Co-funded by Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) of the European Union

sofia development association

COMPETENCE CENTER ON SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

NATIONAL ACTION PLAN

BULGARIA

Social Innovations Plus - Competence Centres (SI PLUS)
The project is funded by the EUROPEAN COMMISSION, European Social Fund and European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation.

https://social-innovations.club/

Project	Social Innovation Plus – Competence Centres (SI Plus)
Call / Funding program	Competence centres for social innovation (European Social Fund and European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation)
Application ref	VP/2020/010/0100
Report on D.2.1.	National Action Plan with KPIs for the development of the centre for competence
Report Authors	Denitsa Lozanova, Sevdalina Voynova, Svetlana Lomeva,
Report Contributors and Editors	Based on extensive co-creation process with the participation of stakeholders from several Bulgarian cities

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 3
2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT 4
3. DEFINITION FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION 6
4. CO-CREATION 9
5. MISSION OF THE COMPETENCE CENTER FOR SOCIAL INNOVATIONS 11
6. SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES AND THEMATIC PRIORITIES 13
7. OPERATIONAL MODEL 19
8. ROADMAP AND ACTIONS 23
9. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 24
10. CONCLUSION 25

1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of national competence centers for social innovation has become a significant endeavor supported by the European Commission, aimed at fostering social innovation across the European Union. Among the six projects backed by the Commission, SI PLUS stands out as a pioneering initiative. Over a period of two years, from May 2021 to July 2023, SI PLUS brings together social innovation organizations, research centers, ESF managing authorities, and other partners to design and develop competence centers. These centers play a vital role in assisting their respective countries in promoting social innovation, including accessing funding from ESF+ and other EU programs.

The Social Innovation Plus – Center for Competences project focuses on preparing the groundwork for national social innovation competence centers. These centers are strategically positioned to support Managing Authorities in planning and implementing subsidy programs aimed at boosting social innovation. Additionally, they provide valuable support to social innovators, enabling them to maximize the benefits derived from these programs. Moreover, through networking and knowledge exchange activities, the competence centers assist other centers in becoming more effective in their respective fields.

The implementation of a National Competence Center in Bulgaria is a significant milestone in the country's pursuit of fostering social innovations that support the social economy and social entrepreneurship. While recent years have witnessed positive advancements in social economy engagement, improved regulations, and better access to financing, there remains a pressing need for focused policy measures. The National Competence Center endeavors to address this need by facilitating the development of social innovations and increasing the visibility of social enterprises within the country. By providing targeted support and guidance, the center aims to further enhance the social economy's growth and impact in Bulgaria.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The current landscape of social innovations in Bulgaria reflects both progress and potential for further development. Over the years, the country has witnessed a growing interest in social entrepreneurship and the social economy, with increasing numbers of individuals and organizations actively pursuing innovative solutions to address societal challenges.[1]

However, despite these positive developments, several key factors highlight the need for a National Competence Center to support and foster social innovations in Bulgaria:

There is no common understanding and clear definition of “social innovations” in Bulgaria. Among the NGO sector and institutions, there is a common misunderstanding about the differences and specifics of the terms “social economy”, “social entrepreneurship”, “social innovation”. The “green innovations” are not considered as part of the “social innovations” among most of the stakeholders. The concept for “social innovation” is more recognizable among the NGO sector. The businesses are still uncertain or ignorant about the concept. The institutions are trying to follow the EU trends though there is no a clear political agenda in that respect.

- **Limited Awareness and Visibility:** While social innovations are emerging within the country, their visibility remains relatively low. Many promising initiatives struggle to gain recognition and attract the necessary support and resources to scale their impact. This lack of visibility hinders the growth and replication of successful social innovation practices across different regions of Bulgaria.

- **Fragmented Ecosystem:** The social innovation ecosystem in Bulgaria currently lacks cohesion and coordination. Various actors, such as social enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and research institutions, operate in isolation, resulting in a fragmented landscape. This fragmentation hampers the efficient exchange of knowledge, collaboration, and the development of synergistic partnerships necessary for driving social innovation forward. Moreover, there is no aggregated data about the number and specifics of the "social innovations" and "social innovators" in Bulgaria, despite the presence of convincing examples of successful social innovations. These successful initiatives often share common characteristics, such as local roots and support, diversified sources of income, and effective use of digital tools and strong communication.

- **Limited Access to Funding:** Despite efforts to improve access to financing for social innovation initiatives, many social entrepreneurs and organizations still face challenges in securing adequate funding. Insufficient financial support limits the scalability and sustainability of social innovations, hindering their potential to create significant social impact.

The nature of social innovations necessitates collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including public bodies, civil society, academia, and businesses. This collaboration presents both an opportunity and a challenge, as it requires leadership and shared ownership. Without a clear understanding and alignment on the concept of social innovations, these collaborative efforts may encounter difficulties in achieving their full potential.

[1] https://social-innovations.club/en/report-on-identification-and-needs-assessment-of-local-users-stakeholders-potential-partners/

Social innovations are characterized by a wide range of actors involved, who may have various roles that fluctuate across different innovations and the development process of a single innovation. Social innovation emerges and develops within a complex and dynamic ecosystem, comprising both supporting and constraining factors. Social innovation actors enact existing practices while also attempting to introduce new or modified ones.

The social entrepreneurs and NGOs have the role of central developers. They often provide infrastructure and other support activities. Some NGOs, such as foundations, also provide funding for social initiatives and idea development. NGOs have taken up the function of lobbying, which surpasses their other activities. Another prominent function is their role as knowledge providers. Social entrepreneurs and enterprises primarily focus on idea development and funding. Those heavily reliant on grant funding or social investment may use the term "social innovation" pragmatically as an additional means to raise funds for their social activities, particularly concerning EU funds.

