background

This example is extracted from our Deliverable 1.1 (p. 57 – 61) "Social Innovations in Support of the EU-Missions" and the full version can be openly accessed here: https://simissionfacility.eu/publication-announcement-d-1-1/.

The deliverable focuses on the role and contributions of social innovation (SI) to the five EU-Missions (part of Horizon Europe 2021 – 2027): Beating Cancer, Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, Climate Change Adaptation, A European Soil Deal, and Restoring Our Oceans and Waters. To analyse these SI contributions to the Missions, an extensive literature analysis has been conducted to showcase the role of social innovation concepts within Mission relevant EU-funded projects. To complement this overview of EU Mission projects with cases of social innovations that contribute or could contribute to the EU Missions, the 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. Furthermore, mission-targeted projects are included as case studies in the deliverable to illustrate two examples of social innovation contributions for each of the five EU Missions.

The EU Mission 'Restore our Oceans and Waters' combines citizen engagement, research and innovation and blue investment with the set goal of restoring and protecting oceans and waters by 2030. This entails restoring degraded and conserving existing ecosystems, reduce human and impact and finding ways to use related goods and services in a sustainable way. Knowledgeable citizens, no pollution, decarbonisation, better governance and regeneration of ecosystems are the key Mission objectives to be reached by 2030. To promote regional engagement, "lighthouses" will be established in major European sea/river basins.

To know more about this Mission, visit the EU Mission: Restore our Oceans and Waters Portal.

The following practical examples serve to demonstrate what role social innovation plays in the EU-Mission 'Restore our Oceans and Waters'. Our goal with these examples is to make seemingly abstract social innovation (SI) concepts tangible through real-world cases. We aim to illustrate how social innovation (such as changes in practices and behaviours, the introduction of new ways of working and collaborating, and the reshaping of social and institutional relationships) can meaningfully contribute to achieving the EU Missions.

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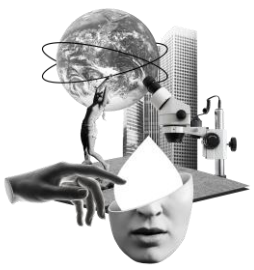

disclaimer

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Social Innovations for Restoring Oceans and Waters

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:

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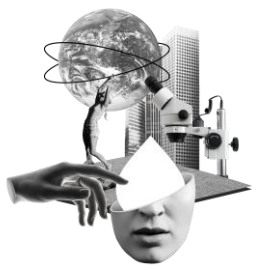

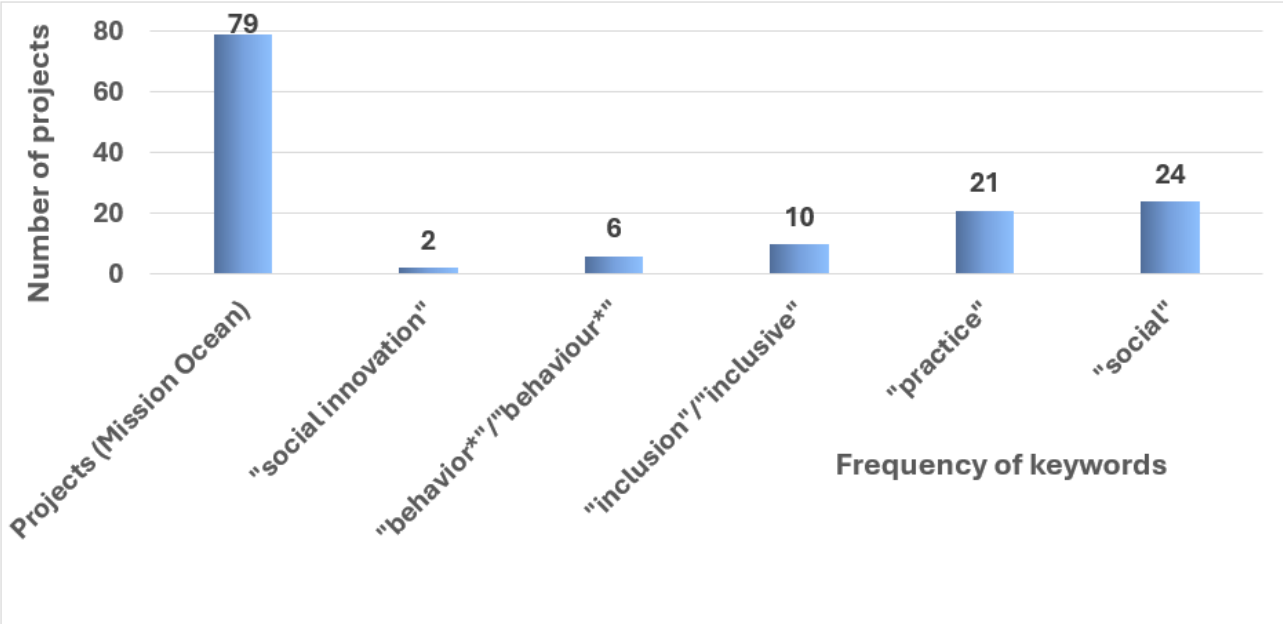

FIGURE 1 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE EU MISSION OCEAN AND WATERS IN CORDIS

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 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.

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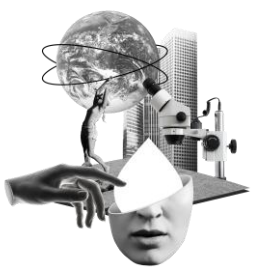

A similar strategy was applied to the SIM and SONNET databases, with each case assessed against the indicators for traces of social innovation. Cases also needed to contribute tangibly to EU Mission Oceans and Waters objectives.

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 PROJECT)

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. 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.

Project Poster (photo:

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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