

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation
ESF+ Community of Practice on Social Innovation

Work Programme 2026

January 2026



**Funded by
the European Union**

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Background

The ESF+ Community of Practice on Social Innovation (CoP SI) is a platform that enhances the capacity of Member States to design, manage and implement ESF+ programmes, in particular the Social Innovation priorities under Article 14 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1057. It brings together Managing Authorities (MAs), National Competence Centres (NCCs), Social Innovation Match (SIM) validators, EaSI National Contact Points (NCPs) and other key actors of the European social innovation ecosystem.

At the end of 2025, the CoP SI had 330 members: 71 MAs (national/regional), 41 NCCs, 24 intermediate bodies, 40 European Commission staff (including geographical desk officers), 33 implementing organisations, 17 line ministries, 25 NGOs and 86 other ESF stakeholders. The CoP combines online and on-site activities to share knowledge, tools and practices on scaling and transfer, call design, implementation, project selection, monitoring and impact measurement.

The National Competence Centres Working Group (NCC WG), established in 2023 as a sub-structure of the CoP SI, plays a key role in strengthening the social innovation ecosystem by building NCC capacity and aligning approaches across Member States.

The CoP's work recognises that complex social challenges such as inequality, unemployment and demographic shifts require collaborative, cross-sectoral, multi-level governance and innovative solutions. This aligns with EU commitments to territorial cohesion, social inclusion and participatory governance, as reflected in the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Social Economy Action Plan.

From 2023–2025, the CoP SI structured its activities around four axes:

1. Building capacity for social innovation
2. Managing and implementing social innovation priorities
3. Scaling up successful social innovations
4. Assessing social and economic impact

This phased approach assumed that Member States must first establish foundational understanding and implementation capacity before moving towards systemic scaling and rigorous impact assessment.

By 2026, after three years of intensive collaboration and peer exchange, the CoP SI has reached a point where it can shift from primarily capacity-building to a more strategic, results-oriented agenda focused on scaling, impact assessment and advocacy.

In 2026, the CoP SI will maintain its focus on the collaboration of ESF+ Bodies (ESF+ MAs and IBs) among themselves and with the other main categories of CoP SI members (NCCs, Social Innovation Match (SIM) validators and EaSI National Contact Points (NCPs)), working in close partnership with the NCC WG.

Key Lessons Learned from 2025

A survey was launched on 7 November 2025 to gather feedback on activities implemented in 2025, as well as needs and suggestions from the CoP SI members for the 2026 Work Programme (WP) (see Annex 2). These needs were also identified and discussed during the Social Innovation Forum 2025 / CoP workshop. In addition, CoP members were invited to propose further topics and suggestions. The input received has been and will continue to be considered, and the Work Programme may be adapted during the year, if necessary. Taken together, these evaluation findings and member feedback highlight several important lessons:

Peer learning: Knowledge sharing through peer-to-peer presentations, testimonials and project examples has enabled a nuanced understanding of how ESF+ supports social innovation across different national and institutional contexts. This is perceived as the main added value of the CoP SI.

Engagement: The CoP SI has maintained consistent attendance, with a stable core of active members. NCCs are the most consistently engaged category, in line with their mandate and developmental stage. A smaller core group of MAs is highly active and uses social innovation strategically, while other MAs participate less and may treat the social innovation requirement more as compliance.

On-site events: Participants rate on-site study visits as major sources of inspiration and learning. Study visits are viewed as catalysts for practical understanding, networking and learning that cannot be fully replicated online. In 2026, the CoP SI will prioritise on-site events as forums for deep engagement with core capacity development and real-world implementation challenges.

Online events: Feedback indicates that online events sometimes leave insufficient time for dialogue, questions, and small-group discussion. Members value interactive spaces for exploring implementation challenges and contextual differences. In 2026 the CoP SI will introduce Action Learning Sets (ALS) — a peer problem-solving format — to create structured dialogue on shared challenges.

Content: Participants request a better balance between conceptual frameworks (systems thinking, theory of change, democratic resilience, 'social time bombs') and concrete cases and tools. They also seek more global perspectives, academic input and voices from practitioners and social innovators beyond the usual institutional actors.