Public bodies at the national and local levels have a broad portfolio of functions, although the term "social innovation" and the respective regulations and policies are not consistent, and there are significant differences between the 265 municipalities in Bulgaria. Local authorities function as social innovation developers, initiators, and operators, with over 70 municipalities having municipally-owned social enterprises. Public bodies are the primary funding providers to date, with some municipalities, especially Sofia, developing special funding instruments for this purpose. They also provide infrastructure, create conditions for user involvement, and address the lack of knowledge providers and sharing. Furthermore, some local governments take the lead as promoters of social innovations, and there are some attempts at policy and structural change as well.

Academia and research institutions are less active and influential in the domain of social innovation.

Banks and other bodies providing financing, including investment funds and business angels, are largely not engaged with social innovations. Since there are no specific social investment funds, social innovations are not of specific interest to financial institutions in Bulgaria, with few exceptions with Social Impact Banking initiatives.

Private companies also play different and diverse roles, ranging from funding and infrastructure providers to initiators and operators. Currently, their involvement is often framed within the context of corporate social responsibility. Social innovations are yet to take a more prominent position in the priorities of the mainstream business community.

Cross-sector collaborations emerge as a common pattern in initiatives developed through alliances, with actors fulfilling specialized functions that take advantage of complementarities and synergies. It is important to note that boundaries between roles and functions can be blurred, enabling flexibility and adaptability within the social innovation ecosystem.

In addition to the main stakeholders, there are non-formal voluntary groups active at the local level, aiming to address societal challenges that have not received an effective response from the public system. These groups, driven by community members and volunteers, play a crucial role in grassroots social innovation. They identify local needs and develop innovative solutions that directly address these challenges, often in collaboration with other stakeholders. While their roles may vary, they contribute to the diversity and resilience of the social innovation ecosystem in Bulgaria.

3. DEFINITION for SOCIAL INNOVATION

The DEFINITION for SOCIAL INNOVATION we widely discussed with stakeholders and adopted for the needs of the Competence Center piloting is the EC definition

> ***innovations that are social both in terms of their ends and their means, specifically those that refer to the development and implementation of new ideas (regarding products, services and models) that both respond to social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations, thus creating benefits for society and increasing its capacity for action***

which based on the mapping and transnational exchange within SI PLUS project and L&R Institute and ArbeitPlus suggestion was operationalized as:

DIMENSIONS	CHARACTERISTICS
Defining Challenges and Social Needs	Challenges that primarily affect vulnerable groups of citizens and/or local communities
	Issues/challenges that affect broader groups in society
	Inequalities/unequal distribution of resources among different groups
	New challenges/problems (emerging needs in the current situation, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine)
	Existing challenges/problems for which solutions have not yet been found (or the found solutions are ineffective)
Goal setting	Resolving social challenges for sustainable improvement of coexistence and strengthening social cohesion
	Empowering different actors in civil society and target groups; building capacity for public and social engagement
	Solutions for sustainable reduction of social inequalities and unevenly distributed resources and opportunities
	Establishing new social relationships that shift the balance of power in favor of those with fewer opportunities to influence
Impact and Target Groups	Tsunami of societal challenges: solutions to challenges for specific groups (vulnerable groups, local communities, etc.) or for comprehensive societal challenges affecting multiple areas of life
	Collaboration and partnership: creating new forms of collaboration - collaborative missions
	Resource utilization and distribution: solutions for better and sustainable use and appropriation of resources, as well as for a fairer distribution of existing social and natural resources and opportunities
	Empowerment: solutions to stimulate opportunities for participation in social processes
	Scope and focus: impact limited to the local context or with supraregional significance through mainstreaming

Approach and Methods	Participatory approach: actively involving the target group in different stages stages of participation (idea/innovation development, implementation, testing)
	Developing solutions that involve or are related to all stakeholders
	Multidisciplinarity: incorporating and utilizing diverse perspectives, resources, experiences, and competencies
	Openness: considering local and cultural conditions and using them as resources for collaborative solution development
Novelty	Innovation New processes, products, services, methods, initiatives, etc. (differentiating/connecting with technical innovations)
	New configuration of social practices aiming to better meet social needs: establishing new connections or new forms of cooperation/communication
	New use of existing resources or their use through new strategies, processes, and services
	Solutions/methods/processes/initiatives that are not new but function better than previously implemented ones in a specific context and represent an improvement for the target groups
	Successful projects that have not yet received (significant) recognition or funding.

4. CO-CREATION

Over the past two years, Sofia Development Association team has successfully organized a series of design thinking and consensus seminars as well as several online and face-to-face consultations in different Bulgarian cities, which have proven to be invaluable in the creation of National Centre for Social Innovation Competences blue print. These co-creation processes have brought together diverse stakeholders (social entrepreneurs, NGO activists, volunteers, academia, public authorities, local communities representatives, businesses) from across the country, fostering collaboration, creativity, and shared ownership.

Main principles of the Co-Creation process used:

Leveraging Diverse Perspectives and Expertise:

The design thinking and consensus seminars held throughout the past two years in Bulgaria have provided a platform for diverse stakeholders to contribute their unique perspectives and expertise in the field of social innovations. By incorporating inputs from policymakers, researchers, practitioners, entrepreneurs, and citizens, the co-creation processes have generated a comprehensive understanding of social challenges, needs, and opportunities specific to Bulgaria. This inclusive approach ensures that the National Centre for Social Innovation Competences benefits from a well-rounded and informed decision-making process.

Fostering Stakeholder Engagement and Ownership:

The active involvement of various stakeholders in the co-creation processes has instilled a sense of engagement and ownership among participants. Through their contributions, individuals and organizations have developed a vested interest in the success of the National Centre for Social Innovation Competences. This shared ownership nurtures a culture of collaboration, responsibility, and commitment, leading to the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the center's initiatives.

Cultivating Creativity and Innovation:

Co-creation processes, such as design thinking, have proven to be catalysts for creativity and innovation. By encouraging interactive workshops and collaborative problem-solving exercises, the design thinking and consensus seminars held in various Bulgarian cities have stimulated fresh ideas and innovative approaches to address social challenges in Bulgaria. The outcomes of these co-creation initiatives serve as a foundation for the National Centre's development of groundbreaking projects that have the potential to bring about positive societal change.

