

# THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CASI AND OTHER FP7 PROJECTS

Social innovation is a broad concept that has been deliberated from the perspective of diverse academic disciplines for quite a long time. Yet, its interplay with sustainability is a topic that has not been widely discussed but still deserves attention.

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The global environmental and societal challenges lead to rethinking the role of innovation in the context of sustainable development [1]. Sustainable development could be defined as a new paradigm of development that introduces sustainable ways of conducting activities that respect environmental limits and at the same time result in social and economic development. It also represents a form of social innovation that could influence human existence and cut across all sectors of our economy and society [2]. Social innovation, in turn, can play a key role in enhancing sustainability by changing existing and creating new social practices for building a sustainable economy and lifestyle. The conjunction between sustainability and social innovation is subject to several projects funded under the Seventh Framework Program such as: CASI, ITSSOIN, SI-DRIVE, SPREAD, TRANSIT, WWWFOREUROPE. The projects' results are expected to bring this relationship up to a new level [3].

## INNOVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainability could be achieved if Europe manages to ensure greener, cleaner and more equitable economic growth, which is based on green business practices, environmentally-friendly technologies and services, education and employment opportunities for all [3]. When considering transition towards sustainable economic growth, the main challenge remains in addressing innovation not only from an economic and environmental, but also from a social perspective. Although the concept of innovation has mostly been related to economic issues, environmental and societal concerns (e.g. unequal access to scarce natural

resources, aging workforce, environmental degradation, climate change or poverty) have lately led to rethinking innovation in the context of sustainable development. European institutions have realized the need to go beyond a traditional understanding of innovation, focusing mainly on technological solutions and market-oriented innovation [1]. In this regard, Annika Surmeier who is a research assistant at Philipps University Marburg, shares that *"From an innovation perspective, new forms of innovations – including social innovation, inclusive innovation, base-of-the pyramid innovation, and eco-innovation – are gaining stature in the scientific community and among policy makers as technological or science-based innovations alone are insufficient to address these challenges"* [4].

"[...] social innovation - innovation without which sustainable development will simply be a grand illusion rather than a paradigm in practice."

Nigel John Roome [1]

According to a report of the European Sustainable Development Network [2], strong linkages between sustainable development and social innovation exist but research still does not address them in depth. However, there are some projects that have already paved the way towards studying the interplay between social innovation and sustainable development.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE CASI PROJECT

CASI ("Public Participation in Developing a Common Framework for Assessment and Management of Sustainable Innovation") is an EU project funded by the Seventh Framework Program (FP7) for Research and Technological Development. The project was implemented in response to

one of the Societal Challenges in the focus of Horizon 2020 program, namely “Climate action, environment, resource efficiency and raw materials”. It considers innovation as a key driver of societal progress and encourages debate on conceptual dimensions, policy boundaries, and good practices linking innovative pursuits with sustainability objectives.

Within the CASI project the interplay between social innovation and sustainability has been examined through activities such as an online survey, desk research, and the development of a data base with relevant practices of social innovation across Europe and beyond.

The online survey was spread among sustainability and innovation experts across the entire EU. Its major aim was to collect experts’ opinion on different issues related to the concepts of sustainable innovation and sustainable development. The analysis of survey results showed that respondents found social aspects of sustainability as highly relevant to sustainable innovation and thus were considered necessary to be taken into account in the design and development stages of the innovation process. However, social innovation was regarded as less relevant to sustainable innovation in contrast to other types of innovation such as product and system innovation. In other words, the majority of respondents claimed that it was more likely for a product or system innovation to develop as sustainable innovation and contribute to achieving sustainable development rather than for social innovation.

The interplay between sustainability and social innovation has also been discussed in two chapters of the first annual report developed as part of the CASI project. The authors of the report argue that social innovations play important role in the transition to a more sustainable society. They claimed that societal challenges, such as climate change, demand a paradigm shift which integrates social innovation in the innovation system. They also discussed the Seventh Environment Action Program running until 2020 (EAP), the key EU program for sustainability, stating that although the EAP does not refer to the concept of social innovation, this type of innovation could contribute to achieving the objectives of the program. Promoting technological developments only would not be enough. According to the authors, social innovations hold the potential to better address societal issues and satisfy societal needs. Unlike the EAP, the EU Framework Program for Research and Innovation, Horizon2020, gives prominence to the importance of social innovation and its role for achieving sustainability. It is believed that the introduction of social innovation in the policy field of sustainability could be facilitated by the further development of the scientific base of social innovation, the

integration of the new innovation paradigm within the innovation programs combining technological and social innovations, and the validation of social innovation in different fields.

Within the CASI project, a number of sustainable innovation cases have been mapped as well. Those cases represent practices of social and technological innovations that inquire into the distinct factors of sustainability. The cases show that sustainable innovation could also be social and that social innovation could lead to sustainability. A variety of collaborative consumption practices (e.g. car-pooling and co-housing projects) have been analyzed and have proven

that concerns related to resource efficiency could inspire social innovation and result in sustainable solutions. One example is the UbiGo Mobility service in Sweden that encourages citizens to turn to a more sustainable lifestyle by giving them the opportunity to test more efficient modes of travelling. Environmental concerns and social issues, such as poverty and limited access to good education, are also areas in which social innovations emerge. The 3D Ecobus mobile education center in

Bulgaria is an example of how an innovative training tool can result in building sustainable habits related to protecting the environment. Social innovators, in turn, have admitted the benefits that new practices can bring in fields such as environmental protection, poverty reduction, and education.