Visibility: Based on feedback from CoP SI members and lessons learned to date, experiences from countries or regions facing greater implementation challenges, as well as from certain policy domains (e.g. healthcare and social services, social integration of people at risk of poverty, entrepreneurship support), are not yet sufficiently visible in CoP SI discussions. The CoP SI, with the support of NCC WG, will work to amplify voices from diverse national and sectoral contexts, particularly through the SIM database cases.

Overall, members want the CoP SI to continue as a space for practical peer learning, while strengthening its role in impact measurement, systems thinking and strategic positioning of social innovation in a changing funding and policy environment.

Main Priorities For 2026 and Work Programme Activities

In 2026, the CoP SI will consolidate its role as a central knowledge and coordination hub for ESF+ social innovation, with a programme built around four interconnected priorities that align closely with and support the strategic objectives of the NCC WG: (1) advocacy of social innovation: creating a common voice; (2) evaluation and assessment of social and economic impact; (3) facilitating upscaling of proven social innovations through portfolio development; (4) innovative finance, social economy and cross-funding for social innovations. In working towards these priorities, the CoP SI will align its activities and deliverables with those of the NCC WG.

The 2026 WP balances immediate programming needs (strengthening implementation and demonstrating impact) with strategic forward-looking dimensions (post-2027 policy design and institutional sustainability). By prioritising in-person learning, strengthening advocacy capacities, addressing financial sustainability challenges and developing shared measurement frameworks, the activities within the CoP SI in 2026 can significantly enhance the field's capacity to generate impact and position social innovation more firmly within the post-2027 policy and funding context.

In 2026, the CoP's strategic role is to:

- build compelling evidence of the contribution of social innovation to European policy objectives
- strengthen implementation capacity across diverse Member State contexts through peer learning and shared methodologies
- facilitate scaling pathways connecting local innovations to regional and national policy frameworks
- develop unified advocacy narratives that communicate the value of social innovation to policymakers, funders and the public
- contribute to post-2027 policy design by documenting lessons learned and proposing evidence-informed recommendations

In 2026, the CoP SI will also collaborate with the other ESF+ CoPs (most notably, Community of Practice on Social Inclusion (CoP SIncl) and Community of Practice on Material Support (CoP MS)) to ensure that social innovation is embedded in related policy areas.

Priority 1: Advocacy of social innovation: creating a common voice

Rationale: Social innovation remains relatively invisible compared to technological innovation in EU and national debates. With the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) expected to reduce social funding and remove earmarking for social innovation, there is a risk that resources will shift to other priorities unless social innovation demonstrates and communicates its value more clearly.

This priority focuses on developing unified, evidence-based narratives that raise political and public awareness and create a common voice among stakeholders capable of scaling up or funding social innovations. By strengthening systems-change thinking within the CoP SI, it helps build a solid intellectual foundation for EU-level advocacy and supports more integrated, resilience-centred social innovation policies.

As advocacy is a core element of social innovation, translating evidence and practice into policy influence, institutional support and sustainable funding at local, national and European levels, CoPSI aims to bring together ESF+ SI stakeholders to explore how advocacy can strengthen the visibility, impact and strategic positioning of social innovation across governance levels, while showcasing the value and results of social innovations already implemented.

Objectives: Build capacity and develop shared, evidence-informed narratives on the value and potential of social innovation; strengthen members' capacity to advocate for social innovation in their national and regional contexts and at EU level; support the development and strengthening of cross-sector advocacy alliances.

Activities: A mutual learning online workshop organised with the NCC WG (February 2026).

Deliverables: An overview of advocacy strategies used at Member State and EU level, drawing on concrete examples of social innovations promoted at various levels, lessons learned from different advocacy experiences and shared insights into how social impact evidence can be used for effective advocacy, and the identification of common challenges, gaps and success factors.

