

# STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL INNOVATION COMMUNITY

The Social Innovation Community (SIC) started from the premise that we need better and more collaborative approaches to address societal challenges effectively. The project was designed to increase social innovators' capacity to act, and to support public and other decision-makers. Therefore, SIC ran a series of on- and offline activities in experimentation, learning, policy and research.

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## CONNECTING A FRAGMENTED MOVEMENT

One of the biggest challenges for the field of social innovation (SI) globally is that it is fragmented. In Europe, while the European Commission has supported a number of research, coordination and support projects with valuable outcomes, actors in research and policy as well as in the different fields of practice are relatively disconnected. This means that the field of social innovation, although dynamic and changing rapidly as new trends emerge and new groups of actors come on board, is still not living up to its full potential and achieving the societal impact needed. Social innovators working at the 'frontline' find it hard to access and use research to inform their solutions. Many working in the field – as social innovators or intermediaries such as funders, labs and for incubator programmes – are tackling similar challenges, but miss out on opportunities to learn from each other. As a field dominated by small, often informal organisations with limited resources, those working in social innovation find it hard to communicate their work to a wide audience and to get their voices heard by governments.

When starting the Social Innovation Community (SIC) project in 2016, we recognised that these challenges affected different groups in the SI field in different ways. Various well-established networks already existed, including research networks, like EMES and DIESIS; networks of intermediaries like Impact Hub, MakeSense or Ashoka; communities within the digital social innovation space like OuiShare and the DSI4EU network; as well as communities with a broader focus like that of Social Innovation Exchange (one of the SIC partners). Other groupings were much more emergent, with a few isolated organisations only recently starting to connect with each other and identify with the idea of social innovation – such as public sector innovators, and organisations working in community-led social innovation.

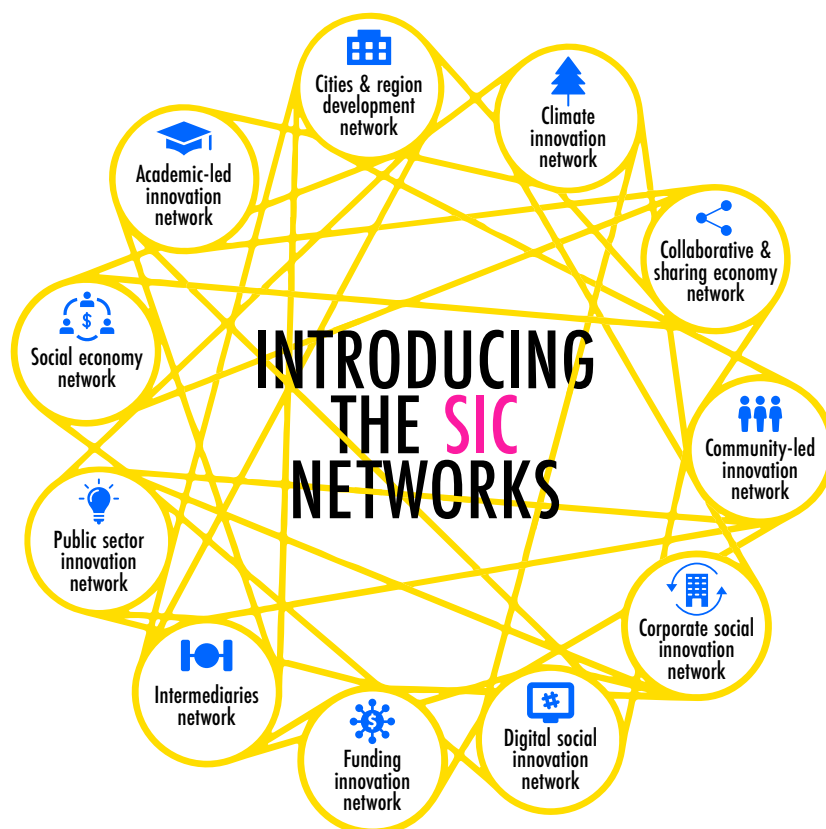
This is why the overarching aim of the Social Innovation Community was to strengthen social innovation networks and help them create more impact by connecting with each other. Over the course of three years, SIC identified, engaged and connected actors including researchers, social innovators, policy-makers, as well as intermediaries, businesses, civil society organisations and public sector employees.

