"How can social innovation be better harnessed in the development of public policies for the ecological and solidarity-based transition?"

Summary of the collective project from the Master's in Territorial and Urban Strategies at Sciences Po Paris Urban School

BIRDS Deliverable D1.4 - FR1 - Mapping of the public social innovation ecosystem in France and analysis of the strategic and operational positioning of its main actors

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17 October 2025

BIRDS
Boosting Initiatives & Resources to Develop Social innovation

Co-funded by the European Union

Social Innovation Initiative

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Preamble

This document summarises the work carried out by four students from Sciences Po Paris's Urban School (Ecole Urbaine), who were entrusted by Avise with a collective project for the 2024-2025 academic year as part of Work Package 1 of the BIRDS project (activity WP1-FR1: "Decompartmentalising the social innovation support ecosystem between the public, private and third sectors").

The collective project is an educational module that puts students in a work situation to address an issue raised by an organisation, with regular methodological supervision provided by a qualified tutor.

Wishing to benefit from high-quality output and an outside perspective, drawing on the research and training expertise of the Urban School, Avise proposed the following issue: "*How can social innovation be better harnessed in the development of public policies for the ecological and solidarity-based transition?*"

Launched in October 2024, this work was presented to around fifty national social innovation stakeholders in France (public actors, social and solidarity economy actors, funders, support providers, etc.) at the National Social Innovation Gathering organised by Avise on June 3rd 2025 in Paris.

This work led to the production of several deliverables, which are summarised and compiled here in a single document to facilitate overall understanding and dissemination.

With the exception of the chapter devoted to the analysis of three fields of observation "Field Analysis" and the chapter "Recommendations," which consist of an exact reproduction of the content produced by the students, this document is a summary of their work.

Abbreviations

ADEME	French Environment and Energy Management Agency
ANCT	National Agency for Territorial Cohesion
ANSA	New Agency for Active Solidarity
CRESS	Regional Chamber of Social and Solidarity Economy
DGCS	Directorate-General for Social Cohesion
DGEFP	General Delegation for Employment and Vocational Training
DITP	Interministerial Directorate for Public Transformation
DLA	Local Support Scheme for the Social and Solidarity Economy
ESS	Social and Solidarity Economy
SI	Social innovation
ODAS	Observatory for Decentralisation and Social Action
OPSI	Observatory of Public Sector Innovation
PTCE	Territorial Economic Cooperation Clusters
RSA	Active Solidarity Income
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy

Presentation of the study

Methodology

In the face of rising inequality, the ecological crisis and the decline of the welfare state, social innovation (SI) is often presented as a local, cooperative and inclusive response to complex issues. However, it often remains marginalised and reduced to one-off experiments. How, then, can we create a system and prevent initiatives from remaining fragmented and isolated?

It is in this context that Avise commissioned a group of four students from SciencesPo Paris's Urban School to analyse the conditions under which the social economy, as a lever for the ecological and solidarity-based transition, can have a lasting influence on public policy-making. Their work was carried out in two complementary phases over the academic year.

During the first few months of the project, a review of the literature enabled the study to be situated within the academic field of the social economy (key concepts and different approaches) and clarified its links with the social and solidarity economy (SSE). This work was then supplemented by an initial series of interviews aimed at building a general overview of the interactions between the various SI actors and structures in France: 14 national actors were interviewed, including public actors from central government (DGCS, DGEFP) or agencies such as ADEME; actors involved in supporting and financing social innovation (Fondation la France s'engage); actors involved in research; and intermediary actors such as Ellyx and the 27th Region, as well as a local authority (the City of Marseille). These interviews were then used to create an interactive map, with the aim of listing and analysing the actors involved in SI and their interconnections. This work revealed the existing synergies and complementarities between actors, but also the compartmentalized nature of certain spheres.

In the second half of the year, capitalising on contributions from the literature and initial discussions with stakeholders, field surveys were conducted in three cities – Nantes, Lyon and Marseille – chosen for the diversity of projects and the richness of their ecosystems. Furthermore, the relatively similar size of these areas facilitated their comparison during the analytical phase. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the practices of the stakeholders encountered (local authorities, associations, incubators, structures dedicated to the SSE, etc.), their territorial roots and the decompartmentalisation of relations between different stakeholders, as well as their links with public authorities. The analysis of discourse and experiences highlighted the dynamics of cooperation, but also the persistent tensions and compartmentalisation. This phase of the study ultimately allowed for generalisation thanks to the comparison of all the information.