Priority 2: Evaluation and assessment of social and economic impact

Rationale: The CoP is moving beyond project-level thinking towards systems change, but a notable gap remains in unified impact measurement frameworks. Members identify a strong need for a unified methodological approach or framework for impact measurement. Current challenges include inconsistent monitoring practices, late evaluation results, output-oriented indicators and uneven evaluation capacity. Impact evidence, however, is crucial for securing future support for social innovation. The 2026 Work Programme will support the development of harmonised frameworks across countries, promote shared standards and methodologies and integrate continuous evaluation into implementation. The focus will be on identifying challenges, concepts and emerging practices, while also translating reflection into concrete learning by bringing together MAs, NCCs, project promoters, evaluators and beneficiaries around real-life cases.

Objectives: Exchange approaches, methodologies and challenges in assessing outcomes and impact; strengthen capacity for results-based management and evaluation across ESF+ bodies and NCCs; identify common barriers and solutions for timely, high-quality evaluations that can support long-term funding cases; progress towards more harmonised yet flexible, conceptual and measurement frameworks for social innovation.

Activities: A joint study visit in Brussels (with the CoP SIincl) focused on impact assessment (March 2026); one joint study visit with the CoP MS (theme to be co-created) (November 2026); one online Action Learning Set (ALS)* on impact assessment.

Deliverables: Recommendation paper on methodologies, harmonised indicators and measurement guidance. It will include a proposal for shared standards for defining, measuring and reporting social innovation outcomes, as well as recommendations for post-2027 monitoring and evaluation frameworks relevant to social innovation.

Priority 3: Facilitating and accelerating the upscaling of proven social innovations

Rationale: Social innovations that succeed at the pilot stage need structured pathways to achieve a wider impact, yet scaling remains hindered by limited dialogue with policymakers, fragmented collaboration networks and insufficient evidence tailored to policy needs. Accelerating the transition from isolated pilots to systematic policy integration requires moving from stand-alone projects to portfolio-based approaches that embed learning, risk management and evidence generation. Stronger alignment between MAs, line ministries and delivery organisations is essential to ensure that proven models can be adopted and replicated across territories. By creating coherent scaling pathways, the ESF+ ecosystem can convert successful pilots into durable system-level change. This includes increasing dialogue with policymakers, strengthening regional and national collaboration, supporting the transition 'From Pilot to Policy' and documenting and sharing scaling pathways using the 350+ cases on the SIM platform.

Objectives: Support the creation of national and regional ecosystems for social innovation that can coordinate scaling; develop a common language and frameworks that enable communication across governance levels and sectors; document and share scaling pathways from local to regional and national levels, including through the SIM platform (350+ cases).

Activities: An on-site study visit in Poland (June 2026), including one ALS. This event will showcase how national and regional collaborations support scaling.

Deliverables: A CoP SI report based on the experience of Polish hosts and the insights and experiences shared by CoP SI members during the study visit, identifying and showcasing how national and regional collaborations support scaling.

Priority 4: Innovative finance, social economy and cross-funding for social innovations

Rationale: The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan identifies the social economy as a key actor in delivering social rights, while the EU Social Economy Action Plan (2021) positions it as a driver of social innovation, just transition and inclusive growth. Social economy entities form the institutional backbone of social innovation in Europe. They provide governance structures, democratic ownership and long-term stability that extend well beyond project-based ESF+ funding cycles. The social economy is therefore not merely a delivery channel for social innovations; it is their durable institutional foundation. Whereas many innovation projects remain dependent on time-limited grants, social economy entities possess legal personality, governance systems and asset bases that allow successful innovations to be embedded, adapted and scaled over time. Innovative financing approaches must focus on strengthening the institutional and financial capacity of social economy actors rather than only funding isolated projects. This includes designing mechanisms that combine public, private and philanthropic capital and clarifying how ESF+ can work in complementarity with other EU instruments and social-finance tools to support long-term scaling and system change.

Objectives: Promote cross-sector alliances (public authorities, social economy actors, private and philanthropic investors) that can support the scaling and sustainable financing of social innovations; strengthen CoP members' connections to impact-investment and social-finance ecosystems, enabling social economy entities to access appropriate forms of capital for different stages of innovation and growth; support different social innovation ecosystem stakeholders in developing their capacity to act as connectors of diverse funding sources and advisors on innovative finance.

