systems and that no organisation or solution alone is capable of sustainably transforming the system towards healthy and sustainable soil practices. Therefore, the project aims to develop enabling governance structures in each of the five regions to manage this transformation. Several partners from the quadruple helix are involved in developing a shared vision for the territory in which they operate. This vision goes beyond a narrow soil science focus. It rather perceives soil as one, however foundational element for rural development. This necessitates also the identification and development of suitable business models affecting the broader value chain, that support healthy soils rather than to degrading them. The underlying social relationships and associated experiences that emerge from the joint co-design works in the living labs, which is guided and supported by the project, promote more holistic perspectives, new approaches to solutions and changes in awareness, which can lead to changes in attitudes, mindsets and practices.

More information: https://gov4all.eu/

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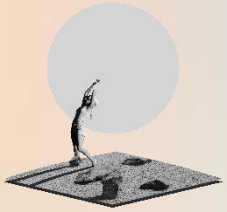

InBestSoil

si mission facility

About the Project: The goal of the **InBestSoil** project, which started its work in January 2023, is to create a business model-based framework for investments in soil health preservation and restoration. To this end, a system for the economic valuation of ecosystem services provided by healthy soils has been developed and the effects of certain measures and practices on soil health have been investigated. The project uses 7 lighthouses and 2 living labs, which provide several study areas across four biogeographic regions from Europe (boreal, continental, Atlantic, mediterranean), and different land uses (agriculture, forest, urban, mining).

Farmer looking at soil (photo: InBestSoil)

The role of social innovation: A major focus of the InBestSoil is the analysis of existing business models and practices and experimentation with new ones designed to enable public and private organisations to assign an economic value to their soil health measures and to facilitate incentives for investment in soil health. To this end, co-design approaches were applied to introduce the abstract concept of soil health into business activities without causing significant damage to business operations but improving their sustainability. At the time being, the project classifies what these either existing or new business models look like. Some are based on savings on fertilizers, while some include the introduction of new products. Others are engaging in new markets like carbon credits or trying to leverage the added value of certifications. Some are not profit-driven but create value through educational offers. In addition to a change in attitude towards the economic and social value of soil, improved business models are in some cases leading to changes in social practices, new interactions to create synergies, new forms of cooperation that benefit various partners and tapping into new markets for instance through the establishment of carbon credit agreements. With the help of living labs, communities of practice are established and organised to facilitate the dissemination of results and putting them into practice.

> *Our objective is that good soil health practices are also profitable, so they can thrive and spread*
> Mr. Andrés Rodríguez Seijo, Project Coordinator of InBestSoil

More information: https://inbestsoil.eu/

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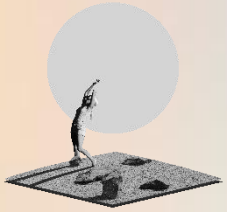

Regionalwert AG

"Regionalwert AGs" are citizen-owned joint stock companies, which support businesses ranging from organic farming and food processing to trade and catering (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regionalwert_Aktiengesellschaft). The economic model of Regionalwert AG is subsistence farming, but not conceptualised for individual farms, but rather entire regions that provide for their own food supply. Producers at various stages of the value chain are brought together with consumers and shareholders. Citizens and organisations (such as companies, churches and foundations) can purchase restricted registered shares, which are subject to trading restrictions. All shareholders are known to the public limited companies by name, and shares are not traded on the stock exchange but are only issued by the respective public limited companies.

Two partnership models exist: first, businesses that are interested in the network but do not currently require capital can become partners by paying a licence fee. Second, Regionalwert AG can provide financial support to businesses that require capital. From a social innovation perspective, Regionalwert AG represents an alternative organisational and institutional model for financing and governing regional food systems.

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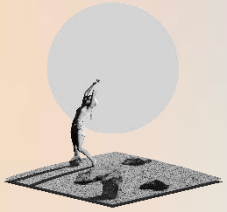

Soil Walks

The Soil Walks project was developed by the Technical University Vienna, the Environmental Agency Austria and Wallenberger & Linhard Regionalberatung KG in collaboration with pilot communities (https://soilwalks.project.tuwien.ac.at/). It raises awareness on the issues of land use, soil sealing and inner-city development and planning. Soil Walks are a method for initiating public dialogue and preparing participatory planning processes. During soil walks, current challenges and opportunities relating to land use in general and specifically for the community are discussed with the population and interested parties. It is a low-threshold participation format in which citizens can participate spontaneously during the walks too. To support communities with hard data, a data dashboard was developed to visualise key figures on land use and sealing in Austrian municipalities and regions. Soil Walks reconfigure planning practices and governance processes by shifting citizen participation from formal consultation settings to open, place-based and accessible formats. The initiative hereby establishes a social innovative practice that forges new social relations between planners, local authorities and citizens, enabling spontaneous and inclusive engagement in discussions on land-use decisions (see https://soilwalks.project.tuwien.ac.at/dashboard/)

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4.5 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR OCEANS

Through the same systematic scan of the CORDIS database as introduced for the other mission areas, 79 Horizon Europe projects related to the EU Mission Ocean and Waters were identified. Using keywords relating to social innovation (social innovation, behaviour, inclusion, practice, social), we identified 33 projects that are related to social innovation practices.

