

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation
ESF+ Community of Practice on Social Innovation
National Competence Centres Working Group

Work Programme 2025

January 2025



**Funded by
the European Union**

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Background

The Work Programme for the National Competence Centres in 2024 set out 4 steps (self-assessment, ecosystem mapping, co-creation and scaling) to support the development of the National Competence Centres (NCCs) for Social Innovation (SI) in all EU member states (MS). Complementary to this process, a self-assessment tool and exercise was conducted in all NCCs, and online training seminars were held on the transversal elements of the process, such as governance and financing. During 2024, NCCs decided to form 3 working groups according to their respective development stage, keeping open the possibility of participating in various groups at the same time. This work programme was designed to establish or reinforce the link with the ESF+ Community of Practice on Social Innovation (SI CoP) Work Programme (WP) for 2025.

Currently, there are 13 formally established NCCs (Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden). 11 EU Member States (MS) are in ongoing processes for their constitution (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia). Up to now there are a few countries that do not have NCC established yet or are at a very beginning of the process (e.g. Bulgaria).

The WP for 2025 continues to develop the above-mentioned core competences and it will focus on strengthening digital capabilities, knowledge sharing and new impact evaluation tools.

Key Lessons Learned from 2024

The key lessons learned during 2024 are the following:

1. The MS that have already launched the NCC adopt different organisational forms, in some cases opting for the constitution of a consortium of different social agents supported by governments (Germany, Poland, Sweden, Spain, etc.), while in others an organisation external to the government (Non-governmental organisation or social enterprise) is selected to act as a coordinator/facilitator of the existing ecosystem (France, Latvia, Romania, etc.).

The most important decision consists of choosing between a decentralised network model or a more traditional organisational structure. The first option allows to distribute tasks among network members in a more balanced and democratic way but increases complexity and slows down decision-making processes. Organisation-centred models are more operational but may not maintain a balanced power dynamics in the ecosystem.

2. The main activities NCCs are:

- Information dissemination on the potential of social innovation, both within governments and public institutions and for the society as a whole.
- Aligning with other COPs within the ESF+ and building linkages with other EU funded programmes addressing social challenges.
- Analysis and visualisation of the existing social innovation ecosystem. These activities started in 2023 in the most advanced cases, but some NCCs are just starting the mapping process.
- Development and application of new social finance instruments and scaling up support of existing initiatives within each national ecosystem. In many cases they are social entrepreneurship initiatives, so it is proposed to broaden the focus so that the NCC's field of action is not reduced to this activity.
- Convening and expanding learning opportunities for the ecosystem: conferences, seminars, webinars, challenges, etc.
- Digitalization of social innovation processes through the development of new tools, platforms and other solutions.
- Evaluation of the impact of social innovation initiatives with the aim of generating and transferring knowledge.
- Building alliances and partnerships with organisations in the public, commercial, civic and academic sectors to ensure the scaling up of solutions to complex social challenges.

In order for these activities to be focused on addressing complex social challenges, NCCs should develop new capacities in (1) ecosystem mapping, (2) co-creation, (3) prototyping (4) impact evaluation with a portfolio perspective and (5) adaptive capacities to scale of innovations within complex systems and to build partnerships with other organisations across these complex fields. These capabilities should be developed with both digital and traditional methods.

3. The combination of various sources of funding and avoiding the “hype” of specific tools is key for the development of NCCs. Most NCCs are funded through the European Social Fund and some receive or are exploring support from national funds (Austria, Ireland, Greece, Germany, Spain, etc.). There are also examples of NCCs combining European, national and philanthropic funds (Denmark, France) for some specific projects.

Work Programme Activities

NCCs have decided to work on the following themes in 2025

- 'Social Impact Assessment and Adaptive Learning of Social Innovation and the Specific Role of NCCs in These Processes'
- 'Informing and Connecting with the New EU Programming Period in Terms of the Potential of Social Innovation'
- 'Mapping Social Innovation with a Particular Focus on Rural and Coastal Communities'
- 'Engaging the ESF+ Managing Authorities, Other Government Departments, and Political Representatives in the Process'
- 'Exploring New Financial Models and Sustainability Strategies for NCCs'
- 'Understanding the Tools and Methodologies that NCCs Can Use in Developing Their Activities'
- 'Exploring Possibilities for Knowledge Exchange among Different Consortiums'

As established in 2024, 3 subgroups have been activated to bring together those NCCs that are in a similar stage of development and subsequently, interested in common topics. This way of working will allow in 2025 NCCs to participate in various subgroups if interested and they can also change the group anytime.

In a more strategic level, some NCCs are exploring how to design a comprehensive and integrated portfolio of social innovations for tackling complex social challenges instead of supporting interesting but often disconnected initiatives. This learning process is a priority for 2025.