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This activity was organised around eleven 'networks' of social innovation actors, at different points on the 'well-established to newly emergent' spectrum. A consortium of twelve partners took responsibility for engaging with actors in these networks, as well as leading a set of cross cutting areas of action – Research, Policy, Experimentation and Learning. The project was designed so that actors from the different networks would work with each other, and with these action areas. By reaching into these different networks SIC was able to bring fresh ideas and different perspectives to the project. The SIC networks were a way to tap into the pockets of dynamic social innovation activity across Europe, which often act in silos.

## CONNECTING RESEARCH, LEARNING, EXPERIMENTATION AND POLICY

The challenge faced by many European Commission funded projects is that dividing the project into well-defined work packages creates silos. Usually, these projects do not include a formal mode of exchanging, connecting and learning as



## Introducing the SIC networks

the members of the consortium focus on their own work packages. The Social Innovation Community was intentionally different. Consortium partners in SIC were encouraged to build relationships throughout the networks, not just with those with whom they directly worked, and the different strands of action were intertwined.

Prior to SIC, the European Commission had already funded around 30 social innovation projects. Recognising that these had all produced a considerable amount of theoretical output and/or empirical data, SIC's **research** work aimed to build on, synthesise and communicate this knowledge base, rather than to create new knowledge. A first step was to carry out an evidence based review drawing together research from scholarly and practitioner literature, relating to each of SIC's networks. With this we aimed to create a framework for a common understanding of social innovation, examining past trends, the latest evidence and emerging methodologies in order to identify priority areas through the project's future roadmap.

The consortium also supported the emergence of a social innovation research community as well as the advancement of social innovation in theory and practice, by bringing together researchers and practitioners in a series of workshops focusing on transformative research and emerging 'hot topics'. To make this work accessible to a wider audience, SIC created an online research forum, where

partners posted short blogs to communicate interesting new research on social innovation, as well as research outputs from SIC's activities.

SIC also aimed to help social innovation networks to strengthen their practice by promoting social innovation learning. After a review of **learning** needs across the different networks, SIC designed and delivered a series of participatory learning processes. We also developed and shared models, tools and other resources of best practice through our Learning Repository.

One of the key outputs of this work was the SIC Summer School, a two-day deep dive event where researchers, social innovators, citizens and policymakers from different networks could meet, co-produce and share knowledge by reflecting on current hot topics in the field. We ran five Summer Schools in different cities over the course of the project, allowing to test and refine the model and tools – with the intention that partners can continue to run Summer Schools after the project has finished. SIC also developed and trialled Learning Relays, an experimental process that combined a face-to-face thematic workshop with online learning activities where participants tapped into each other's knowledge and networks to crowdsource input for each other's challenges.

To support social innovation 'on the ground', SIC conducted **experiments** to test new models of collaboration to address locally defined issues and challenges. Five experiments were conducted in four cities in Italy, Norway, Estonia and Croatia, in close cooperation with a host centre. The goal of these experiments was to identify challenges and then to co-create solutions. In Turin, for example, stakeholders worked together with SIC and a local host centre to co-create solutions to local housing problems. One of the solutions resulted in a new housing policy in the City of Turin with a holistic and human centred approach to the solution given by the municipality and stakeholders.

Finally, SIC aimed to give social innovation networks a greater voice in **policy**. The project ran a series of ten masterclasses in cities across Europe to bring policymakers and social innovators together, helping to foster greater understanding of social innovation amongst government officials, and vice versa. In the second half of the project, attention was turned to the negotiations on the EU's next Multi-Annual Financial Framework and proposals for programming, aiming to ensure that social innovation continued to be supported effectively at the EU level. To do this, SIC co-created the 'Lisbon Declaration on Social Innovation' (see the article of Reynolds et al. in this chapter), with over 350 representatives of the community from 19 EU countries. The Declaration sets out ten policy proposals that this community would like the EU and member countries to implement. The recommendations aim to reflect the different needs and interests of SIC's networks – for example, 'social innovation fellowships' are proposed to support grassroots community-led innovation, an innovator-in-residence scheme to promote social innovation in the public sector, and an initiative to create social innovation intermediaries in all EU countries. Carlos Moedas, Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, publicly declared his support for the Declaration in November 2018.