Establishing Networks and Partnerships:

The co-creation processes facilitated by the design thinking and consensus seminars have played a crucial role in fostering collaboration, networking, and partnership building. These initiatives have provided opportunities for stakeholders to connect, exchange knowledge, and form alliances with like-minded individuals and organizations. These networks and partnerships can continue to support the National Centre for Social Innovation Competences in areas such as resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, and collaborative problem-solving.

Promoting Inclusive Decision-Making and Consensus Building:

Inclusivity and participatory decision-making have been integral to the co-creation processes in Bulgaria. By actively involving diverse stakeholders, the design thinking and consensus seminars have ensured that decisions regarding the establishment and operation of the National Centre for Social Innovation Competences reflect the collective wisdom of fragile social innovation system in Bulgaria. This inclusive approach helps build consensus, minimize resistance, and increase the center's ability to address the needs of a broad range of stakeholders and should be further implemented as an integral part of the future NCCSI.

In addition to the co-creation process SDA team used the **"test before invest"** principle in order to formalise the Centre as a separate body in the future in piloting a scaling of two social innovations[2]. The application of the "test before invest" principle has allowed for a more rigorous and evidence-based approach to social innovation. Instead of committing significant resources upfront, this principle encourages conducting pilot projects or experiments to test the feasibility, effectiveness, and scalability of new ideas. By testing the viability of social innovations before making substantial investments, the risk of failure is minimized, and resources are allocated more efficiently. This approach fosters a culture of learning, adaptability, and continuous improvement, leading to greater success rates and long-term sustainability of initiatives.

[2] https://social-innovations.club/en/report-lessons-learned-identifying-and-scaling-up-social-innovations/

5. MISSION OF THE COMPETENCE CENTER FOR SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

The mission of the Social Innovations Competence Centre is to address the ever-evolving societal challenges, including poverty and inclusion, access to quality education and healthcare, digitalization and the lack of digital skills, human rights and integration, ageing and well-being, urban regeneration, the right of clean air , access to culture, and more.

The core purpose is to foster social innovation and development by empowering individuals and organizations to create impactful solutions that address the identified needs and challenges.

Based on the findings from the national mapping and comprehensive co-creation process with the active participation of diverse stakeholders from different Bulgarian cities, and based on the transnational exchange of experiences the mission of the Competence Center is defined by the following objectives:

Identify and Analyze Societal Challenges: The CCSI should be at the forefront of understanding the complex and dynamic societal challenges that affect communities in Bulgaria. Through research, data analysis, and engagement with diverse stakeholders, CCSI will identify and gain insights into the root causes and implications of these challenges.

Facilitate Collaboration and Resource Mobilization: By fostering partnerships and networks, CCSI mobilizes resources, expertise, and knowledge to address the identified challenges effectively and to create a supportive ecosystem that can leverage the strengths of each partner to drive sustainable change.

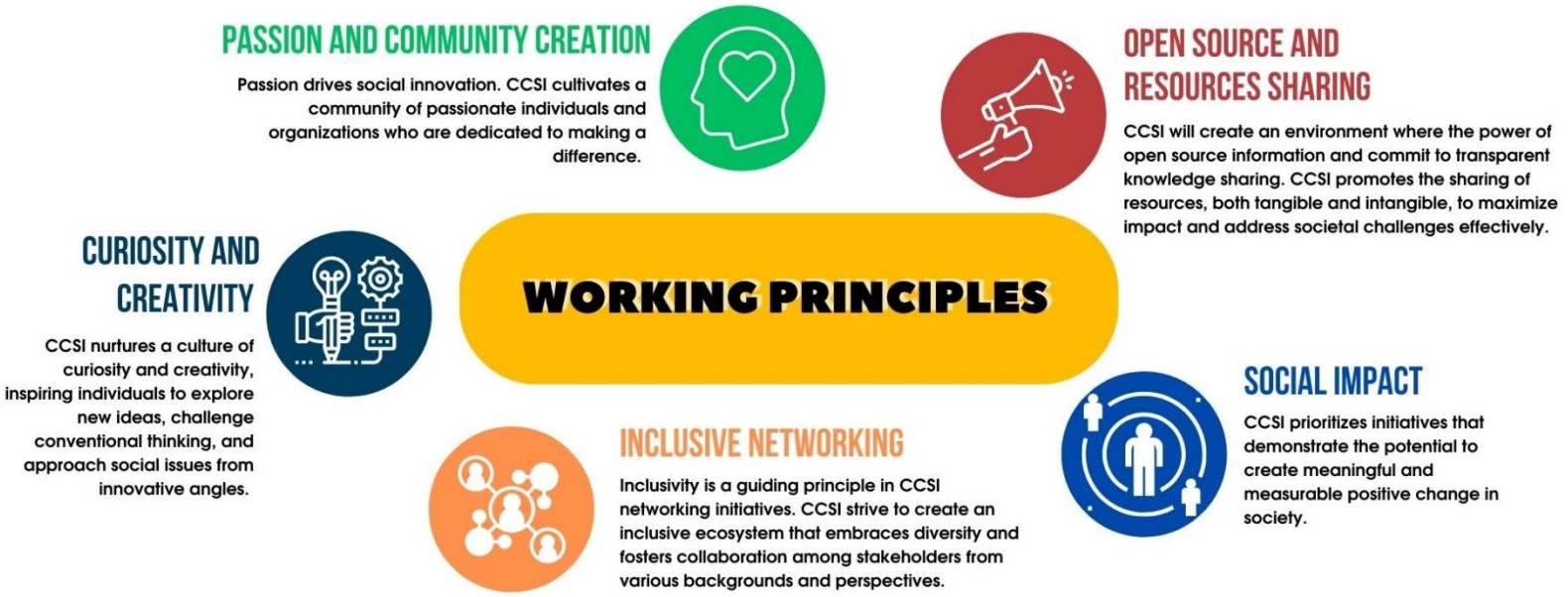
Support and Nurture Social Innovators: By providing nurturing environment through mentoring, capacity building, and access to networks, CCSI should empower individuals and organizations for experimentation and learning, so that these ideas are tested, refined, and positioned for maximum impact.