The results of the sequential analysis of projects for the EU Mission Ocean and Waters in CORDIS are shown in the following chart:

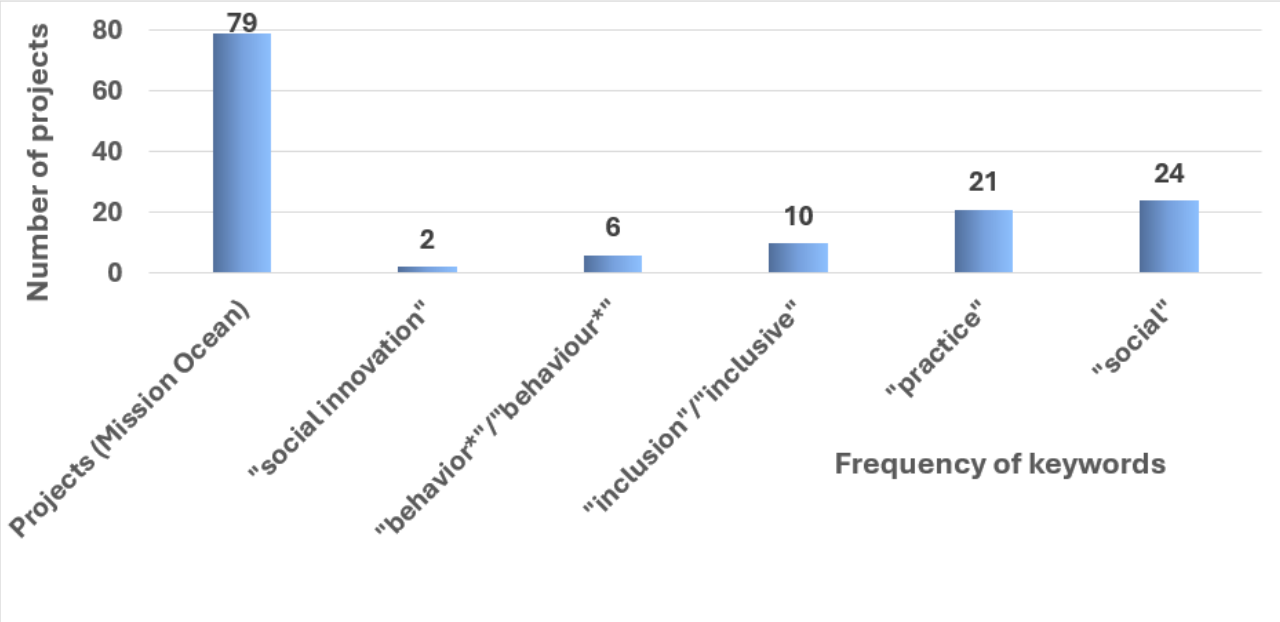

FIGURE 8 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE EU MISSION OCEAN AND WATERS IN CORDIS

Within this selection of potential socially innovative projects within the CORDIS database, we found many projects addressing aquatic challenges, but only a minority used socially innovative mechanisms rather than technology-driven ones. Several recurring patterns explain why most projects were excluded: First, as mentioned, many initiatives centred around technical innovations. A good example, for instance, is SEARCULAR, which focuses on new recyclable fishing gear or ECOTWIN and SEADOTs' contributions to Digital Ocean Twin architectures. These projects may be scientifically sophisticated but they do not introduce new social

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practices, governance arrangements or participatory structures. Consequently, they fall outside the scope of social innovation. Second, a large subset of projects was advocacy-oriented rather than focused on changing practices. Mr. Goodfish 3.0, for instance, seeks to influence consumption behaviour through apps, indicators, or educational materials. While such tools are important for awareness and may support future uptake, the available descriptions do not yet show evidence that they generate new collective arrangements, challenge economic paradigms, or anchor transformed practices. Additionally, many initiatives mentioned citizen engagement or co-creation but in ways that remained vague or subordinate to technical research. Projects such as SEADITO reference multi-actor processes or living labs, yet the descriptions lack clear articulation of socially innovative components such as shared governance, redistribution of decision-making power, or community-driven experimentation. However, two Horizon Europe projects from the CORDIS database stood out as they demonstrated strong social innovations aligned with the mission's objectives: TiDAL ArtS and EcoDaLLi.

A similar strategy was applied to the SIM and SONNET databases, with each case assessed against the indicators for traces of social innovation. Cases also needed to contribute tangibly to EU Mission Oceans and Waters objectives.

In reviewing social-innovation cases from databases outside of CORDIS, a number of entries were examined but ultimately most were not suitable for inclusion in the final analysis. Most of the cases were not included because their primary objectives only indirectly touched upon the mission focus areas or because their activities showed limited relevance for systemic change in water management. Several examples also lacked sufficient documentation of scalable social-innovation mechanisms, making it difficult to assess whether the initiative produced more than locally bounded or short-term effects. In some cases, projects centred mainly on general community development, social services or cultural initiatives without a clear link to the mission. Colimar (CTP database) for example focusses on forming a cooperative of women seafood producers but does not tangibly contribute to the goals of the Oceans and Water Mission. As a result, only one additional case from the SI drive was notable as it demonstrated a clear thematic connection and a well-described social-innovation component.

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TIDAL ArtS

si mission facility

About the Project: TransformIng anD inspiring Aquatic Landscapes through Art and Sciences is a Horizon Europe Mission Ocean project that seeks to bridge the gap between humans and nature through creative collaboration. Its goal is to address the ongoing climate, environmental, and biodiversity crises by fostering alliances between art, science, and society. The project mobilises artists, scientists, citizens, and cultural and technological institutions to raise awareness of the challenges facing aquatic systems and to inspire collective, creative solutions for their protection and restoration. At its core, TIDAL ArtS employs a transdisciplinary and interspecies approach that treats water not only as a subject of study but also as a guiding method for collaboration. Through successive co-design rounds with local citizens, scientists, and cultural actors, the project builds cyclical "tidal" interactions where knowledge and inspiration flow back and forth between disciplines and communities. This process challenges long-standing divides between culture and nature, humans and non-humans, and replaces them with a fluid and relational understanding of aquatic ecosystems.