## CAPACITY BUILDING FOR AND WITH SOCIAL INNOVATION NETWORKS

The SIC networks sat at the core of the SIC project. We recognised from the start that the project would stand or fall on our ability to engage with a wide range of actors in the SI movement. However, we did not have the resources to create new, formal membership networks – and as noted above, several of these already existed. Moreover, when we consulted people in the SI field on potential governance arrangements, early in the project's lifetime, they expressed a clear preference for fluid, flexible connections rather than a formalised, bureaucratic structure. SIC therefore conceived its approach to engaging networks as 'facilitation'. Within the consortium, facilitators were identified for each of the eleven networks. Their roles were to make links with actors and existing networks in these fields, and help them build better connections with each other, and with other networks

and SIC activities. SIC network facilitators ran workshops and online discussions, participated in others' events to promote the project to relevant actors, took part in online exchanges, and produced content (e.g. articles) to disseminate on platforms relevant to their networks.

In practice, finding an effective approach to network facilitation with the resources available to the project was challenging. It took some time to develop effective ways of working. Over the course of the project, the different network facilitators took on different approaches: some worked largely by connecting with established networks and introducing actors within those networks to SIC. Others focused on reaching out to actors who did not already self-identify with social innovation and creating new, informal communities of practice. Over the course of the project we found that engagement with the networks was easiest and most effective when we connected this work to our learning, research, experimentation and policy activities – giving networks a clear reason to engage. We also found that activities bringing people together across networks were most valuable, and something that was distinctive to SIC – for example, connecting well established digital social innovation networks to funders who are starting to engage in social innovation.

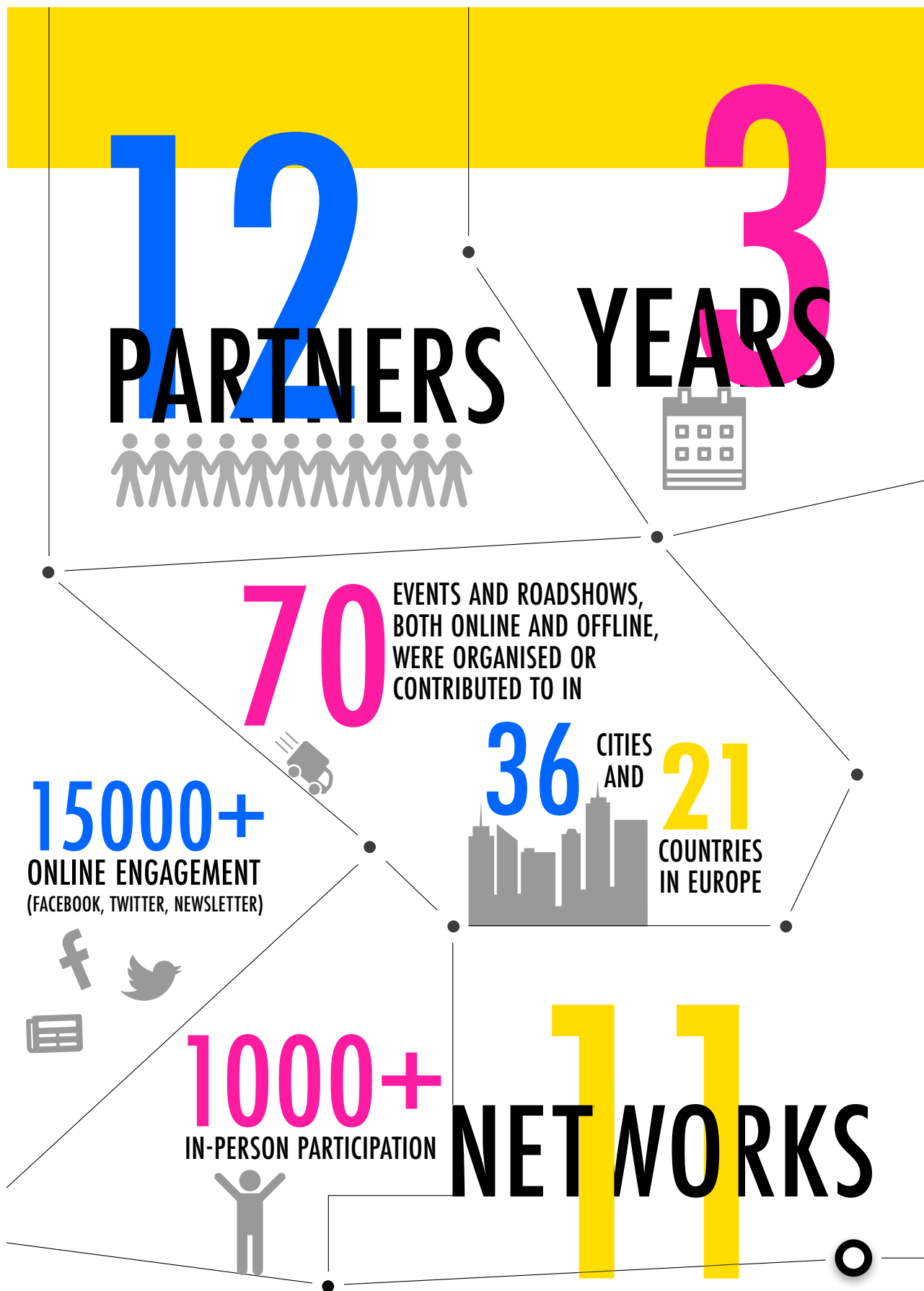
The diversity of SIC networks and the collaboration across them gave SIC the potential to address complex challenges – for example, within our experimentation work package, and our summer schools, we brought people together to carry out focused work on issues like migration, refugees and the future of work. SIC was able to work as a 'backbone organisation' of social innovation by bringing together these different networks.