Activities: An online mutual learning workshop (September/October 2026) on innovative finance and cross-funding for social innovation, bringing together MAs, social economy organisations and finance actors to share experiences, models and practical challenges.

Deliverables: An overview document, based on the activities implemented by the CoP SI and previous reports, summarising existing possibilities for supporting social innovation in a more integrated way. It will highlight practical pathways to combine public (ESF+ and other EU funds), social and private capital, with a particular focus on strengthening the financial resilience and scaling capacity of social economy entities.

*In 2026, the CoP SI will introduce **the Action Learning Sets (ALS)** as peer support and learning format designed exclusively for ESF+ MAs and IBs, other implementing bodies and line ministries. Each ALS is structured around priority topics and offers MAs the opportunity to present a specific challenge, while peers from other Member States listen, ask clarifying questions and propose practical ideas and solutions. A facilitated group discussion identifies common patterns, contextual differences and transferable approaches.

Event Calendar

Date	Name of activity	Format	Topics/Options
17 February	Joint mutual-learning workshop 'Advocating for Social Innovation in ESF+: Strategies for Raising Awareness and Informing Policy'	Online	Priority 1: Advocacy of social innovation: creating a common voice - With the NCC WG
5–6 March	Joint study visit 'Using Impact Measurement to Scale What Works in Social Innovation and Social Inclusion: Impact Measurement as a Lever to Enhance Effectiveness, Support Scaling-up and Inform ESF Operations'	On-site Belgium	Priority 2: Evaluation and assessment of social and economic impact - With the CoP SIIncl
16–17 June	Study visit	On-site Poland	Priority 3: Facilitating and accelerating the upscaling of proven social innovations - Theme to be co-created with the host MS - Includes a session on ALS
September/ October (TBC)	Mutual-learning workshop	Online	Priority 4: Innovative finance, social economy and cross-funding for social innovations
October	SIF 2026	On-site	TBC
November	Joint study visit	On-site (TBC)	- Theme to be co-created with the CoP MS, based on the Work Programme Priority 2
December	Mutual-learning workshop	Online	2026 final event Lessons learned, key findings, recommendations and generated evidence; synthesis of CoP SI and NCC WG learnings and impacts

Note: A summary report is drawn up following each event. For more detailed information, please refer to the [CoP SI Teams](#) files section and [SI+website](#).

Annex 1

Achievements and Outputs of the Community of Practice on Social Innovation in 2025

Type of event / output	Date	Topic
Online workshop: 'Integrated Approach and Multi-Fund Approach for Social Innovation'	4 February 2025	By showcasing various ways to combine EU funds and programmes with ESF, the event aimed to broaden perspectives within the CoP SI. Rather than focusing on a single in-depth case, it highlighted cross-sector collaboration and moved beyond well-known ESF approaches. The variety of examples, presenting different ways of combining EU funds and programmes with ESF to support social innovation, was intended to open CoP SI participants' minds and adapt to various situations across the EU.
'Supporting Social Innovation: A Journey Through Two ESF Programming Periods. The Experience of the Czech Republic' Study visit in Prague, Czech Republic	13-14 April 2025	The study visit focused on Czechia's ESF+ MA, a Member State with long experience in supporting social innovation, showing its evolution, challenges and improvements. The event was practice-oriented, with project testimonials and study visits. Key lessons included adaptive management, integrated governance, user-centred design, flexible funding and scaling proven solutions. Insights will help shape ESF+ support for social innovation beyond 2027.
Joint online workshop: 'Collaboration and Funding Strategies for the National Competence Centres'	27 June 2025	The event aimed to explore funding roadmaps for NCCs and different forms of collaboration with ESF+ MAs to support social innovation. It was organised in collaboration with the NCC WG.
Online workshop: 'Scaling and Transfer: Leveraging Social Innovations for Broader Policy Impact'	17 September 2025	The event explored the enabling factors that help successful social innovations achieve policy-level impact. ESF+ bodies from different Member States shared examples of innovations integrated into policies. The discussion also covered the use of the SIM and the portfolio approach to strengthen social impact.
Social Innovation Forum 2025, Brussels, Belgium	1-2 October 2025	'Social Innovation for System-Level Change' workshop explored systemic approaches to complex social challenges and strategies for embedding innovation into public policy. It discussed the need to continue raising awareness vis-à-vis policymakers to ensure the sustainability of funding beyond ESF+ and potential scale-up and/or mainstreaming, as well as how to gather evidence to support dialogue with policymakers.