Artwork from a TIDAL Arts Collective by Isabella Martin (Image: TIDAL ARTS

The Role of Social Innovation: TIDAL ArtS is an inspiring case for social innovation because it reimagines how environmental awareness and action can emerge through art, participation, and shared meaning-making. With this transdisciplinary approach, it contests the dominance of technocratic approaches to sustainability by showing that social and cultural change are just as crucial as technical solutions. Through its transdisciplinary collaborations, it brings together artists, scientists, and citizens as equal partners in exploring the future of aquatic landscapes. By positioning creative practice as a form of social experimentation and public engagement, TIDAL ArtS cultivates new relationships between people and the natural world. In doing so, it exemplifies how social innovation can operate through imagination, emotion, and culture to inspire environmental stewardship and collective agency.

More information: https://tidalarts.eu/

Sarah Tamulski, SUBMARINER Network (photo: Sarah Tamulski)

Natural ecosystems should be an actor in the conversation. The natural world deserves an equal seat at the table

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About the Project: EcoDaLLi focuses on the restoration, protection, and sustainable management of the entire Danube Basin through an ecosystem-based governance approach. Its ambition is to strengthen and centralise governance structures within the basin by connecting diverse stakeholders—governments, researchers, innovators, and civil society—around shared goals for ecological resilience. To achieve this, EcoDaLLi establishes a network of Practice Living Labs supported by a digital portal that facilitates the exchange of knowledge, the co-creation of innovative solutions, and collaboration across borders.

Project Poster (photo: EcoDaLLi)

Through workshops, innovation services, and policy engagement, EcoDaLLi promotes experimentation with new circular solutions for a sustainable blue economy. By integrating data, experiences, and initiatives across the Danube region, it aims to foster a learning ecosystem that links policy, practice, and science in pursuit of long-term environmental restoration.

The Role of Social Innovation: EcoDaLLi is an inspiring social innovation in redefining governance as a participatory, dynamic and cross-sectoral process. Instead of treating water management as a purely administrative or technical task, it creates an open innovation ecosystem that encourages experimentation, dialogue, and co-creation among a wide range of actors. Its Living Lab structure allows stakeholders to test and refine new ideas collaboratively, while its digital portal connects these efforts into a shared resource for knowledge and practice. By promoting collaboration between different institutional levels and countries, EcoDaLLi challenges traditional, fragmented governance models. It demonstrates how social innovation can emerge through systemic collaboration—reshaping relations between governments, communities, and ecosystems to better address the interconnected challenges of water, climate, and biodiversity.

More information: https://ecodalli.eu/


Verena Höhn, Steinbeis Europa Zentrum (photo: Verena Höhn)

Our focus is on translating innovation into the language and context of different communities. Their needs are often more socially or nature oriented while the innovation discourse that they hear about in the news or from their governments is often business- and tech-oriented

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The North Atlantic Salmon Fund

The North Atlantic Salmon Fund (NASF) contributes directly to aquatic ecosystem restoration. Operating across Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands, NASF pioneered an economic and governance innovation that reframed the relationship between fisheries and conservation. By negotiating buyouts of commercial salmon fishing quotas and providing compensation to fishers, NASF restructured market incentives towards ecological restoration rather than extraction. This model challenges dominant economic logics that prioritise resource exploitation and demonstrate how local negotiations can scale into influential international policy engagement. The combination of ecological impact, community involvement, and transformational economic reasoning makes NASF a rare and robust example of social innovation in the aquatic domain. By demonstrating how locally negotiated solutions can be scaled and translated into broader policy debates at international level, NASF illustrates how social innovation can enable systemic change in aquatic ecosystem governance, combining ecological effectiveness with social legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

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4.6 SYNOPSIS OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IN THE EU MISSIONS

Following the presentation of the empirical results from the scoping analysis on social innovation, this section provides a first synopsis that begins to identify recurring patterns of social innovation across the EU Missions. The synopsis highlights how social innovation contributes in specific ways to the achievement of Mission objectives and how these contributions differ across Mission areas. The analysis shows that social innovation responds to distinct problem contexts and that different societal challenges require tailored, place-based and context-sensitive approaches. At the same time, the findings indicate that social innovation remains underutilised and undervalued as a core component for triggering and scaling the systemic changes necessary to address the complex societal challenges targeted by the EU Missions. This highlights the need to more systematically integrate social innovation into EU Mission governance, programming and evaluation, and to anchor it more firmly within mission-like research and innovation funding approaches beyond the current EU Mission framework, in order to sustain its capacity to drive and scale systemic change.

Social Innovation patterns in the EU Mission Cancer

Social innovations within the EU Mission Cancer predominantly manifest through changes in practices of care, prevention or research, as well as through the reconfiguration of social relations and organisational arrangements in the cancer care system. They often refer to new practices either contributing to the primary prevention of cancer or improving the quality of life. To detect leeway for change and promising new practices bridging changes in individual behaviour with supporting new forms of organisation, new forms of relation in the innovation process are central. For example, the inclusion of patients and survivors in the research process enables a prioritisation of factors that contribute to their well-being after treatment. In particular, the involvement of survivors brings greater attention to psycho-social dimensions that are often marginalised in conventional post-treatment care, which tends to focus primarily on physical symptoms. Social innovation in this context emerges through new practices of follow-up care that integrate social support networks, peer exchange and community-based resources into cancer survivorship pathways.. Similarly, medical care is often organised in a top-down fashion with factors contributing to changes in lifestyles being rooted in local communities. Empowering local communities on their means to improve public health and enable the diffusion of lifestyle changes can be seen as another

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one. In a nutshell, social innovations in this Mission area contribute to the design of solutions tailored to local and social contexts.