The student team

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Presentation of partners

Avise	SciencesPo École Urbaine
Created in 2002, Avise is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to support the development of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) and social innovation (SI) in France, with a view to making them the driving forces behind a necessary change in our economy, to make it more sustainable and more humane. To this end, it carries out several major missions: it equips and guides all SSE and SI stakeholders through all stages of their development (idea, creation, consolidation, scaling up); it leads national communities of SSE and SI support providers in the regions; it supports SSE enterprises and develops programmes at national level, and it finances national SSE projects through the European Social Fund+ (ESF+). As a result, Avise is now the leading player in the field of SSE and social innovation and their development challenges. This is why Avise has been mandated by the French government to be the National Competence Centre for Social Innovation (NCCSI) for France in Europe, with a view to achieving a successful ecological and solidarity-based transition by supporting social innovation, whether driven by public, private or citizen actors, while strengthening cooperation between these actors. As part of the BIRDS (Boosting Initiatives & Resources to Develop Social Innovation) transnational collaboration project, Avise is working with the Spanish, Portuguese and Swedish NCCSIs to develop a comparative approach to best practices within the different national ecosystems.	Thanks to this original module, students are given the opportunity to work on a real-life problem posed by a public, private or non-profit organisation. For all the École Urbaine Master's programmes, the organisation and management are identical: the project is jointly supervised by the École Urbaine management and partners at all stages of the project; regular methodological support is provided by a professional or academic tutor who is a specialist in the field. Collective projects enable partners to capitalise on the research and training developed within the École Urbaine, to benefit from high-quality studies and work, and to tap into a capacity for innovation. Collective projects are particularly suited to studies, diagnostics, forecasting, comparative analysis, and even preparation for evaluation, and more generally to any issue that can inform the organisation concerned in an R&D context. Each project involves a group of first-year students from one of the École Urbaine's Master's programmes. Students work between 1.5 and 2 days per week during dedicated time slots for a period of 6 to 9 months (depending on the Master's programme concerned).
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Introduction

Faced with inequality, the ecological crisis and the limitations of productivist economic models, social innovation (SI) has emerged since the 1970s as an alternative to traditional public action (Laville, 2016). It aims to transform modes of production, governance and solidarity by mobilising local dynamics, citizen knowledge and intersectoral cooperation capacities. By proposing collective and experiential responses, SI is part of a "strong solidarity" approach, in which the local area plays a central role: the economy is no longer an end in itself, but a means to serve social justice and environmental preservation. However, the scientific contours of this concept are still unclear. Its success depends on the ability to create an open ecosystem that avoids fragmentation, isolation or the instrumentalisation of initiatives.

SI is part of a long history of collective engagement in response to the shortcomings of the state, such as the autonomous solidarity movements that emerged in the 19th century (Laville, 2016). In the 1970s, SI became a focus of public action in response to the crisis of the welfare state and socio-economic changes. Numerous local initiatives emerged (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005), seeking to rebuild social ties, experiment with new forms of production and compensate for the decline in public services. Social innovation thus became part of a movement of territorial and institutional restructuring.

In France, the institutionalisation of social innovation accelerated under the impetus of the European Commission (Béji-Bécheur and Bonnemaizon, 2022) from the 2000s onwards, with the Vercamer parliamentary report recognising social innovation as a lever for public transformation and the law of July 31st 2014 on the SSE (Social and Solidarity Economy). The latter provides an initial legal definition of social innovation: the development of new responses to poorly or inadequately met social needs, with the active involvement of beneficiaries. Nevertheless, two divergent interpretations of social innovation coexist: one focused on measurable social impact, the other on democratic co-construction and the re-embedding of the economy in society, inspired by the work of Polanyi (1944) on the "great transformation" and that of Laville (2016) on the plural economy.

This study was carried out as a collective project by four students from SciencesPo's École Urbaine on behalf of Avise. The analytical approach aims to better understand the foundations of this concept by attempting to refine its definition. It is thus part of an institutionalist approach to SI, emphasising bottom-up territorial dynamics and the hybridisation of economic, social and political logics. Social innovation is seen as a process of transformation involving civil society, the public sphere and economic actors, rather than a technique. This dynamic of reorganising modes of organisation based on the needs of populations is illustrated by local initiatives such as short food supply chains, third places, resource centres, territorial mutual societies, etc. (Richez-Battesti and Vallade, 2017; Nadou and Talandier, 2020).