Drive Scalable and Sustainable Change: The Competence Centre aims to support the scaling and long-term sustainability of social innovations as impactful solutions require a pathway for growth and widespread adoption.

Advocate for Policy Integration and Systemic Change: To create lasting impact, the Competence Centre actively advocates for policy integration and systemic change working closely with policymakers, institutions, and other stakeholders to facilitate the integration of innovative solutions into policies and practices.

In line with the mission of the Social Innovations Competence Centre, it embraces some of the principles of ethical hackers as integral components of the approach to fostering social innovation. These principles will guide its teams actions, strategies, and collaborations, ensuring that it operates with integrity, openness, and a commitment to positive impact.

The principles CCSI adopt are:



6. SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES AND THEMATIC PRIORITIES

The Social Innovations Competence Centre operates within a comprehensive scope of activities, focusing on various areas to support and promote social innovation.

The specific areas of focus for the Center operation identified during the co-creation process were:

Creation and Support of Inclusive Networks at Local, National, and Transnational Levels: The Competence Centre strives to create and foster inclusive networks that span local, national, and transnational levels. These networks serve as platforms for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and partnership building among stakeholders from diverse backgrounds and sectors. By facilitating connections and interactions, the center promotes cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation, enabling the exchange of ideas, resources, and expertise.

The SI PLUS project partners have already made significant progress in establishing three transnational networks focusing on Administration of Programmes and Funds supporting social innovations, Poverty and Inclusion, and Social Innovations and Sustainability. These networks have served as initial steps to create vibrant platforms for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and partnership building. As a result, the potential for scaling social innovation has been identified and triggered, influencing the design of supporting programs and fostering the creation of new partnerships.

Looking ahead, the Competence Centre envisions further expanding and managing these networks through transnational cooperation with National Competence Centres established in different European countries. By leveraging this cooperation, the networks can tap into a broader pool of expertise, experiences, and resources, fostering greater cross-border collaboration and learning. This transnational exchange will address a pressing need identified during the mapping and needs assessment of the Bulgarian social innovation ecosystem: the lack of opportunities for transnational exchange and partnership building among social enterprises. This scarcity stems from limited knowledge and skills to develop transnational projects, bureaucratic obstacles within operational programs, and a lack of interactive platforms for networking.

The Competence Centre will actively facilitate the creation and development of local and national networks within the social innovation ecosystem and foster community building by creating platforms and spaces for actors to connect and engage. This will involve organizing networking events, skills sharing workshops, and Social innovation Summit where actors from various sectors and regions can connect and collaborate. The Competence Centre will also establish communication channels and online platforms that facilitate ongoing interactions, knowledge exchange, and resource sharing among network members.
Face-to-face meetups and informal gatherings are indeed a preferred form of interaction among social innovation actors in Bulgaria. The Competence Centre recognizes the value of in-person connections and the benefits that arise from direct engagement.

While virtual communication channels provide convenience and efficiency, face-to-face meetups and informal gatherings remain an essential element of the social innovation ecosystem. The Competence Centre recognizes the value of these in-person interactions and will actively support and facilitate such opportunities for social innovation actors to connect, collaborate, and create lasting impact.

Societal Challenges Analysis and Needs Assessment: The Competence Centre is committed to conducting comprehensive analysis and needs assessments to identify and understand the societal challenges, needs, and gaps within the field of social innovation. In addition to traditional methods, the centre will employ innovative approaches to gather insights and ensure a holistic understanding of the diverse needs of stakeholders and communities.

These methods include:

- *Participatory Workshops and Design Thinking*: These interactive sessions involve diverse stakeholders, including social innovators, beneficiaries, community members, and experts. Through collaborative exercises and ideation processes, participants contribute their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations, allowing for the co-creation of solutions that address identified challenges. For example, a design thinking workshop may be conducted with marginalized communities to understand their specific needs and co-design solutions that empower and uplift them.

- *Social Media Listening and Data Mining*: In today's digital age, social media platforms offer a wealth of information that can be leveraged for needs assessment. Social media listening involves monitoring online conversations, trends, and sentiment analysis related to social issues. Data mining techniques can be applied to extract valuable insights from social media data, including identifying emerging needs and gaps in real-time. By analyzing social media data, the Competence Centre can gain insights into public sentiment, emerging trends, and pressing social challenges, contributing to a more dynamic and up-to-date needs assessment process.

- *Human-Centered Ethnography*: The Competence Centre employs human-centered ethnographic research methods to gain deep insights into the lived experiences and needs of individuals and communities. This approach involves immersing researchers in the context of the community, engaging in participant observation, interviews, and storytelling. Through this immersive and empathetic research, the centre can uncover nuanced needs, cultural considerations, and contextual factors that influence the design of effective social innovation initiatives. For example, conducting ethnographic research in a rural community can reveal unique challenges faced by the population and inform the development of tailored solutions that address their specific needs.

- *Participatory Data Collection*: Participatory data collection methods engage community members as active participants in the needs assessment process. This can include using participatory mapping techniques, focus group discussions, or participatory video approaches. These methods empower community members to express their needs, perspectives, and aspirations directly. By involving the community in data collection, the process becomes more inclusive and ensures that the voices of marginalized groups are heard. Participatory data collection fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment within the community, leading to more accurate and context-specific needs assessment outcomes. Some examples of participatory data collection are the Photo Voice methodology, DeepDive Peer reviews of public services efficiency and needs assessment, ActiveAgeing Frendly cities, etc.