Social Innovation patterns in the Mission Climate Neutral and Smart Cities

Urban areas are simultaneously facing challenges related to emissions, mobility, social inclusion, and democratic participation. This highlights the need for a systemic approach in working towards climate neutrality goals. As in the other Mission areas, the diversity of urban contexts across Europe calls for a more context-sensitive and socially attuned approach than the predominantly centralised and technology-focused models that currently shape the energy transition. Many of the analysed social innovation initiatives reflect the growing need to focus on behavioural change, citizen participation, and justice, although they vary considerably in the depth with which these dimensions are embedded. While living labs, co-design processes, and new collaborative formats are widely utilised, these approaches remain constrained by the technical and planning-oriented systems within which they operate, limiting their transformative potential. However, the social innovation initiatives showcased also incorporate other interventions that seek to reshape underlying systemic characteristics more fundamentally. They do so by extending spatial and behavioural transformation from neighbourhood to city level (UP2030), coupling low-carbon urban transitions with inclusivity (REALLOCATE), democratising renewable energy governance (Berliner Energetish), changing educational practices (tiganokinsi), and implementing community-ownership models (Repowering London). In this sense, social innovation in this Mission area excels in creating new bonds across governance levels and societal actors, highlighting how climate-neutral cities depend on coordinated changes in practices, relations and institutional settings alongside technological change.

Social Innovation patterns in the EU Mission Climate Change Adaptation

Climate change adaptation is a systemic challenge. All sectors are affected by extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and questions of climate justice. Moreover, the broadness of climate change effects often makes top-down “one size fits all” solutions ineffective. As the presented projects show, social innovations can play a crucial part in laying the foundations for bottom-up systemic changes and empowerment of more vulnerable groups that suffer most from climate change impacts. The bundle of social innovations that make up social innovation in this EU Mission is targeted at analysing the challenges in a systemic way and designing potential solutions accordingly. Across this Mission area, social innovation is characterised by approaches that address adaptation challenges

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from a systemic perspective and translate them into context-sensitive solutions. Central to these efforts are changes in planning and governance practices that make adaptation processes more inclusive and bring new stakeholders into the design of adaptation measures, thereby reshaping organisational arrangements and social relations. New practices in this context refer to changed practices in dealing with heatwaves, dry periods and other climatic disasters. These include a variety of changes in everyday life ranging from changes in ventilation practices to a change in working hours. Diffusing these practices partly rests upon a change in curricula and the use of other educational channels, as the project Adaptation AGORA shows.

Social Innovation patterns in the EU Mission Soil

Changing practices to ensure more sustainable management and use of soil is a key aspect of the Soil Mission. This requires a fundamental understanding of the importance of soil, which, unlike other issues such as climate change, is less firmly anchored in society. For this reason, raising soil literacy is included as a separate action point in the Soil Mission. Within this context, social innovation plays am important, but yet underused role. The analysed initiatives demonstrate that socially innovative approaches are beginning to emerge, particularly where transdisciplinary methods are used to reshape governance arrangements, economic practices and learning processes. Projects such as Gov4All and HuMUS experiment with new forms of governance and territorial management agreements that bring together farmers, public authorities and other stakeholders in novel ways. Cases like InBestSoil and Regionalwert AG illustrate how alternative business and financing models can support soil-friendly practices by reconfiguring relationships between producers, consumers and investors at regional level. A further cluster of social innovations in this Mission area focuses on learning, capacity-building and peer exchange. Numerous projects have developed training programmes and participatory methods, such as peer-learning formats to foster experiential learning and shared understanding of soil-related challenges. Put into context, EU Mission projects appear to underutilise the potential of social innovation, particularly with regard to changes in social practices and social relations. While a range of socially innovative approaches to soil management, such as community-supported agriculture models or the Regionalwert case, are well established, they have not yet been systematically integrated into the Soil Mission. This points to substantial untapped potential for leveraging social innovation to support the achievement of the Mission's objectives.

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Social Innovation patterns in EU Mission Oceans and Waters

Social innovations related to the EU Mission Oceans and Waters start from the recognition that challenges in aquatic territories are not merely environmental in nature. Biodiversity loss, pollution and overexploitation are systemic problems rooted in how societies organise, govern and value water resources. As in other mission areas, technical and top-down approaches often fall short in addressing the systemic nature of these challenges adequately. Social innovation plays a key role in enabling bottom-up efforts in tackling aquatic challenges by reshaping how community, institutional and economic actors relate to and interact with waters. The innovations that are highlighted in the showcased projects show that, both locally and regionally efforts can be made to change society's role in water management. The social innovation initiatives in line with this mission focus on: rethinking water governance structures by strengthening collective stewardship (EcoDALLI), engaging new stakeholders or actors that introduce new perspectives to water management (Tidal Arts), and prefiguring a more ecological value-based approach that challenges the dominant economic rationales (North Atlantic Salmon Fund). Taken together, these initiatives illustrate how social innovation can support more inclusive, ecologically grounded and systemic approaches to aquatic governance and restoration.

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5. CONCLUSION

The results of the scoping search have shown that social innovations can make an important contribution to achieving the goals of the five EU Missions in distinct ways. They do this in three ways:

1. Social innovations provide *new solutions* in the form of new practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements *to complex problems* that the EU Missions aim to solve.
2. Social innovations contribute to a *redesign of innovation processes* that aligns with the general orientation of MOIP toward co-creation, participation, and citizen involvement.
3. At the same time, social innovation helps to *integrate technological innovations into a co-creative process of social change*, which allows them to be more closely linked to the objectives of the EU Missions and potentially increases their social acceptance and impact.

At the same time, it is clear that social innovations need to be integrated more closely into the EU Missions following a long-term perspective in order to realize their full potential.

Social innovations provide *new solutions* in the form of new practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements *to complex problems* that the EU Missions aim to solve.