In this context, the social economy plays a key role: it aims to transform the state by promoting a participatory approach. The state remains the guarantor of universal rights, while promoting local and community initiatives.

The French SI ecosystem[1] is now structured around a variety of actors: public, private, associations and citizens. Avise, created in 2002 with the support of the Caisse des Dépôts, plays a central role in supporting the development of the SSE and SI through mechanisms such as the Local SSE Support Scheme (DLA) and the Fabrique à Initiatives. Alongside it, foundations such as La France s'engage finance projects with a strong social impact, while networks such as the Mouvement associatif, ODAS[2] , and ESS France promote best

[1] For more information, see the mapping and analysis of the French social innovation ecosystem, carried out by Avise as part of the European BuiCaSuS consortium in 2022: https://www.avise.org/ressources/mapping-and-analysis-of-the-french-social-innovation-ecosystem
[2] ODAS has since ceased to exist, following its liquidation in March 2025.

practices. Through programmes such as French Impact, social impact contracts, and calls for projects from the ANCT, the State has also been able to support this dynamic.

Other actors, such as ANSA, have enabled the experimentation and widespread adoption of innovative public policies, such as the Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA) active solidarity income scheme. Local authorities are also key players, capable of anchoring SI in local realities. For example, the Gironde Department and the City of Marseille are developing pioneering mechanisms (participatory budgets, social third places, local mutual societies) to transform modes of governance. However, their actions often depend on local political will. The NOTRe law, by recentralising certain powers, has sometimes hampered these efforts by complicating the coordination between levels of action.

With this in mind, breaking down barriers between social innovation ecosystems is a necessity. This involves strengthening cooperation both between structures within the same territory and between levels of governance. Key levers such as territorial intermediation, resource pooling, recognition of citizen knowledge, and the creation of flexible experimentation frameworks must be mobilised. Thanks to its position as an intermediary between public, semi-public and associative actors, AVISE plays a strategic role here by supporting the capacity-building of project leaders, mapping support ecosystems and facilitating exchanges between different professional spheres.

Interviews conducted as part of the study show that, despite its development, the transformative scope of SI and its hybridisation with public policies face several challenges: compartmentalisation of actors, lack of vertical coordination, rigidity of regulatory frameworks, and risks of formatting or excessive delegation of projects on the part of the public service (Epstein, 2015; Richez-Battesti et al., 2012; Douchet, 2019). This can sometimes hinder local experimentation dynamics and slow down the spread of initiatives due to a lack of support or stable funding. The main challenge remains scaling up: how can we ensure that local experiments feed into public policy in a sustainable way, without losing their meaning or their local roots?

For SI to become a vehicle for systemic transformation, it is necessary to break down barriers between ecosystems, strengthen intermediation mechanisms, and rethink evaluation indicators. As Murray et al. (2010) point out, truly transformative SI requires favourable institutional conditions, openness to collective intelligence, and collaborative governance oriented towards the common good.

Building on this reflection, this study explores the tension between experimentation and institutionalisation and between local initiatives and national frameworks. The aim is to examine the capacity of SI to become a vehicle for systemic transformation by promoting an ecological transition that is both social and solidarity-based, without leading to a disengagement of the state.

The study consists of a review of the scientific literature, including an analysis of the concept of SI and its theoretical framework, followed by a reflection on the importance of the territorial context and an analysis of the link between SI and ecological transition. The findings of this review were then used for an extensive campaign of interviews with 14 national SI actors. Finally, the role of the state and the structuring of the public ecosystem is analysed, illustrated by a mapping of SI actors.

Focusing on the French case, this study is part of the broader European BIRDS (Boosting Initiatives & Resources to Develop Social Innovation) project, which brings together the National Competence Centres for Social Innovation in Spain, Portugal, Sweden and France in a consortium for the 2024-2027 period. This study specifically explores collaborative practices in France and questions the capacity of SI to influence public policy. In particular, it examines the emergence of genuine local communities and the establishment of multi-level governance adapted to each territorial context, as well as the capacity of SI to initiate a process of ecological transition involving profound institutional and paradigm shifts.