These innovative methods of needs assessment allow the Competence Centre to go beyond traditional approaches and gain deeper insights into the complex social challenges and needs within the social innovation ecosystem. By employing participatory workshops, data mining, social network analysis, human-centered ethnography, the centre ensures a holistic understanding of diverse stakeholders' perspectives and needs. This knowledge serves as a foundation for developing targeted strategies, programs, and initiatives that create sustainable social impact.

Database Development and Curation

The Competence Centre recognizes the importance of data and information in driving evidence-based decision-making and promoting innovation. This database serves as a comprehensive repository of information, resources, and best practices in the field of social innovation. It provides stakeholders with easy access to relevant data, research findings, successful case studies, and other valuable resources to support their work and decision-making processes.
The Database may include: a collection of case studies showcasing successful social innovation initiatives from around the world; funding opportunities for social innovation projects; information on social impact measurement frameworks, methodologies, and tools; a collection of tools, guidelines, reports, and research publications, that social innovators can leverage in their work in topics such as business models, scaling strategies, stakeholder engagement, community development, and sustainability; policy and regulatory database; policy innovations, etc.

Tailored Learning and New - Capacities-Building: To enhance the capabilities and skills of social innovators, the Competence Centre designs and implements blended learning programs and capacity-building initiatives. These programs combine online and offline learning methods to provide participants with comprehensive training, mentorship, and practical tools. Additionally, the center offers on-demand mentoring services to provide targeted guidance and support tailored to the specific needs of social innovators.

The Competence Centre develops blended learning programs that offer a dynamic and flexible learning experience. These programs leverage online platforms and resources to provide participants with the flexibility to access content at their own pace and convenience. The programs also include offline components, such as workshops, seminars, and practical exercises, to foster hands-on learning experiences, collaboration, and networking among participants. he Competence Centre offers a wide range of comprehensive training topics to equip social innovators with the necessary knowledge and skills. Some of the topics covered in the blended learning programs include:

- Design Thinking and Human-Centered Design: Participants learn how to apply design thinking methodologies to identify and address social challenges, placing the needs and perspectives of the beneficiaries at the center of the innovation process.

- Social Impact Assessment: Participants gain an understanding of various methodologies and frameworks for assessing the social impact of their initiatives. They learn how to measure, monitor, and communicate the social value created by their projects.

- Digital Marketing and Online Presence: In today's digital era, social innovators need to leverage various online marketing channels to reach their target audience effectively. This topic covers strategies for website development, search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing, and online advertising. Social innovators learn how to build an online presence and engage with their audience through digital platforms.

- Fundraising and Financial Sustainability: This topic focuses on effective fundraising strategies for social innovators, including exploring different funding sources, developing grant proposals, and building sustainable financial models.

- Collaborative Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement: Participants learn how to build effective collaborative partnerships and engage with diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and businesses, to amplify the impact of their initiatives.

- Impact Communication: Effectively communicating the social impact of initiatives is crucial for social innovators to gain support, attract funding, and inspire action. They learn how to craft compelling narratives, use digital media, and leverage storytelling techniques to create awareness and mobilize support.

The Competence Centre provides on-demand mentorship services to social innovators, offering personalized guidance and support tailored to their specific needs and market niches. Experienced mentors provide one-on-one sessions, helping participants navigate challenges, refine their strategies, and unlock their full potential. The mentorship process aims to accelerate participants' learning, provide valuable insights, and foster personal and professional growth.

The blended learning and on-demand mentoring will take into account the growth level of the social innovators – whether they are at start-up phase or they are advanced and will be blended to the specifics of the area they are intervening.

Recognizing the value of peer-to-peer support, the Competence Centre will encourage the establishment of mentoring programs and peer learning initiatives within local and national networks. These programs will enable experienced actors to mentor and support emerging social innovators, sharing insights, guidance, and practical advice.

The Competence Centre will provide tailored support and resources to enable social enterprises to engage in transnational collaborations. This support will include capacity-building programs focused on developing the necessary skills and knowledge for transnational project development.

Additionally, the center will develop an interactive online platform that serves as a networking hub, connecting social enterprises across borders, facilitating knowledge exchange, and fostering collaboration. The Centre seek partnership with the different formats of mentorship and support programs and promote the support for scaling social innovations.

Publicity and Visualization of Social Innovators: The Competence Centre places a strong emphasis on publicity and visualization to promote the work of social innovators and their initiatives. This includes showcasing success stories, organizing events, and leveraging various communication channels to raise awareness about social innovations and their impact. The Centre for Competences on Social Innovations will establish partnerships with national media, online media outlets, and online platforms of support organizations to enhance the publicity and visualization of social innovators in the digital realm. These partnerships will leverage digital platforms and channels to amplify the visibility of social innovators and their initiatives, reaching a wider audience and fostering engagement. By collaborating with digital media outlets and online platforms, the centre will share inspiring stories, raise awareness about social innovation, and inspire others to engage in innovative solutions for societal challenges. Through targeted publicity efforts, the center has the ambition to inspire others, foster a culture of innovation, and create an environment that recognizes and supports the contributions of social innovators.

Access to Financing and Resources: The Competence Centre recognizes the crucial role of access to financing and resources in driving the implementation and scaling of social innovation projects. As part of its activities, the center works to facilitate and enhance access to funding opportunities and resources for social innovators. This includes developing partnerships with funding institutions, providing guidance on fundraising strategies, and connecting innovators with relevant resources to support their initiatives. The contact point of EaSI program in Bulgaria is a natural partner, as well as funding programs of Sofia municipality. The Competence Centre will also work towards streamlining administrative processes within operational programs, advocating for simplified procedures and increased flexibility for transnational cooperation.

Transnational cooperation and exchange of experiences

Collaboration with the European Centre for Social Innovations and other Centres established by consortiums in different EU countries is a fundamental aspect of the centre's transnational cooperation function. This collaboration enables the exchange of experiences, expertise, and resources on a larger scale. It involves aligning strategies, sharing research findings, and exploring opportunities for joint initiatives and projects. The European Centre for Social Innovations and other national centres serve as vital partners in fostering transnational cooperation, facilitating connections, and amplifying the impact of social innovation across Europe.