Sharing an interest in solving societal challenges, restructuring research and innovation processes and engagement of various actors, the EU Missions and social innovations have the potential to mutually support and complement each other. Even though the term “social innovation” is used explicitly only in few projects, the review of projects listed in CORDIS and funded under EU Mission topics has shown that if a topic mentions social innovation explicitly and frames a certain understanding of the concept, projects will use the term more consciously, as well. Beyond EU Mission projects specifically referring to social innovations, many projects initiate social innovations without referring to them explicitly. Looking into the structure of the EU Missions and respective topics, we found that many topics explicitly ask for the inclusion of affected groups, co-creation of solutions and an integration of technological, business, governance and social innovations. This substantiates the results of the review that EU Mission projects leave sufficient room for the creation of and experimentation with social innovations. The review further showed that experimentation with new practices to solve challenges is approached by single EU Mission projects. The EU Mission project adaptation

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AGORA (see chapter 4.3) is one example, which explores the value of soft adaptation measures, in which citizens adapt certain practices to become more resilient when dealing with climate challenges. By focussing on wider forms of engagement and new actor constellations, projects in all five EU Missions establish new social relations and forms of organisation to solve societal challenges. Yet, the long-term orientation of these new social relations and forms of organisation beyond project duration might remain a challenge if they are not regarded as a long-term solution to be established in adequate institutional settings. In order to guide subsequent implementation processes, the HuMUS project, for instance, established 34 territorial management agreements on local and regional development with the involvement of quadruple helix stakeholders. The step-by-step process implemented in this context has also contributed to a new, more inclusive understanding of governance with regard to land use.

The results of the scoping search of the non-EU mission related SI-databases point to the previously untapped potential of social innovations. Even if social innovations matching the EU Missions' targets directly are rare, we find several examples of how social innovation could contribute in a broader perspective. For example, all cases listed in the SONNET database contribute to the mitigation of emissions, which is key objective of the Cities Mission, with three simultaneously contributing to cancer prevention (through a contribution to health in general), one to the Soil Mission and three to the Oceans and Water Mission. Assigning the vast activities of social innovation initiatives to the EU Mission's targets, thus, shows the potential of social innovations to connect different sectors and thematic foci. Through their embeddedness in local contexts and communities, social innovations prefigure new forms of organisation rooted in a co-creation spirit, thus, contributing to social resilience in a broad sense. A fine example of this is Regionalwert AG, which brings together consumers and producers of agricultural products in a socially innovative business model.

To fully leverage this potential, social innovation needs to be explicitly recognised and targeted within EU Missions and the EU framework research programme in general, for example through dedicated instruments and evaluation criteria in mission-based R&I programmes and the build-up of EU-wide as well as regional support structures that enable their rollout as well as local and regional development, adaptation and integration.

Social innovations contribute to a re-design of research and innovation processes

The predominant form in which social innovation activities are conducted in the EU Mission projects relates to a re-design of the research and innovation process by

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engaging diverse stakeholders in local settings including potentially affected social groups and allowing for sharing a diversity of perspectives of the challenge at hand and potential solutions to it. Yet, opening up the innovation process does not exclusively mark the development, testing and diffusion of social innovations, but is becoming increasingly important in the design of technological innovation processes as well. In social innovations, a particular focus is placed on the inclusion of (potentially) affected groups in the research and innovation process and incorporation of their views. On the one hand, this enables the delivery of better results, products or services. On the other hand, the empowerment of (marginalised) social groups by giving them a voice, agency and ownership is a central element of social innovation. The Soil Walks project, for example, offers a concrete method for low-threshold citizen involvement in issues of land use and soil sealing. The inclusion of affected social groups beyond the academic realm in research and innovation processes can itself be understood as a change in the social practice of how research and innovation is conducted, and thus as social innovation in academic practice. Putting this into the context of EU Mission policy and also the bigger R&I policy perspective, this suggests that changes in innovation processes and practices should be recognised not only as enabling conditions, but as substantive innovation outcomes in their own right, warranting explicit consideration in R&I policy design.

As the majority of research and innovation actions (RIA) funded within the EU Missions contributes to the development and implementation of innovations, looking at the process might reveal a change in practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements that can be regarded as a social innovation in itself. Bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders can lead to the formation of new social relations that contribute to addressing societal challenges in new ways beyond the duration of single projects. This points to the importance of assessing how Mission-funded projects design co-creative formats with a view to their continuation beyond the project lifetime, and how resulting social innovations are institutionally embedded or linked to longer-term governance structures. This has implications for Mission-oriented R&I funding, as it points to the need for funding instruments and evaluation criteria that go beyond technical performance and short-term outputs, and instead value inclusive processes, empowerment effects and the durability of newly established social relations and organisational arrangements.

In this respect, social innovations contribute to the design of innovation processes by aligning social and technological innovations with the missions, integrating their development and implementation into a social innovation process, and thus increasing their acceptance among potential users and consumers. Consequently, social innovations should not only be conceptualised at the level of individual

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projects, but also at portfolio level, contributing to a holistic understanding of how complex problems need to be tackled by aligning social and technological innovations with Mission objectives. This underlines the relevance of integrating social innovation more systematically into Mission governance and programme portfolios, rather than treating participatory elements as ancillary or project-specific features. In this way, they make a decisive contribution to increasing their social impact in terms of achieving the missions.