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## SUSTAINING SIC

From the very start, a key objective of SIC was to create products and structures which would not disappear or simply be stored in an archive. Instead, we aimed to sustain the main outcomes far beyond the project's lifetime. Here are some examples of what will go on and what can be accessed and used:

The **SI Assembly** is a European-wide group established to provide a link between SI actors in Europe, and to help to ensure that SIC (including key outputs like the Social Innovation Declaration) continues to be visible regionally, sectorally and within key institutions which SIC might want



to influence. The task of the SI Assembly is to provide an overarching frame for the different groups and networks that have been supported by and through SIC and any emerging and new group in the field of social innovation. Its first online meeting was held in June 2019, providing a platform for around 20 organisations to share current work and build connections.

The **Lisbon Declaration on Social Innovation** is the most tangible output of SIC's policy work. The consortium sees it as one of the most likely areas that the project could make a lasting policy impact for the wider social innovation community. The SIC consortium has decided to form a self-sustaining **EU Social Innovation Policy Alliance (SIPA)**, to continue advocating the recommendations within the Declaration, and working to promote a 'social' model of innovation in Europe. SIPA intends to become a coalition of organisations working together to achieve these goals, with SIC partners Nesta, REVES and AEIDL, and additional partner Nesta Italia, leading this work in its start-up phase.

The **SIC Learning Repository**, provides access to blogs and resources related to the public sector and the use of social innovation to improve the welfare system. There is lots of content supporting the public sector to take advantage of social innovation in the everyday practices of service delivery. All tools produced and collected during the SIC project can be accessed that support the design and experimentation of social innovations by innovators, intermediaries and the public and private sectors. ([www.silearning.eu](http://www.silearning.eu))

Several SIC methodologies have been codified and made available for others to use. For example, anyone can use the workshop methodology of **Policy Masterclasses** (as long as the SIC brand is used and credit is given to the partners who created the concept). Guidelines of how to set up an effective Policy masterclass are documented and available on the Learning Repository. Meanwhile, **Summer Schools** will continue to be organized under the umbrella of the European School of Social Innovation (ESSI).

The SIC Research section has also migrated to the ESSI website in order to sustain the research elements of SIC. All key research outputs and other important research pieces are available on the ESSI website ([www.essi-net.eu](http://www.essi-net.eu)) for free, including the **Research Forum** content.

So while the SIC project has come to an end in 2019, its key outputs will not disappear but live on and make a contribution towards further connecting a still fragmented movement that is the Social Innovation Community.

**Acknowledgement:**

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