Literature review and national hearings

Conceptualisation of the field of analysis of social innovation

It is important to distinguish between SI (defined in the introduction) and public innovation, which aims to improve public policy internally within administrative services. According to the DGCS (Directorate-General for Social Cohesion), SI *"can be used to improve or ensure the proper implementation of public policy".* Other respondents interviewed as part of the study referred mainly to policy design as a form of public innovation, based on an iterative process to better meet the needs of agents and users. One respondent from the city of Marseille emphasised the importance of *"inspiring practices".*

The Open Book of Social Innovation confirms this approach: SI in the public sector involves a profound transformation of practices, mindsets and structures, integrated into public strategies to address challenges such as climate change, obesity, ageing and inequality. Governments must recognise the shortcomings of public services and provide innovative solutions. It is also necessary to involve citizens and front-line workers through feedback loops, similar to the practices recommended by Ellyx and implemented, for example, in the City of Marseille or within the DGCS.

In addition, structures such as the 27th Region enable public administrations to test ideas without risk, by prototyping solutions and organising collaborative workshops. These practices are in line with the testimonials collected, which emphasise action research and the involvement of local areas and their populations. This aspect of SI, known as public innovation, will therefore be an essential element of the Field Analysis section of this study. However, the objective is to better understand the ecosystem and public initiative from a more institutional or regulatory perspective, where public actors act as field actors, responding to localised social problems. In this sense, interviews with the DGCS and researcher Nadine Richez-Battesti, as well as field surveys, highlighted the role of the State as a financial supporter or facilitator of partnerships with local authorities.

Ultimately, the social innovation ecosystem and public initiative are based on these elements, but the mapping (see: Appendix 3) reveals relationships and roles that are often more complex than simple questions of structure or funding.

SI and social sciences: a structured and divided scientific field

Analysing social innovation and its cross-sectoral collaborations through the lens of the social sciences first requires an understanding of the structure of this field. Several authors have proposed dichotomies to describe it. Among these, the analysis by Besançon and Guyon (2017) is particularly useful, as it distinguishes between two main blocks.

The first block adopts an entrepreneurial and goal-oriented vision. It is divided into two sub-fields: the modernisation of public policies (an approach similar to *New Public Management,* where SI is seen as a tool for efficiency and sometimes for the disengagement of the state) and social entrepreneurship (distinguishing between the school of SI focused on the philanthropic and economic individual, and the school of market-based approaches focused on organisations with a social purpose, but with a secondary pursuit of profit).

The second block offers a process-based and less entrepreneurial vision of SI, and includes two sub-categories: social enterprise (European, collective approach) and institutionalist analysis (Quebec), which emphasises social transformation and territorial anchoring. The latter approach, which is the one adopted here, highlights a process of localised and bottom-up innovation, collective intervention by various actors,

democratic governance, a market logic limited by the use of other forms of coordination, and finally a transformation of the framework for action to respond to social issues.

Actors such as ODAS and Nadine Richez-Battesti are part of this perspective, emphasising *the empowerment* of residents, territorial dynamics and the mobilisation of diverse local actors (social and solidarity economy, private, public). For some of them, this territorialised approach is based on the theory of the "social region", which re-embeds economic logic in the social sphere (Polanyi) and considers local socio-economic history and institutional capacities. According to Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2016), SI in this logic is above all institutional – through collective processes, it responds to fundamental needs, which *"are not natural, they depend on processes that reveal them".*

Thus, in the institutionalist approach, SI is conceived as a territorialised, inclusive and participatory innovation system, redefining governance (Leloup, 2005) and integrating the most vulnerable groups (Richez-Battesti, 2017). For example, the alternative food circuits studied by Chiffoleau and Paturel (2016) illustrate the establishment of multi-level governance and new links of local solidarity, enabling the empowerment of populations and a redefinition of territorial rules.