An innovation seldom comes alone: Social and technological innovations can complement each other

In accordance with the objectives of the EU Missions' approach (chapter 2.2) - to broaden public visibility of complex societal problems, create possible solutions via (local) participation and spark inspiration for private investments for long-lasting transformations - the analysed EU Mission projects do not only focus on the diffusion and scaling of pure technological inventions and innovations. As solving the wicked problems underlying the five EU Missions depends on the combination of multiple (potential) solutions and new forms of governance, it comes as no surprise that EU Mission projects focus on a bundle of activities and measures. From a Mission governance perspective, this underlines the importance of designing funding instruments and project portfolios that explicitly support integrated bundles of technological, social and governance-oriented interventions, rather than isolated or sequential solutions. This is exemplified by the Gov4All Mission Soil project which builds on an understanding that both soils and humans are embedded within social-ecological systems and that no organisation or solution alone is capable of sustainably transforming the system towards healthy and sustainable soil practices. Bundles of activities do not only comprise the development of technological and social innovations, but at the same time the promotion of new forms of governance and citizen participation in an inclusive, co-creative way. Given the complexity of the problems and alignment of different governance levels and facilitation of learning between different regions and administrative silos, the projects focus on systemic problem-solving, which requires synergetic interaction between the actors and aims to eliminate the underlying causes of the problems.

In many projects that have been studied, the interaction with technological innovations plays a key role. However, putting the systemic problem approach centre stage, technological innovations are not regarded as an end in themselves, but integrated into the development and diffusion of new social practices to achieve the Mission's targets. In this way, technologies to be employed in a certain area of application are seldom pre-defined, but developed or chosen carefully within a participatory process paying attention to the socio-cultural context. This

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has implications for Mission-oriented R&I policy, suggesting that calls and evaluation criteria should allow for adaptive technological pathways and value the capacity of projects to integrate technological development within participatory and context-sensitive social innovation processes that understand the importance of social practices, social relations and institutional arrangements.

Social Innovation thus contributes to integrate technological innovations into a co-creative process of social change, which allows them to be more closely linked to the objectives of the EU Missions and through this address a core challenge of Mission implementation: ensuring societal acceptance, legitimacy and sustained impact beyond the duration of individual projects.

OUTLOOK AND NEXT STEPS

The analysis presented above on how social innovations are conceptualised in the context of the EU Missions points to several implications for different policy and practice areas:

Implementation level: Social Innovations for the EU Missions demand a clear and long-term perspective to realise their full potential

Across all five EU Missions, projects such as e-QuoL, Adaptation AGORA and HuMUS illustrate how EU Mission projects can initiate changes in practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements, while also revealing the limits of project-based interventions for long-term institutionalisation. Looking at the SI-databases shows that many social innovations took several years or even decades to become institutionalised or realise their impact. Hence, ensuring that social innovations developed and tested in EU Mission projects are scaled and diffused after the finalisation of the project and to integrate and learn from established social innovations is critical to exploit not only social innovations' full potential for the EU Missions, but the full potential of the EU Missions overall.

Policy level: Implications for EU Mission and R&I policy

This entails a clear mandate for EU Mission policy and for research and innovation policy more broadly. Social innovations should be more explicitly recognised as a crucial element in addressing complex societal challenges, as they provide an essential innovation perspective that complements technological innovation. Addressing such challenges is not only a matter of inventing and diffusing new technologies, nor solely of designing technologies that are socially acceptable. Rather, social innovation foregrounds the importance of understanding and

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transforming social practices, social relations, forms of organisation and institutional arrangements as core components and unique feature of the European research and innovation model.

The role of the Social Innovation Mission Facility

Through the scoping search, we have demonstrated the pivotal role that social innovation already plays in reshaping research and innovation processes within EU Mission projects, as well as the potential it holds for widening the range of solutions to the challenges addressed by the EU Missions. This report has laid the conceptual foundation for understanding social innovation in relation to the EU Missions. Building on this conceptual framework and the empirical findings, the next phase of the Social Innovation Mission Facility (SIMF) will focus on translating this evidence into targeted support and coordination processes for social innovation practitioners, funders, policymakers and researchers. These activities will be implemented through a range of formats, including a funders and investors network, social innovation training and Scaling Labs, and the establishment of a community of practice that provides a space for shared reflection on how social innovations can be embedded in Mission governance, adapted to different contexts and linked to existing policy and practice ecosystems.

Through these activities, SIMF will bring together the social innovation community, EU Mission projects and Mission secretariats. Drawing on the long-standing experience of social innovation actors and the diversity of socially innovative activities already developed, SIMF aims to make more effective use of social innovation's potential within the EU Missions. Through those activities, SIMF in its role as coordination and support action contributes to strengthening connections, learning processes and capacity-building around social innovation in the context of EU Mission-oriented R&I policy and practice, while preparing the ground for the more effective rollout of renewed Mission policies based on a clearer understanding of the necessity of the contributions of social innovation.

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ANNEX I: SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

At the programmatic level of Europe's research and innovation policy, a new perspective on innovation has been emerging since the 1990s. In the EU research framework programmes, the social dimension has been substantially upgraded in relation to the importance of technology-oriented research and innovation. The concept of social innovation specifically gained more attention during José Manuel Barroso's presidency. His advisers admitted that traditional policies were failing to cope with the economic and financial crises and at the same time, to meet mounting social needs. Since then, social innovation has been an integral part of European innovation policy which appears and reappears in different phases in the European policy arena (Milotay, 2023).

Under Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017) cast social innovation as a lever for modernising welfare systems. Marianne Thyssen, Employment Commissioner, went further, pitching social innovation as both ethical and instrumental to Europe's future. Carlos Moedas as Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation (2014–2019) provided further important impetus. He channelled it into Horizon 2020 funding and declared that the EU should back social innovation not "because it's trendy, but because it's the future." Social innovation became part of Europe 2020's promise of "smart, sustainable, inclusive growth", and a new generation of EU-funded projects emerged, consolidating and further developing theoretical and empirical insights from predecessor research initiatives such as SI-DRIVE (Social Innovation – Driving Force of Social Change), TRANSIT (Transformative Social Innovation Theory) and TEPSIE (Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Building Social Innovation in Europe).

