InCARE

Policy Brief No. 1

Promoting Social Innovation in long-term care: A common narrative for change across Europe[1]

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Long-term care (LTC) systems throughout Europe are facing the challenge of ensuring affordable and high-quality care to diverse ageing populations, while promptly addressing the shortcomings of long-term care provision blatantly revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic. As sustainability is of paramount concern, interest in socially innovative approaches that build on local community strengths has been steadily rising.

In support of policy-makers and organisational stakeholders that wish to engage directly in the implementation of social innovation initiatives in LTC, the InCARE project[2] team has derived the key lessons arising from a decade of European experiences – with a focus on doing rather than analysing social innovation.

The approach to social innovation in long-term care that underpins our recommendations and all InCARE project activities is presented in detail in InCARE Short Report No 1[1].

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When is Social Innovation successful?

Both the innovativeness (i.e. the character of being different from previous initiatives in the same area/same target group) and the success (i.e. effectiveness of addressing local needs) of social innovation initiatives is context dependent. What is new and enriching in one local context is often already standard practice in another. Despite this variability, a few common denominators for success are apparent:

- Placing emphasis on inclusive approaches, which promote a shift from consultation and engagement to empowerment of users and the public;
- Promoting collaborative processes, which allow for the redefinition of stakeholder roles, joint learning and broader sharing of decision-making power.
- Matching the initiative with the particularities of the local context, reflecting local demand and preferences, as well as of the strengths and resources of local communities;
- Making a lasting impact - through scale-up, through the transformation of standard process and practice or through inspiring reinvention of common approaches.

How can Social Innovation be supported?

Investment in social innovation to date has focused on supporting early stage experimental interventions, in the hope that developing and showcasing original ideas will organically lead to their adoption and diffusion. Little has been done to define and promote the system-level changes needed for the creation of enabling environments, in which social innovations can not only arise but persist and grow. In order to increase the survival chance of social innovations as well as their societal impact, a shift in approach is necessary.

Firstly, more emphasis should be placed on the characteristics of the implementers and the local implementation setting rather than on the characteristics of the social innovation initiative. Local innovators should shift focus away from 'best practice' initiatives and towards defining the 'best fit for purpose' initiative. Successful social innovation in long-term care is built through the process of identifying innovative ideas, adapting them to match the characteristics of local settings and creating a flexible policy framework (including regulatory, financial and operational aspects) that supports local implementation.

Moving away from a focus on 'best-practices' and closer to a focus on 'best-fit for purpose' solutions at local level

A best-practice is...	Local implementers should ask...
... addressing a specific social need/ challenge	Is the social need addressed by this initiative sufficiently similar with the most stringent needs of our local community? Do we have sufficiently close ties and exchanges with the community to determine those needs?
... building on previous experiences & available knowledge	What are the main strengths and resources of our local community? What skills and experience exist already and which should we try to enhance?
... proposing new approaches and ways of working	Would these approaches work well in our context? What changes to these approaches would make them more coherent with our local conditions?
... bringing together the right stakeholders	How can we encourage participation of the target group the initiative seeks to benefit? Who are our local allies? How can we bring other local groups on board? What changes could we make to ensure all our allies and collaborators are as engaged as possible? What support can we get from national/international stakeholders?
... capitalizing on opportune timing	What on-going policy or social processes can support the development of a local social innovation initiative? And how? What funding, joint learning & exchange opportunities are out there?
... tracking progress and community-level impact	What is important for our community and collaborators? How can we measure our contribution?

Secondly, scale-up and sustainability should be actively pursued as goals right from the earliest design and implementation phases of social innovation initiatives, as they are more likely achieved when a broader coalition of stakeholders, at different governance level, comes together. Local implementers can define creative and tailored solutions to local problems and are ideally positioned to implement them; while the support of regional and national partners will ensure higher resilience, better alignment with existing structures at higher governance levels, and access to broader knowledge and advocacy networks which can promote meaningful change in existing policy frameworks.

From a policy perspective, a focus on local strengths and priorities implies that a good policy framework is sufficiently flexible to facilitate and support innovation, implementation and adaptation on a local level. No blueprints or one-size-fits-all policy conditions exist and innovations need to be tailored to local contexts. Policy makers should therefore create a policy environment with enough plasticity that local actors have the space to choose and adapt the best-fitted solutions.