The centre facilitates peer learning exchanges, study visits, and mentoring programs that enable social innovators, managing authorities, and support organizations to learn from one another's experiences and gain insights into different approaches and strategies. These exchanges strengthen relationships, build trust, and promote collaboration among stakeholders.

The platforms for exchange could be the existing transnational networks created by SI PLUS partners, but also the Community of Practice workshops and the different online and offline events conducted by the organizations from the Consortiums who are working to establish Competence centres in their countries.

THEMATIC PRIORITIES:

During the mapping of social innovation practices and needs assessment, several thematic priorities were identified based on the pressing challenges in the social innovation landscape. These priorities include **combating poverty**, **access to the labour market**, **access to education and healthcare**, **human rights and inclusion**, **urban regeneration in deprived areas**, **digitalization and skills acquisition**, etc.

combating poverty

access to the labour market

access to education and healthcare

human rights and inclusion

urban regeneration in deprived areas

digitalization and skills acquisition

Recognizing the dynamic nature of the world and the importance of local contexts, stakeholders expressed the need to analyse and reassess these priorities annually. This approach ensures that the Centre for Competences on Social Innovations remains responsive to evolving needs, aligns with local realities, and addresses the ever-changing societal challenges in a timely and relevant manner. By regularly revisiting and adapting the thematic priorities, the centre can effectively support social innovation initiatives that are most impactful and address the most pressing needs within the given context.

A GOOD EXAMPLE ON NURTURING NEW SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES: INCLUSIVE SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR INTEGRATION

A good example of translating the proposed principles of the National Center for Competences in Social Innovations into action to address social challenges is the new Bureau for Integration and Social Innovations (BISI) in Sofia, established in March 2023 based on the pilot activities on scaling social innovation.

BISI is a new player in the landscape of migrant and refugee inclusion initiatives, but also in social innovations addressing a variety of societal challenges, like an ageing population, digital transformation and new skills, access to education and employment, etc. The ambition of the organization is to not only fill service gaps to target populations but to change the lens through which social challenges are understood.

While independent from public body structures, the Bureau will seek active collaboration with the city to tackle the hard questions of effectiveness, sustainability, and scalability of social innovation as a robust tool for transforming local government. In particular, by applying a social innovation logic to integration and inclusion, BISI will aid local authorities move beyond the view of integration as just another regulatory area and an administrative matter, seeing it instead as an interactive, participatory, community-based process of mutual learning and shared ownership of solutions.

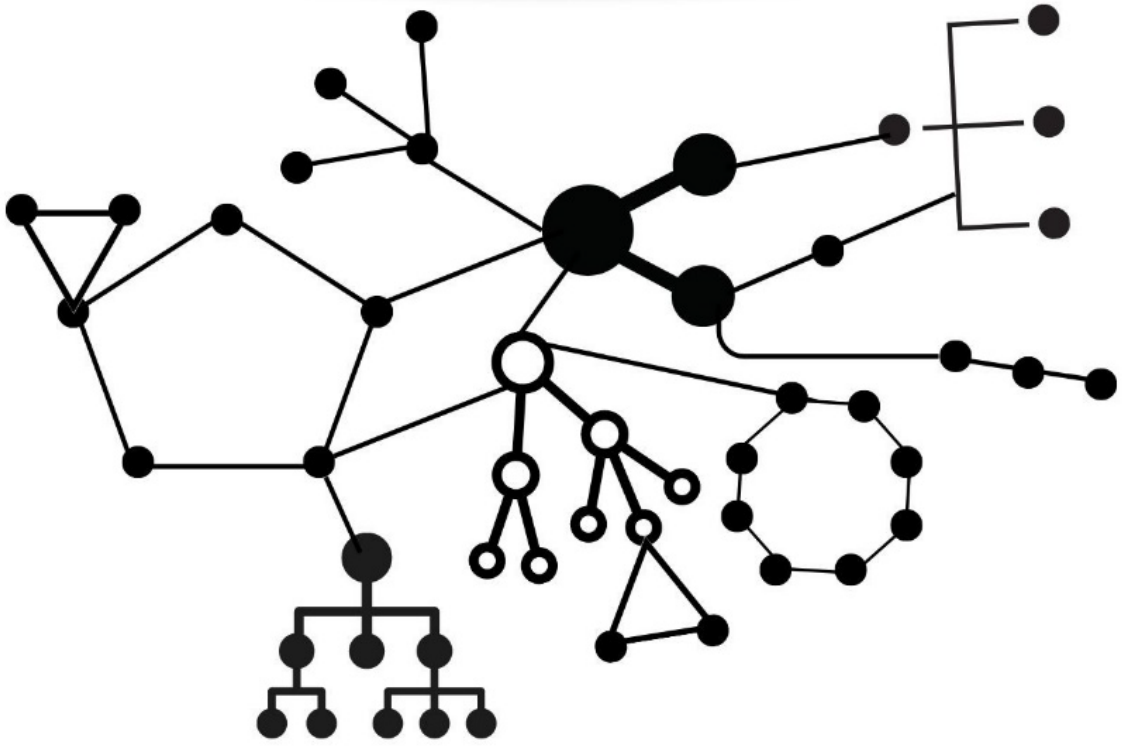
The Bureau has already made first steps in forging local partnerships to tap expertise, networks, and resources. Adopting a human-centred approach to streamline services: BISI is planning a series of participatory assessment sessions regarding the urban environment (e.g., photovoice and guided walks around the city). Last but not least, BISI aims to ensure inclusive, diverse, and unbiased collaborative environment for partners and target groups (e.g., innovative engagement initiatives to tackle intersectional discrimination against women).

7. OPERATIONAL MODEL:

After extensive discussions and co-design workshops, the operational model of the Centre for Social Innovation Competence in Bulgaria emerged with the following key features:

Innovative and Inclusive Structure: The Centre was envisioned to be innovative from its foundation, reflecting its purpose of dealing with social innovations. It was agreed that the Centre should include various stakeholders, promoting collaboration and collective ownership. The model aimed to move away from a centralized structure, allowing for flexibility in governance and operations.