The von der Leyen Commission used the concept in several policy arenas: the European Green Deal, the Social Economy Action Plan, the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) regulation and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) all gave it formal weight and substance. Commissioner Nicolas Schmit tied it to the "just transition," making it clear that innovation for the common good was no longer a side project but a pillar of the EU's innovation model.

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At the same time, the European Social Network highlights social innovation in its programme, and the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) supports social innovations with multiple measures on the European and Member States level by promoting social innovation through specific actions in national/regional contexts. The new ESF Social Innovation+ Initiative includes EU-wide, multi-national projects to develop, replicate and scale up innovative solutions. The European Competence Centre for Social Innovation has also been created not only to organise transnational calls for proposals but also to collect, assess, develop, validate, and disseminate suitable tools and methods for social innovation. It offers mutual learning, capacity building and networking for ESF Managing Authorities and other relevant stakeholders. National Competence Centres for Social Innovation were established in most of the Member States, supporting managing authorities to programme and implement social innovation actions and support organisations on the ground with capacity-building and networking measures.

From digital social innovation pilots to urban living labs, from impact bonds to European competitions, the landscape has undergone impressive developments since 2010. However, geopolitical tensions, renewed fiscal constraints, and the resurgence of traditional R&I priorities centred on competitiveness and technological leadership have placed growing pressure on innovation policy to deliver short-term results. Although many activities to promote social innovation have been undertaken at European level in recent years, Europe's social innovation story is far from complete – in fact, we have just finished the prologue and gotten a glimpse of what social innovation could achieve in a fully-developed and institutionalised innovation system that makes use of the distinct capabilities of technological and social innovation and their synergies. Too often, it has been framed as a substitute rather than a key component to strengthening the European (social) model. Impact measurement remains weak. Definitions shift from one Directorate-General to another. Critics warn of technocratic capture: what began as grassroots energy risks being tamed into bureaucracy.

SPOTLIGHT: SOCIAL INNOVATION POLICY IN PORTUGAL AND GERMANY

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On the European member state level, **Portugal** is one of the most advanced and ambitious examples, both budget-wise and in light of social innovation's importance within the national innovation strategy. The country, during its severe debt crisis in the late 2000s, decided to make social innovation and social entrepreneurship key priorities of its 2014-2020 strategy, investing massively to finance social innovation and social entrepreneurship projects; to promote the necessary ecosystem for its future sustainability, creating a social investment market. Portugal, in this sense, can serve as a blueprint for a social innovation strategy aiming at ecosystem development on the national and regional level alike.

At the same time, **Germany** has taken steps to integrate social innovation into its national innovation strategy and has made efforts which can be considered pioneering. The topic has gained national momentum, also driven by a small but vibrant community that has been researching social innovations and supporting their development and dissemination. Against this background, efforts to open up national, regional and local innovation policies and to develop a social innovation policy in its own right have intensified. Overall, the focus of German innovation policy has shifted from the market potential of individual fields of technology to the social need for sustainable solutions and their realisation. Accordingly, numerous initiatives and programmes have been developed in various ministries in recent years that aim to create favourable framework conditions to promote social innovation.

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ANNEX II: DETAILED METHODOLOGY OF THE SCOPING SEARCH

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF EU MISSION PROJECTS

For analysing the cases listed in CORDIS, the dataset of EU Mission projects funded under Horizon Europe was reviewed in September 2025. As the review of projects started in the beginning of the month, the list of projects updated in August 2025 was reviewed. Projects were reviewed for each EU Mission individually. In a first step, the topic was filtered to display projects funded under calls specifically referring to the respective Mission, topics covering two EU Missions (e.g. HORIZON-MISS-2023-OCEAN-SOIL-01) were included in the analysis of all respective EU Missions. To identify projects with high potential for social innovation activities a keyword search was applied to review the project objective and self-identified keywords using the keywords “social innovation”, “behaviour*" "behavior*”, “inclusion" "inclusive”, “practice” and “social”.

The keyword "social innovation" was employed to detect projects that regard themselves as active in the area of social innovation, the keywords "practice", "behaviour*"/"behavior*" were employed to detect projects that take into account changes in practices and/or behaviour, the keyword "social" was used to detect projects that take into account social issues, including new forms of organisation, while the keywords "inclusion"/ "inclusive" should be able to disclose projects focussing on new ways of engagement and social relations including the inclusion of potentially affected social groups. In a second step, the description of objectives of projects that used at least two of the keywords or referred to social innovation explicitly was read and further reviewed in terms of matching to the subject of social innovation.

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The sequential analysis of EU Mission projects listed in CORDIS was complemented with a quick review of the calls collected in the work programmes 2021-2022 and 2023-2024 for the EU Missions to identify calls that explicitly referred to social innovation.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SI-DATABASES

The **SI Match Tool** is a platform managed by the Social Innovation+ initiative of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) collecting social innovation initiatives in the field of employment, education and training, and social inclusion. Project promoters or other stakeholders can upload their social innovation profile to the SI Match tool resulting in 371 cases in total in September 2025.

To review the potential contribution of the social innovations to the EU Missions, the case description was read and scanned for activities relating to one or more of the five EU Mission areas. A short description for cases potentially contributing to the EU Missions was provided in the final selection.

The **SONNET** database focuses on identifying the transformative potential of the 500+ described cases in the area of energy transition. The cases were first ranked based on expert assessments in response to the question: "To what extent does the SIE-I[5] challenge, alter and/or replace the current status quo?" (Ranked from –2 = anti-transformative, to 0 = neutral, to 2 = transformative). To include only cases with a potentially high impact in the analysis, social innovations that scored 1 or below

[5] The abbreviation SIE refers to social innovations in the energy sector. SIE-I refers to a specific innovation (I) of the social innovations in the energy (SIE) sector listed in the database.