A stronger focus on social innovation in future policies, addressing the transition to a sustainable society, is recommended by the CASI project so as to supplement the previous focus on technological innovations. Social innovations are considered to play a crucial role in sustainability by introducing new societal practices that contribute to building sustainable economies and lifestyles [3].

## OTHER PROJECTS THAT ADDRESS THE CONJUNCTION BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

There are many projects funded under the FP7 that do research on different aspects of social innovation. Some of them address the interplay between social innovation and sustainability. Besides CASI, examples of such projects are SI-DRIVE, ITSSOIN, SPREAD, TRANSIT, WWWFOREUROPE. Among other things, these projects explore concepts such as a new transformative social innovation theory, a new analytical basis for a socioecological transition, environmental sustainability and consumer protection in finance, a multi-stakeholder dialogue towards a sustainable lifestyle, several mapping processes of existing social innovation cases for

“Social innovation will play a key role in sustainability by changing existing and creating new societal practices in order to build a sustainable economy and lifestyle.”

CASI [3]

sustainability, a management framework and a pluralism of policy recommendations.

The projects listed above highlighted the interplay between social innovation and sustainability in various ways. CASI created a database of more than 200 practices of sustainable innovations of which almost a quarter is by origin a social innovation. ITSSOIN studied the impact of social innovation activities on the organization’s transformational performance. SI-DRIVE compiled seven analytical policy reports in the field of education and lifelong learning, employment, environment and climate change, energy, mobility and transport, health and social care, and poverty reduction and sustainable development. SPREAD created a sustainable baseline report while TRANSIR developed a theoretical approach and WWWFOREUROPE compiled a compendium of case studies on socio-ecological transitions. Many of the projects’ activities comprise a mapping of social innovation initiatives which contributes to disseminating good practices across Europe.

However, enhancing the role of social innovation for sustainability rests upon the following:

- EU policies to ensure a better visibility and labeling of the role and concept of social innovation.
- To outline the sustainable aspect in the FP7 results together with the conjunction of social innovation and sustainability, and spread the core results [3].
- To create adequate framework and support structures for social innovations.
- To establish policy institutions that would be directly responsible for social innovations.
- To ensure a shared understanding of social innovation that distinguishes it from other concepts and types of innovation.
- To find new ways of developing and spreading social innovation practices that consider participation of relevant actors, civil society and even users [5].

To sum up, social innovation holds the potential to contribute to a better understanding of innovation processes and moving the central focus of policy towards a new paradigm of sustainability in which social innovation plays an important role [3]. Lately, an increased awareness and promotion of social innovation is observed in many countries. However, further efforts are still necessary in order to place social innovation high on the political agenda [5].

**REFERENCES**

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## PROJECTS THAT ADDRESS THE CONJUNCTION OF SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

<p><b>CASI</b> <i>(www.casi2020.eu)</i></p> <p>The CASI project investigates the scope of sustainable innovation as a societal phenomenon. It contributes to increasing understanding of sustainable innovation and explores the impacts of practices representing social and technological innovations. Thus the project helps determine the scope and priorities for national and EU policy making.</p>	<p><b>TRANSIT</b> <i>(www.transitsocialinnovation.eu)</i></p> <p>The nexus of social innovation and societal transformation, conceptualised in terms of sustainability transformations is explored as part of the project. The project introduces the concept of transformative social innovation as a way to analyse the interaction between social innovation initiatives and the dynamics of sustainability transformations.</p>
<p><b>ITSSOIN</b> <i>(www.itssoin.eu)</i></p> <p>The project investigates the impact of the Third Sector and of civic engagement on society. It aims to prove that the Third Sector is best placed to produce social innovation, especially through stimulating civic involvement and participation.</p>	<p><b>SI-DRIVE</b> <i>(www.si-drive.eu)</i></p> <p>SI-DRIVE aims to extend knowledge on social innovation by integrating diverse theories and research methodologies, mapping SI practices on European and global level, and conducting in-depth analyses and case studies in order to ensure relevance to policy makers and practitioners.</p>
<p><b>SPREAD</b> <i>(www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu)</i></p> <p>SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyle 2050 is a European social platform project that gives opportunity to different societal stakeholders to contribute to creating a vision for sustainable lifestyles in 2050. The project results in developing a roadmap for strategic action for policy makers and provides innovative ideas related to achieving sustainable lifestyles in European societies.</p>	<p><b>WWWFOREUROPE</b> <i>(www.foreurope.eu)</i></p> <p>WWWFOREUROPE is a research project which aim is to change the course of economic policy in the direction of a socio-ecological transition. One of the questions that the project addresses is related to the way social and technological innovations could be supported in order to contribute to social and ecological sustainability.</p>

All these projects address to a certain extent the interplay of social innovation and sustainability and lay the foundation of studying the topic. The projects’ outcomes are expected to bring the relationship between the two concepts up to a new level.

Projects addressing SI and Sustainability

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