

Social Innovation in Slovakia

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As social innovations have grown in Europe, this concept has gradually become established in Slovakia as well. At the European level, social innovations have become part of strategic documents, programmes and research projects, and increasingly received greater attention from the governmental, private and non-governmental sectors in Slovakia.

During the last decade, social innovations in Slovakia have primarily belonged to the third sector. Lately, non-profit organizations, civic associations, foundations and think-tanks have been the predominant promoters of social innovations. The private sector put its shoulder to the wheel mostly through its own foundations, grants and project fostering.

The public sector has the greatest opportunities to foster social innovation expansion, in particular through the instruments implemented in the social policy framework. Slowly but surely, the public sector has started grasping the social innovation concept. Based on defining documents at the European level, four operational programs contain references to social innovation as a useful tool for addressing current challenges and problems. Projects carried-out within the operational programmes *Research and Innovation*, *Human Resources*, *Effective public sector* and *Regional Operational Programme* should incorporate elements of social innovation in their implementation. Even academia is paying more attention to social innovation as various departments have addressed theoretical and practical aspects of social innovation in several research projects. However, it is also worth mentioning the initiative of individuals or groups of students who bring innovative projects of their own volition, or at the various grants and competitions. A large proportion of new ideas come from the start-up matrix as well. Social innovation projects have been fostered through various hubs, incubator/accelerator programmes or Impact Academy – providing training for social entrepreneurs.

Financing social innovation is primarily being conducted through the 2 % tax assignment. Additional resources comprise grants, crowdfunding and private investors. It is expected that majority of social innovation in the coming years will be supported through European Structural and Investments Funds, and Slovak Investment Holding.

Thematically, the prevailing social innovation projects mainly focus on local development, education, social inclusion and active citizenship. Of the long list of inspiring ideas, examples to be mentioned include *Batsuit* and *Remote Assistant* - technological solution for the blind. The *BUDDY* project prepares children in children's home for independence through experiential learning. Last but not least, inspirational projects helping homeless people enable them to work as waiters or porters.

Ranking among pioneer events helping to promote social innovation are the *Social Innovation Workshop* organized by the consulting company Centire, *Social Innovators Map* developed by the Pontis Foundation and *Social Impacts Awards*.

Social Innovation constitutes an essential instrument for problem and challenge solving in Slovakia. The most critical problems include long-term unemployment and youth unemployment. Another long-standing problem remains the Roma issue – proceeding from poor integration into society, unemployment and poor living conditions. Slovakia has not been spared from the growing support for extremist parties, who are supported mainly in the less-developed Slovak regions. To reverse this trend, the focus has to be directed at more effective social, economic and educational policies.