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were excluded. The 48 cases that remained suitable were searched for potential contributions to the EU Missions.

The **Critical Turning Points** database comprises the timeline of at least four specific initiatives of the 20 international social innovation networks studied in the EU-funded project transformative social innovation theory (TRANSIT). The networks studied cover a wide field of thematic areas from social entrepreneurship, to time banks, ecovillages, transition towns, hackerspaces and fablabs.

Using the selection criteria as background, keywords were chosen to identify social innovations in the SONNET and Critical Turning Points database relating to the different missions. For social innovations contributing to the Cancer Mission, the keywords "health", "illness", "cancer", "health risks" and "well-being" were applied. To identify social innovations active in the EU Mission Soil, the keywords "soil", "earth", and "resource extraction" were used. The keywords "adaptation", "climate adaptation" and "resilience" were applied to search for social innovations relating to the EU Mission Climate Change Adaptation. For identifying social innovations contributing to 100 climate-neutral and smart cities, the keywords "energy" and "CO2" were used and social innovations in the EU Mission Area Oceans and Water could be identified using the keywords "ocean", "water" and "sea".

For the cases described in the **SI-Drive** database, the case study summaries for the policy fields Education and Lifelong Learning, Employment, Environment and Climate Change, Energy Supply, Mobility and Transport, Health and Care, as well as Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development combining an overview of the 1.005 cases of the global mapping and the 82 in-depth case studies were reviewed. The case study descriptions of all seven case study reports were scanned for social innovations contributing to the EU Missions. The review criteria served as a background guiding the judgement. For each case, a detailed description was added to the overview explaining *why* the case contributes to one or more EU Missions or *why* it does not.

Project partners submitted 25 further social innovations by filling out a questionnaire asking for the initiative's approach to social innovation in accordance

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with the working definition, trajectory, impact, and contribution to the EU Missions. 22 of the social innovations were submitted by Portugal Social Innovation and funded under Portugal 2020. Due to the geographical concentration of social innovations in Portugal and pre-selection by project partners, the cases were not reviewed systematically but taken into account as inspiring examples for social innovations addressing the EU Missions.

LIST OF REVIEW CRITERIA APPLIED TO SOCIAL INNOVATION CASES

Success factors for social innovations contributing to the EU Mission "Cancer":

Direct contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation contributes to the mission by breaking up former silos in research, policy-making and patient care
- The social innovation contributes to the understanding of cancer development
- The social innovation addresses prevention, diagnostics, treatment, quality of life of patients during and after treatment
- The social innovation improves the screening programmes for cancer detection
- The social innovation improves the access to diagnostics and treatment

Indirect contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation contributes to the Zero Pollution Action Plan by improving air quality (esp. reduction of aerosols and airborne fine particles that can cause (lung) cancer)
- The social innovation contributes solving challenges in the health system including the lack of staff
- The social innovation improves networking in the health system including novel mechanisms for citizen engagement

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Success factors for social innovations contributing to the EU Mission "Climate Change Adaptation":

Direct contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation contributes to a better understanding, preparing for and managing climate risks such as heatwaves, forest fires, droughts, floods, storms and diseases
- The social innovation contributes to co-creating a shared vision of transformation towards climate change adaptation
- The social innovation develops enabling conditions and solutions to deal with climate risks

Indirect contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation enhances climate resilience by contributing to the:
  - **Resilience of environmental systems.** Climate neutrality, circular economy, preserving biodiversity and toxic-free environments
  - **Resilience of social and economic systems.** Equity, social and gender justice, children and youth: "leave no one behind".
  - **Resilience of political systems.** Inclusiveness and solidarity. Networks and communities.

Success factors for social innovations contributing to the EU Mission "100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030":

Direct contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation fosters cities' ability to build capacities by innovative silo-breaking governance and /or supports the engagement of citizens and stakeholders
- The social innovation contributes to cities' as innovation hubs
- The social innovation improves city climate actions
- The social innovation contributes to an integrated urban planning model
- The social innovation contributes to the development of smart systems and data-platforms to integrate digitation developments

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Indirect contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation contributes to climate neutrality in cities by contributing to:
  - the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the city
  - the restoration and/ or increase of natural sinks

Success factors for social innovations contributing to the EU Mission "Soil":

Direct contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation contributes to the reduction of desertification
- The social innovation contributes to the conservation of soil organic carbon stocks
- The social innovation contributes to a decrease in soil sealing and an increase of re-use of urban soil
- The social innovation contributes to the reduction of soil pollution and restoration
- The social innovation contributes to the prevention of erosion
- The social innovation contributes to the improvement of soil structure to enhance soil biodiversity
- The social innovation contributes to a reduction of the EU global footprint on soils (reduction of imports)
- The social innovation contributes to an improvement of soil literacy in society
- The social innovation brings together key stakeholders (landowners, land managers, advisors, biophysical and social scientists, data scientists and technologists, planners, policy makers and other public authorities, businesses, educators and trainers, civil organisations (environmental NGOs, youth organisations), citizens and consumers) for the EU Mission in a novel way

Success factors for social innovations contributing to the EU Mission "Restore our Oceans and Water":

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Direct contribution to the EU-Mission:

- The social innovation contributes to increasing Citizen participation, engagement, co-creation, activation, training and education in the field of marine and water ecosystems
- The social innovation contributes to regenerating marine and water ecosystems including the restoration of habitats, renaturalisation of rivers and waters and protection of waters
- The social innovation contributes to a decrease of pollution, i.e. the removal and prevention of plastic litter, halting of eutrophication and reduction of underwater noise
- The social innovation improves the decarbonisation of European waters, ocean and seas and waters by enhancing climate neutral waterborne transport, supporting the energy transition through renewable, low-impact ocean energy, fostering climate neutral blue tourism

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