Joint online workshop: 'Sharing Visions, Challenges and Practices in Impact Measurement'	18 November 2025	The aim of the online event was to mutualise the knowledge of two CoPs (SI and SIncl) by focusing on methods and tools for assessing social innovation results and impact in their specific policy fields and sectors.
Online workshop: 'Taking Stock of the 2023-2025 Activities, Preparing the 2026 Work Programme and Supporting Social Innovation post-2027'	9 December 2025	The aim of the online event was to take stock of learning and activities from 2023–2025, as well as broader insights gained over the past three years.

Annex 2

Results From the Questionnaire for the ESF+ Community of Practice on Social Innovation in Preparation of the Community of Practice on Social Innovation Work Programme 2026

The survey gathered input from 53 respondents from 20 different Member States, with relatively equal representation across countries: on average, one to four professionals provided input per Member State. Only Greece had a higher representation, with 11 respondents.

For more than 50% of respondents, the main focus of their social innovation activities relates to active inclusion and employability, and the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Activities in the field of access to employment, activation measures for all and the integration of marginalised communities were also mentioned. Around 30% of respondents operate on a broader level, in all areas of society.

The survey explored eight thematic areas for 2026 to map interest within the CoP SI. Four of these areas were chosen by 60% or more of respondents, and four areas by approximately 35%. Based on these preferences, the following areas are favoured:

- Advocacy of social innovation: how to create a common national and European voice to raise awareness.
- Connecting social experimentations within different European programmes to reach higher impact of social innovations.
- Exploring how social innovation could support policy frameworks, such as: European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan, Skills Agenda, ESF+ Regulation and Common Provisions Regulation, Child Guarantee, Care Strategy and the upcoming Anti-Poverty strategy (2026).
- Innovative finance and cross-funding for social innovations: exploring ways to build bridges with the private sector to ensure more funding for the sustainability of social innovations.

In general, respondents expressed interest in more knowledge exchange on case studies that can be transferred to other Member States. The OECD *start / scale / sustain* model is viewed as a valuable methodology to apply for this purpose. Respondents also seek specific networking opportunities where they can connect with like-minded actors, such as social innovators working on similar challenges or MAs sharing their implemented actions. There is a need for more in-depth knowledge exchange to build a common understanding on topics such as impact assessment and its recommendations for successful project design and implementation. Respondents also expressed interest in understanding the link between social innovation and building resilient societies in Europe. Some members call for the development of common KPIs, and others mentioned learning about rural aspects of social innovation, international trends and regulatory sandboxes. Some respondents are keen to learn more about the post-2027 period, preparations for the next MFF and plans for future strategies and support measures for social innovation.

A majority of respondents are eager to see collaboration between the CoP SI with other CoPs, especially the CoP SIncl. There is interest in exploring case studies across different CoPs that can be transferred across Member States. Examples mentioned include reskilling and upskilling, combatting social isolation among elderly people in rural areas and involving different target groups such as NEETs in policy design and implementation. Some members proposed developing common policy recommendations and other supporting documents for CoP members.

The exchange of experiences and good practices is a guiding principle for all respondents. On-site events and networking opportunities are by far the most preferred ways to do this. Online events, smaller working groups and documentation play a role for around half of respondents.

Reflecting on the added value and quality of activities in 2025, respondents are highly positive: they broaden and deepen knowledge. In particular, on-site events are considered to be of the highest value. A suggested area for improvement is to make events shorter and allow more time for interaction.

