



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. Country-specific differences mostly relate to institutional or structural realities rather than practices or experiences of social impact assessments.

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 more specific definitions of what constitutes impact assessment are multiple and divergent, therefore showing a lack of common language
- Similarly, there is a shared difficulty or ambiguity in concretely defining “social innovation”, and in particular applying the term differentiating social innovation projects from others.

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.
- 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.



Practices and stakeholders

Though difficult to generalize, the practice of social impact assessment by social innovation projects in all four countries is largely similar 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 paraphrased as “good enough now, robust later”.

- In all four countries there is no collectively agreed-upon “best” method or singularly used method.
- 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.
- Debates continue in each country as to whether there is indeed an ideal method for impact assessment. Often this debate centers around the level of scientific robustness necessary for impact assessment.
- Academic and institutional discourse typically promoting the use of counterfactual methods, these methods are largely inaccessible to social innovators and unnecessary given the goals of social innovators in their impact assessments.
- Most social innovation projects transnationally practice impact assessment using a theory-based and logic-model approach and mixed methods with relatively simple tools (namely theory of change, questionnaires/surveys and interviews). This “realistic evaluation” approach is understood to be better adapted for innovation projects 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 due to their perceived credibility by external partners and thus as a means of securing further funding.
- These assessments are typically ex-post, this is mostly due to the time constraints as well as funding structures of social innovation projects. 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.
- In all four countries, the principal obstacle to the practice of impact assessment is financial. In all four cases, the majority of 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.
- 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).
- Many social innovation projects in early stages (before scaling) are focused on survival and stability, rather than robust impact measurements and long-term monitoring.
- 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.
- Impact assessments are more highly concentrated among projects working on the themes of social inclusion, employment and health.
- While impact assessments by social innovation projects have historically focused more on social impact indicators, there is increased interest transnationally in environmental sustainability indicators.



- There is no full degree in impact assessment in any of the four countries studied, but limited to professional and technical trainings or 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.

- 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 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.
- 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.
- 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”.

Country-specific findings

Spain

- National strategies for social impact assessments by innovations are carried by public administrations.
- Calls for projects on the platform Vidas require providing social impact assessment results.
- Impact assessments are done more as administrative obligations rather than learning-oriented.
- More widespread use of outcome collection tools and management tools (such as IMP, EVPA, BIA). These standardized tools are seen as more “professional”.
- Lack of a consolidated reference organization, structural leadership in social impact assessment.

Portugal

- Strong influence of academic and research institutions on the practice of social impact assessment
- Projects financed by Portugal social innovation require providing social impact assessment results.
- The current perspective of actors in the ecosystem is to work towards a common approach of social impact assessment.



- There is currently no legal status defining social economy/ social enterprises.

Sweden

- Term “evaluation” appeared as early as the 70s, and thus earlier than in the other three countries.
- Due to a high degree of local self-government compared to other countries, private and social investments are less developed in Sweden.
- A national strategy for social entrepreneurship and social innovation which tasked agencies with developing support for social impact measurement.
- A national standard established in 2025 by the Swedish Institute for Standards.
- Important role of Statistics Sweden in making public data available (aided by unique personal identification numbers in the country).
- There is currently no legal status defining social economy/ social enterprises.

France

- Strong overlap between the social innovation and social economy ecosystems. Social economy defined by law and includes a criterion on “social utility” thus anchoring the practice of social impact assessment in the social solidarity economy.
- Relatively high degree of resources produced, networks and working groups dedicated to the topic.
- In particular, several free and accessible tools for impact assessment and sectoral reference standards.
- Similarly, theoretical work being done on adapting impact assessment to the specificity innovation projects, and in particular experimental projects.

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:

- 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.
- Across all types of financial actors, both public and private, it is essential to **develop more funding streams for social impact assessment practices**. Funding remains the central obstacle to practicing impact assessment, transnationally, and thus contributes largely to the inaccessibility of the practice 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 an ideal and under-developed in practice. 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**.



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