The 2025 WP proposes the following topics and outputs. The aim is to respond to the themes identified as priorities in 2024 (key stakeholder engagement, finance and evaluation), to scale up successful practices and to incorporate a complex systems approach to NCCs activities. In this way NCCs can learn to address complex societal challenges in a collaborative way. In particular, it is proposed to emphasise digital tools and capacities that NCCs can develop. The complex problems identified cannot be tackled in an exclusively analogue way.

1. Development of a Digital Roadmap for NCCs

This WP proposes to focus the first face-to-face meeting in 2025 on opening a critical debate on the different existing digital tools to strengthen the work of NCCs. The aim is to avoid falling into the most popular trends, to learn to differentiate between their possibilities and limitations and, above all, to position NCCs as new collaborative infrastructures to address complex social challenges. Among the topics to be addressed during the visit, the use of SIM database, digital mapping, Deep listening and Digital governance (Portfolio management and evaluation) will be highlighted.

It is believed that NCCs should be included in the Social Innovation Match (SIM) database due to their unique potential to enhance the social innovation ecosystem, offering significant added value. However, the current functionality of SIM is not sufficient to integrate NCCs effectively. It is important to discuss and explore options for adapting SIM to accommodate NCCs, as well as exploring how NCCs can be aligned with SIM's existing framework. It is planned to open discussions on possible adaptations, engaging NCCs.

Output: A new digital roadmap for NCCs – the expectation is that during the event in March in Lithuania the strategy on digital roadmap will be developed and the roadmap itself will be implemented in 2025.

2. Portfolio Resource Mobilization

NCC WG will continue the debates and to deepen the funding strategies for NCCs from a portfolio perspective. Innovation portfolio management enables public sector organisations to systematize social innovation activities in order to tackle complex social challenges. It is a core component to build a rigorous approach to innovation management and a condition to better assess the social impact of their activities. The plan is to have more progress on the funding models of the centres, to be able to share them within the group. In particular, it is proposed to work with the European Commission (EC) to connect NCCs to existing funding streams. This will be a great opportunity for the EC to learn about the possibilities offered by NCCs to support their lines of work from a portfolio perspective and for NCCs to strengthen their funding strategies.

Output: Toolkit for Portfolio Resource Mobilization.

3. Social Impact Assessment

The NCC WG aims to deepen the tools to assess the social impact of NCCs and the Social Innovation ecosystem in each Member State. This topic has been identified as a top priority from NCCs to gather quantitative and qualitative evidence of the systemic impact of social innovation and facilitate new investments to tackle complex challenges. To this end, the different experiences of NCCs will be presented and new methods will be incorporated.

Output: Guidelines and Recommendations for NCCs Social Impact Assessment and Adaptive Learning.

4. Developing Knowledge Generating Strategy

It is planned to analyse the strategies for generating knowledge and to propose new possibilities. Specifically, NCC WG will discuss how to better engage with academia and new instruments such as the possibility of having Erasmus type of exchanges and internships for NCCs. The needs and a strategy for working plan 2026 will be discussed.

Output: New Knowledge Generation Strategy for 2026.

The 3 subgroups will contribute to this WP in the following way:

	Topic and activity	Output
Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Social Impact Assessment of social innovation and the specific role of NCCs in these processes.- Informing and connecting with the new EU programming period in terms of the potential of Social Innovation.- Mapping Social Innovation with a particular focus on rural and coastal communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- One pager with specific recommendations for NCCs Social Impact Assessment and Adaptive Learning.- A short position paper outlining potential synergies with other EC programmes focused on social innovation, particularly Horizon Europe.- One pager inviting NCCs across the EU to work on drawing out the key lessons on supporting NCCs in rural and coastal regions.
Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Engaging the ESF+ Managing Authorities, other government departments, and political representatives in the process.- Exploring new financial models for NCCs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- One pager with specific recommendations for how to engage ESF+ Managing Authorities, other government departments and political representatives in the process.- Concept page on 3 possible financial models for Portfolio Resource Mobilization.
Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Understanding the tools and methodologies that NCCs can use in developing their activities.- Exploring possibilities for knowledge exchange among different consortiums.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Concept page on the core tools and methodologies that NCCs can use.- One pager with specific suggestions for knowledge exchange.

Events Calendar

Name of Activity	Format	Date	Topics/Options
Study visit	Onsite Vilnius, Lithuania	March 4-6	Digital Tools and Strategies for NCCs
Mutual learning workshop	Online	May 28	SI Portfolio Resource Mobilization
Study visit	Onsite Malmö, Sweden	Sept. 9-11	Guidelines for Social Impact Assessment & Adaptive Learning (TBC)
Mutual learning workshop	Online	Nov. 25	New Knowledge Generation Strategies

All events will be followed by a summary report.

