



Transnational comparisons: social impact assessment ecosystems and practices

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Transnational commonalities



The four national mappings of social impact assessment practices and ecosystems find many observations common to France, Spain, Portugal and Sweden. At the same time, country-specific differences reflect not only institutional or structural realities, but also different degrees of governance arrangements and levels of formalisation of social impact assessment practices and experiences.

Terminology

Across all four countries, there is a shared general definition of the term “impact”, used to describe changes and effects generated by the actions of an intervention

- Both terms “impact evaluation” and “impact measurement” are used in across countries, mostly interchangeably;
- However, several national reports observe that, within each country, definitions of what constitutes impact assessment are multiple and divergent, sometimes vague. Definitions are multiple and divergent, therefore showing a lack of common language
- Similarly, national reports point to varying degrees of clarity and operationalisation of the concept of “social innovation”. In some contexts, this may create challenges in consistently distinguishing social innovation projects from other types of interventions, particularly in the absence of explicit operational definitions.

Historical background

A general historic trend, regarding the arrival and evolution of impact assessment for social innovation, is evident transnationally. Namely:

- The establishment of New Public Management in Europe in the 1990s resulting from a cultural shift towards performance management in the public sector. This combined with an increasing pressure to improve public accountability and efficiency in public expenditures helped accelerate the development of evaluation, in particular public policy evaluations.
- The growing demand for evidence-based policy and practice, or the use of data and evidence in public decision-making for social services contributed to developing the practice of evaluation beyond public policy and into social innovation projects. As such, many public funding calls in each of the four countries studied include criteria relating to social impact, albeit with different levels of formalisation and enforceability.
- While impact assessment originated in the realm of philanthropy, it has steadily evolved as a practice among public actors and the non-profit sector over the past few decades.
- More recently, due to global green transition initiatives and increased scrutiny on corporations, European norms like CSRD and SFDR, in addition to international frameworks like the UN’s SDGs, the classic economy sector is increasingly appropriating the term “impact” and practicing extra-financial accounting.
- Similarly, impact assessment having reached a higher level of maturity in recent years, new discourses and actions dedicated to impact management are emerging. Going beyond the



measurement of impact, practices are evolving to better integrate impact results in strategic decision-making.

- Overall, impact assessment practices and knowledge have been largely carried by and developed by the non-profit sector, social enterprises, foundations and, more recently impact investors.
- As a general observation, impact assessment has become progressively institutionalized across the four countries studied, although the pace, depth and modalities of this institutionalisation vary significantly depending on national policy choices and governance frameworks.

Practices and stakeholders

Though difficult to generalize, the practice of social impact assessment by social innovation projects in all four countries is characterised by some shared patterns, regarding the tools and methodology used as well as the types of actors involved. The general approach to impact assessment by social innovation projects can be broadly described as “good enough now, robust later”, reflecting constraints of scale, resources and project maturity rather than a normative methodological choice.

- In all four countries there is no collectively agreed-upon “best” method or singularly used method, with a plurality of approaches coexisting depending on project purpose, scale and available resources.
- Practices remain fragmented with an unequal use of assessment tools, largely due to unequal access to the necessary resources and the technicality of certain methods, as well as differing levels of institutional guidance and support within national ecosystems.
- Debates continue in each country as to whether there is indeed an ideal method for impact assessment. Often this debate centres around the level of scientific robustness necessary for impact assessment, and the balance between methodological rigor, feasibility and learning objectives.
- Academic and institutional discourse often promotes the use of counterfactual methods; however, such methods are frequently difficult to implement for social innovation projects given their scale, resources and ethical or practical constraints. These methods may also not be the best adapted to the primary learning and decision-making goals pursued at a project level.
- Most social innovation projects transnationally practice impact assessment using a theory-based and logic-model approach and mixed methods with relatively simple and accessible tools (namely theory of change, questionnaires/surveys and interviews). This “realistic evaluation” approach is understood to be better adapted for innovation projects in many cases, as they better explain why change has happened, for whom and under what circumstances.
- More technical and robust methods (such as monetarization and counterfactual methods) are typically chosen by project owners selectively, often due to their perceived credibility by external partners and thus as a means of securing further funding, or in contexts involving higher stakes, scaling ambitions or outcome-based funding mechanisms.
- These assessments are typically ex-post, this is mostly due to the time constraints as well as funding structures of social innovation projects. Despite an interest in integrating evaluation early into project lifecycles, the use of ex-ante assessments is also more difficult for experimental projects and projects tackling more complex and multifactorial social issues.
- Further, most impact assessments are project-based approaches at a micro level (evaluating a single or limited set of actions of a project). All four countries observe the need for more meso and macro level evaluations, or a better understanding of systemic change generated by social innovations, particularly in relation to scaling and policy learning.