# Learning from experience: a common narrative for change

In the absence of one-size-fits-all best-practices, prospects for the transferability of a social innovations are limited. The experiences of the past decades have shown most social innovation initiatives are precarious and remain local, although they can be very valuable in their local context and generate tools and ideas with far reaching impact. What is repeatable and is, in fact, repeated in virtually every successful social innovation initiative in long-term care, is a structured and participatory development process. This can be narrowed down to four key principles which should guide the efforts of local stakeholders who are directly involved with the implementation of social innovation in long-term care:

- Start with the end in mind – Shape a common vision for progress by engaging care users, their families and communities, as well as care providers and policy-makers in defining what is desirable, relevant, timely and feasible;
- Invent the right solution – Identify promising, innovative ideas and adapt them to fit the skills of local implementers and the characteristics of the local context (best-fit for purpose);
- All aboard! – Create a broad network of collaborators by engaging meaningfully with all local stakeholders including end-users and ensuring they can participate as co-producers or active allies throughout the design and implementation process;
- Think big from the very beginning – Partner early on with stakeholders at higher governance levels who can support sustainability and scale-up.

European institutions and national governments can also play key roles in supporting the implementation, scale-up and sustainability of social innovations in long-term care. Their efforts should focus on:

- **Supporting knowledge sharing and mutual learning on social innovation** within and between countries/ This can be achieved by creating spaces for active exchange of ideas, experiences and concerns, either by supporting further developments of the activities of already established networks of local stakeholders (e.g. Eurocities, European Social Network) or by supporting the creation of new, dedicated virtual communities of practice;
- **Dedicating resources and attention to the creation of broad partnerships and ally networks** that actively focus their efforts not on implementation but on scale-up and long-term sustainability of social innovation initiatives. This can be achieved by matching investment in the design and development of social innovation with earmarked resources for the creation of partnerships between communities, local implementers and policy-makers at all governance levels.
- **Agreeing to ambitious targets and actively supporting the development of accessible, affordable and high-quality community-based long-term care services throughout Europe.** The efforts of EU Member States to address the current challenges in long-term care provision should be monitored through the adoption of ambitious targets for long-term care system development at EU level. Successful monitoring and system responsiveness will crucially hinge on establishing harmonized and systematic data collection efforts and strengthening data infrastructure in long-term care across Europe. Furthermore, in order to support all Members States to achieve such targets in a timely and efficient fashion, national and regional efforts towards long-term care service development should be actively supported through the European Semester and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
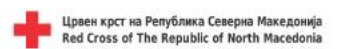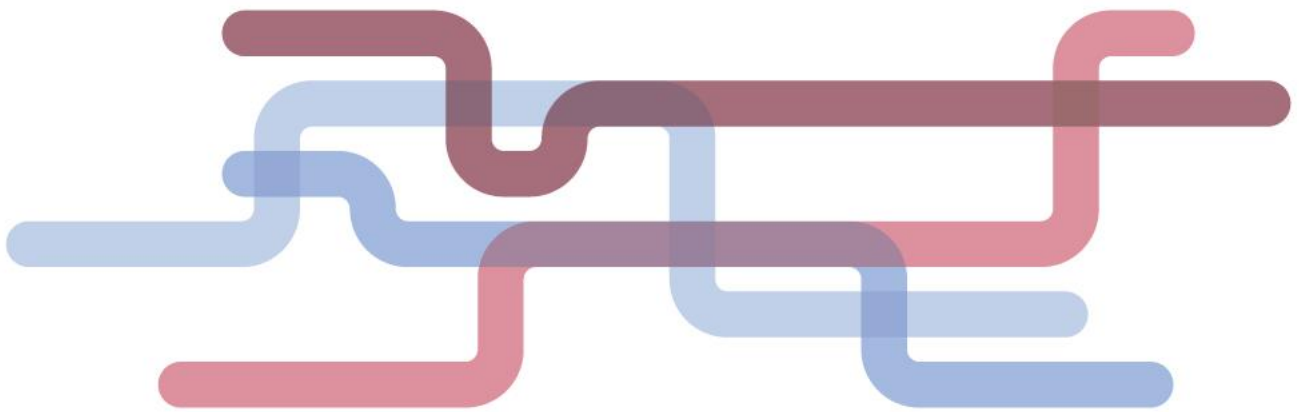
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InCARE (Supporting Inclusive development of community-based long-term CARE services through multi-stakeholder participatory approaches) aims contribute to the design of a coordinated approach to the development of national long-term care policy and care services at local and regional level, by establishing socially innovative and participatory decision-making processes. We work with care users, care providers and policymakers in Spain, Austria and North Macedonia to design, implement and scale-up innovative care services.

More information on the project's website: https://incare.euro.centre.org/

[1] This briefing note summarizes the results and recommendations presented in Ilinca S., Simmons C., Zonneveld N., Benning K., Comas-Herrera A., Champeix C., Nies H., Leichsenring K. - Social Innovation in long-term care in Europe: Towards a common narrative for change. InCARE Short report, April 2021, available here.

[2] More information on our work and further publications and open access materials are available at: https://incare.euro.centre.org/