Online Platform and Physical Space: The Centre recognized the importance of both digital and physical spaces. It was determined that the Centre could start as an online platform, providing a virtual hub for networking, knowledge exchange, and resource sharing. However, it was also acknowledged that physical spaces were necessary for meetups, workshops, and networking events. Office spaces were considered optional due to the financial resources required, but alternative options such as networking with cities, the 6 six regional focus points for supporting social economy, and establishing a mobile unit of the Centre were explored.



Governing Structures: Several models of governing structures were discussed during the co-creation process. These included:

GOVERNING STRUCTURE	PROS	CONS
Partnership Agreement: One proposed model involved a partnership agreement between organizations mandated by the Bulgarian ESF Managing Authority and the Ministry for Labour and Social Policies. This agreement would establish the Centre's mission and main functions, with resources being shared among the partner organizations.	*Resource Sharing*: The partnership agreement allows for the sharing of resources among organizations mandated by the Bulgarian ESF Managing Authority and the Ministry for Labour and Social Policies. This pooling of resources can lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness in implementing the Centre's mission. *Expertise from Multiple Organizations*: With a partnership agreement, the Centre can benefit from the expertise and diverse perspectives of multiple organizations involved. This can enrich the knowledge base and provide a broader range of support to social innovators. *Flexibility:* The partnership agreement provides a flexible structure that can adapt to changing needs and priorities. It allows for collaboration between organizations with different strengths and specializations.	*Coordination Challenges*: Coordinating activities, decision-making, and resource allocation among multiple organizations may present challenges. Clear communication and effective coordination mechanisms would be essential to ensure smooth operations. *Potential Power Imbalance*: Depending on the structure and dynamics of the partnership, there is a possibility of power imbalances among organizations. Ensuring equitable participation and decision-making would require careful management.
Regional Cluster: Another proposed model suggested the formation of a regional cluster, involving stakeholders from the six main regions in Bulgaria. The Centre would work closely with municipalities, the six focus points established to support social economy, and various stakeholders within each region. This model aimed to leverage regional expertise and	*Regional Expertise and Collaboration:* The regional cluster model leverages the expertise and knowledge present in each of the six main regions in Bulgaria. It allows for focused collaboration between the Centre and municipalities, social economy focus points, and other stakeholders within each region.	*Fragmentation*: Operating within regional clusters may lead to fragmentation and duplication of efforts if coordination and information sharing mechanisms are not well-established. Ensuring effective coordination and collaboration across regions would be crucial.

collaboration for effective implementation.	*Tailored Approaches*: By working closely with regional stakeholders, the Centre can develop tailored approaches and initiatives that address the specific needs and challenges of each region. *Strong Regional Network*: The regional cluster model can foster a strong network of social innovators, organizations, and local authorities within each region. This network can facilitate knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, and collaboration.	*Potential for Unequal Regional Development*: Depending on the resources and capacities of each region, there is a possibility of unequal development and support for social innovation. Ensuring fairness and equity across regions would require careful attention.
"Arm's Length" Association: A third model discussed was the establishment of an "Arm's Length" association, with governance comprised of representatives from Managing authorities, municipality/ies and endorsed organizations responsible for establishing the Competence Centre in Bulgaria. This model aimed to strike a balance between government involvement and autonomy.	*Autonomy and Independence*: The "Arm's Length" association provides a level of autonomy and independence for the Centre in decision-making and operations. This allows for agility and adaptability to the evolving needs of the social innovation landscape. *Government Involvement*: The involvement of representatives from national and local authorities ensures a direct link to government policies and resources, potentially enhancing the Centre's influence and support. *Balance of Expertise and Authority*: The "Arm's Length" model aims to strike a balance between government authority and the expertise of organizations involved in establishing the Competence Centre.	*Potential Lack of Representation*: Depending on the composition and selection process, the "Arm's Length" association may not fully represent the diverse range of stakeholders and perspectives in the social innovation ecosystem. Ensuring broad representation and inclusivity would be essential. *Limited Autonomy*: While the "Arm's Length" model provides some level of autonomy, there may still be constraints and limitations imposed by government policies and regulations. Balancing autonomy with accountability to the government may require careful navigation.