- In all four countries, financial constraints are frequently identified as a major obstacle to the practice of impact assessment. In many cases, social impact assessments are externalized to consultants and researchers providing assessment services for a fee. Financing impact assessment remains thus a considerable difficulty for social innovation and non-profit projects primarily in contexts where evaluation is not structurally embedded in funding design, especially for small and early-stage initiatives.
- Similarly, the choice of impact assessment methodology by project owners is largely based on available financial and human resources (limited time and technical expertise of internal teams), and in some cases on the requirements of funding instruments or public policy frameworks.
- Many social innovation projects in early stages (before scaling) are focused on survival and stability, rather than robust impact measurements and long-term monitoring. Evaluation needs and ambitions often evolve as projects mature or scale.
- All four countries observe geographical disparities in the practice of impact assessments, the availability of specialized consultants and researchers being more largely concentrated in major cities, which can further limit access to evaluation expertise in rural areas.
- Impact assessments are more highly concentrated among projects working on the themes of social inclusion, employment and health, reflecting both funding priorities and the historical development of social innovation ecosystems.
- While impact assessments by social innovation projects have historically focused more on social impact indicators, there is increased interest transnationally in environmental sustainability indicators, partly driven by European regulatory frameworks and broader sustainability agendas.
- There is no full degree in impact assessment in any of the four countries studied, training opportunities are instead provided through professional, technical and specialised university courses.

Funding

Generally speaking, across all four countries the main funders of social impact assessments are public actors, national and regional public administrations. These are largely indirect funding streams for impact assessments, that is that the budget for social impact assessment is included in an overall budget for a project or organization, rather than a specific funding stream to specifically and exclusively finance assessments. There are some important differences across countries in the extent to which impact assessment is structurally embedded and financed by design within public funding instruments.

- Specific public funding streams for social impact assessments are rare or inexistent in each of the four countries. When present, these are small contracts or tenders and thus fund small-scale ad hoc assessments. The notable exception being in Portugal, where impact assessment costs are explicitly eligible and financed as an integral component of public funding schemes supporting social innovation projects.
- The exception is the evaluation of European-funded programs, such as the ESF+ and JTF national program evaluations steered by the national managing authorities (carried out by third-party consultants and researchers via public contracts).
- More generally, calls for projects and tenders for social innovation projects may include some social impact criteria, but are more often limited to economic impact criteria, or to outputs and activity-based reporting.
- In all countries, there are some more recent, and for the moment less developed, funding streams for impact assessments coming from corporate foundations and banks or impact investors (as increasingly present in the larger social innovation ecosystem).



- Social impact bonds exist (or have existed) in all four countries, and include an aspect of impact assessment and data auditing, with varying relationship between results and payment.
- These bonds have, to some degree, contributed to the increasing cultural representation of impact assessment as a prerequisite for obtaining funding for social innovation projects, in other words that “money follows evidence of outcomes”, particularly in contexts where outcome-based funding mechanisms have been deliberately promoted by public policy.

Areas for further exploration

The national mappings of social impact assessment practices and ecosystems in France, Spain, Portugal and Sweden highlight several key shared issues. These issues have been identified as priorities for future areas of work and strategic objectives for the European community of practice on social innovation, building on different levels of maturity and institutionalisation across countries:

- National reports highlight the importance of conceptual clarity, **shared and operational definitions of social innovation**, clear problem framing and explicit theories of change as prerequisites for credible, comparable and non-subjective impact assessment.
- Consolidating and further promoting **earlier and more systematic integration of impact assessment into the lifecycle of social innovation projects**, building on existing practices in some national contexts, including ex-ante evaluability, theories of change, iterative learning and adaptive management, would strengthen both project-level performance and the usefulness of evidence for scaling and policy uptake.
- **Developing shared principles and guidance on proportional and fit-for-purpose impact assessment** is identified as a strategic priority for some countries. Rather than leaving methodological choices solely to project-level constraints, there is a need to clarify when different levels of rigor, including more robust or counterfactual designs, are appropriate in relation to project scale, maturity, risk and policy relevance.
- Need to support the development of **inter-actor and inter-institutional cooperations** both in supporting and executing impact assessments of social innovations. It is particularly important to strengthen cooperation mechanisms and partnerships with public administrations, not only as funders but also as users of impact evidence for policy design and implementation.
- Across all types of financial actors, both public and private, it is essential to **develop more funding streams for social impact assessment practices**. While funding remains a significant challenge in many contexts, financing impact assessment should increasingly be addressed through structural integration within funding instruments, rather than relying on ad hoc or external resources. This remains a key condition for improving access to and quality of impact assessment practices for social innovators.
- Similarly, a major impetus behind the development of social impact assessment globally has been a paradigm shift towards evidence-based policy. However, studies and observations from the social innovation ecosystem note that this remains unevenly developed in practice across countries and policy domains. In order for public decision-making to better reflect the realities of social needs and the solutions being developed, it is important for social impact assessment results and public policy evaluations to **better inform public policy design and decision-making**.
- **Moving beyond predominantly project-level (micro) assessments towards meso- and macro-level perspectives** represents an important area for future work. National reports point to the need for better understanding of systemic change, scaling dynamics and the contribution of social



innovations to broader public policy objectives, including the creation of mechanisms to support the transfer, adaptation and scaling of successful social innovation practices into mainstream public policies. This includes fostering structured learning loops, cross-country exchange of good practices and greater engagement of public authorities to enable policy uptake, whether through the adaptation of existing legislative and policy frameworks or the design of new public policy instruments.



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