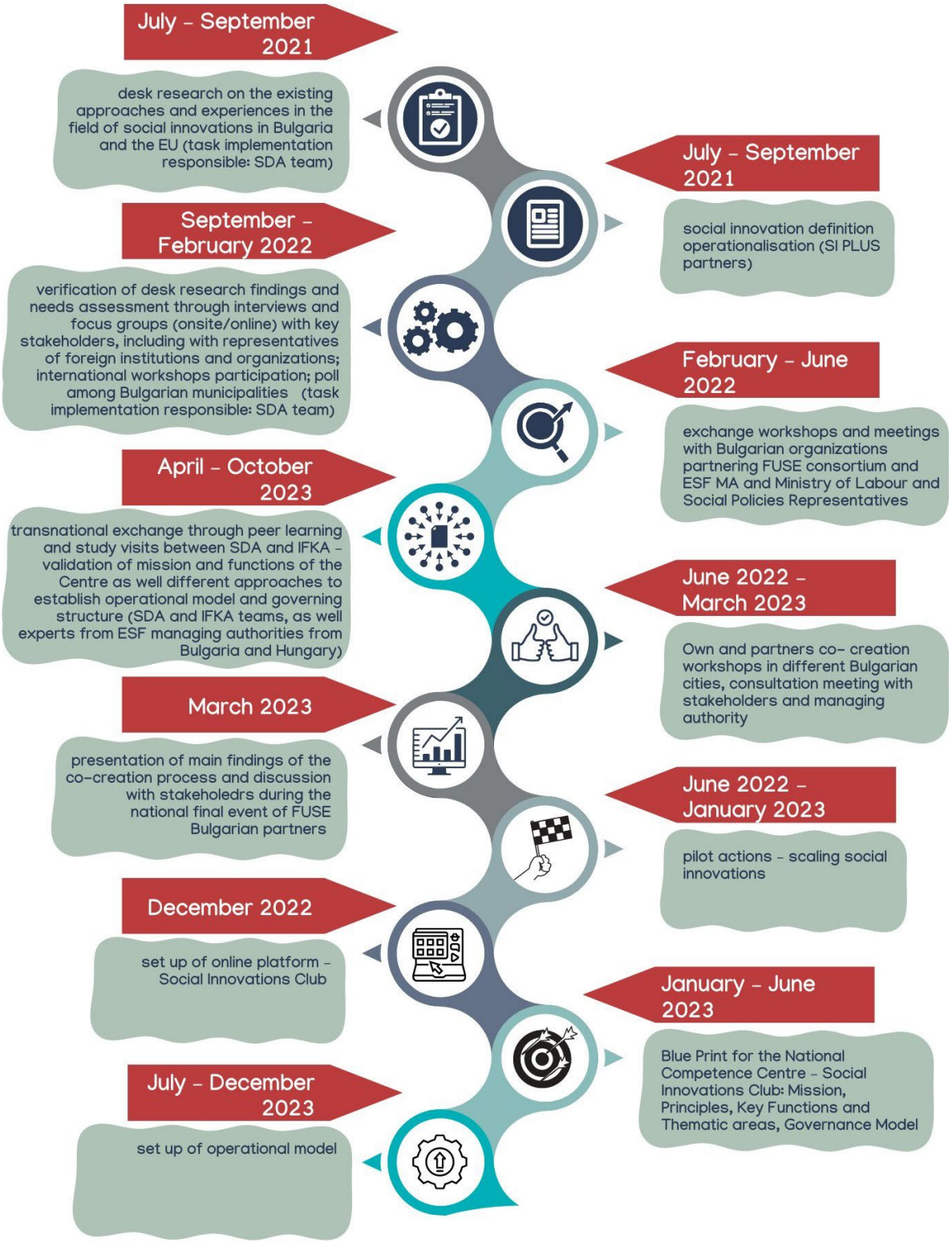
Ultimately, the operational model of the Centre for Social Innovation Competence in Bulgaria aimed to combine innovation, inclusivity, flexibility, and collaboration. It would operate as an online platform while also facilitating physical networking spaces.

The Centre should have one core management team and ad hoc mobile teams reflecting the needs assessment. The main expertise and knowledge should reflect the main principles and mission of the centre and its core functions.

Potential funding sources for the Centre: ESF+ funds at national and EU level, Research and Innovation Funds, European Regional Development Fund, municipal funds, private funds.

We started with the creation of an on online club for social innovations:

8. ROADMAP AND ACTIONS



9. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Examples of possible indicators for monitoring the Social Innovation Competence Center **process** include:

- extent to which essential features of social innovation developed and implemented;
- extent of community participation and resources mobilisation and support for the innovation;
- extent that management tools and procedures are used to address constraints;
- appropriate adaptation of innovation;
- adjustment of social innovation strategy based on findings of monitoring and evaluation.

Monitoring and evaluation should also be able to capture the outputs/outcomes of the Social Innovation Competence Center operations.

Examples of indicators of **outputs/outcomes** include:

- number of sites/organizations implementing the innovation;
- number of start-ups and scale-ups supported;
- evidence of political support;
- use of local and national resources to support the innovation;
- client and community satisfaction with services that include the innovation;
- number of successful participants in the Competence Center professional development courses, online training courses and other education/training activity delivered, including data on gender;
- number of success stories per year;

Monitoring and evaluation also needs to examine the overall **results/impacts** of Social Innovation Competence Center operations and its sustainability.

Examples of indicators of the results/impacts are:

- number of people with access to quality social innovation services/products over time has increased;
- number of previously underserved persons using improved services has increased;
- the innovation is incorporated into the programmatic and technical standards, norms and practices of local/national government and other relevant systems;
- policy influence – integration of social innovation approach into government strategies or programmes, adoption or amendment in policies;
- the innovation is funded through national and local budgets/total EUR amount of private and public capital attracted;
- social and economic status has improved.

10. CONCLUSION

The establishment of a Competence Centre for Social Innovation in Bulgaria is a significant step towards fostering social innovation, driving positive social change, and supporting the growth of the social economy. This report has highlighted the current landscape of social innovations in Bulgaria, the need for a national Competence Centre, and the key considerations for its establishment and operation.

Bulgaria's social innovation ecosystem faces various challenges, including fragmentation, a lack of common understanding, and limited data on social innovations. The Competence Centre will play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by providing a platform for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and capacity building among diverse stakeholders.

Through its core management team and operational model, the Competence Centre will ensure the effective implementation of its mission and objectives. The Centre will offer tailored support to social innovators, facilitate collaboration and networking, and provide resources and guidance for accessing funding opportunities. It will serve as a hub for knowledge exchange, policy influence, and the promotion of social innovation at the national level.

The success and impact of the Competence Centre will be measured through a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with its mission and objectives. These KPIs encompass various aspects, including the number of supported social innovators, social impact generated, stakeholder satisfaction, funding leveraged, knowledge dissemination, partnerships formed, policy influence, capacity building, and outcomes achieved.

By actively engaging with stakeholders, adapting to local needs, and leveraging partnerships, the Competence Centre has the potential to become a catalyst for social innovation in Bulgaria. It will create an enabling environment for social innovators to thrive, generate sustainable solutions to societal challenges, and contribute to the overall well-being of communities.

As Bulgaria moves towards a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient future, the Competence Centre for Social Innovation will be a vital resource, empowering social innovators, fostering collaboration, and driving positive change. Through its initiatives and activities, the Centre will contribute to the development of a vibrant social innovation ecosystem, ultimately enhancing the social economy, promoting social entrepreneurship, and creating a more equitable and prosperous society.