SI as a means of transforming social relations

The aim is to follow the social innovation concept presented above, without reproducing the traditional scientific oppositions. Rather, it is a question of moving beyond these divisions to consider SI as a lever for transforming social relations. In this regard, *The Open Book of Social Innovation* offers an interesting approach, notably through the notion of *"Systemic Change".* The latter is the culmination of the social innovation process. It aims to bring about lasting change to structures, practices and mindsets on a large scale by integrating innovation into social, economic and political systems, going beyond the local or sectoral framework to influence entire paradigms. It involves a reconfiguration of power relations, social norms and economic models, requiring profound institutional and behavioural changes. A case study in Argentina (Younes, 2019) illustrates SI's ability to change the established order by transforming social relations in a given territory. In the public sector, the application of SI requires a collaborative approach. Citizens must be actively involved in the design and evaluation of services, while administrations must encourage experimentation and learning to enable systemic change. In this way, SI can become a driver of collective progress, drawing inspiration from new innovation strategies, networks and policies.

Social innovation, local integration and interdependence

Firstly, local integration and collaboration within SI ecosystems rely on **intermediation**. This consists of physical and symbolic spaces for dialogue that promote trust, cooperation and "translation" between various actors (associations, institutions, etc.) around a common project (Nadou and Talaendier, 2020). Such spaces are created, for example, by structures such as Ellyx or La France s'engage, to overcome the sectorisation of ecosystems. In addition, intermediation involves reaching agreement on the objectives of the social innovation project, the expected results and how to measure them. Slitine et al. (2024) refer to this as *the middleground*: a symbolic meeting space where legitimate mediators act as a link between idea generators (*underground)* and institutions (*upperground)*. In concrete terms, this involves training actors to navigate institutional networks, while adapting institutions to their needs (Besançon and Guyon, 2013). In practice, intermediation requires breaking down administrative silos by strengthening external and internal dialogue. In Marseille, for example, cross-functional working groups enable expertise to be pooled, as explained by Laurent Boy, the city's strategic SSE sector project manager. The aim is to transform territorial belonging into a collective consciousness, strengthening individuals' "capabilities" (Besançon et al. 2017) and thus enhancing the success and reproducibility of projects (Klein et al., 2014). Social innovation is thus anchored in territorial matrices, supported by mechanisms such as PTCE (Territorial Economic Cooperation

Clusters), which bring together local actors and institutions for sustainable projects (shared gardens, waste management, short supply chains, etc.). These dynamics combine local resources and external support, illustrating the central role of the SSE in building solutions tailored to specific territories (Richez-Battesti and Vallade, 2017).

Secondly, the local integration of innovations can be explained by the very construction of social innovation, which emerges from a collective dynamic responding to a social need, creating links and new forms of solidarity. Social innovation is not limited to concrete solutions, but builds a process *of empowerment* through shared learning (Richez-Battesti and Vallade, 2017). These projects form the basis of **committed citizen communities** – in the Durkheimian sense – where individuals share values and objectives, gaining recognition as legitimate interlocutors (Younes et al., 2019). These initiatives transform territories and issues, and change the trajectories of excluded people. They promote "bottom-up" governance, which works with institutions to access resources (grants, networks). Learning is bidirectional: citizens acquire skills, while institutions discover new models (Chiffoleau and Paturel, 2016). As Laura Douchet of Ellyx points out, the expertise of project leaders, although different from that of administrations, is essential.

Thirdly, it is necessary to strike a delicate balance in **the dissemination of SI, which oscillates between the desire to scale up or replicate initiatives and the risks of standardisation**. Although SI is part of a participatory democracy context (Blondiaux, 2008), the dissemination of these initiatives — from local experimentation to their adoption on a larger scale — represents a major challenge for public actors. According to *The Open Book of Social Innovation* (Murray et al., 2010), this process involves local testing phases, followed by scaling up to achieve systemic and sustainable impact. Organisations such as La France s'engage support projects over a three-year period to help them scale up, while La 27ème Région promotes an *open source* approach*,* documenting processes to draw inspiration from previous innovations and set up projects in other areas, tailored to social needs. However, some innovations remain too specific to their area to be generalised. In Marseille, for example, projects respond to unique local needs and are not intended to be exported. Laura Douchet (2019) suggests considering large-scale experimentation directly, integrating failure as part of the process. This implies long-term support to make the results visible. However, excessive standardisation by public authorities can hinder adaptation to local realities. As Bernard Pecqueur (2022) points out*, "the march towards standardisation is the march towards death".* The challenge is therefore to find a balance: supporting local initiatives while integrating them into regional or national frameworks, without creating a rigid hierarchy. This requires combining different levels of work to preserve the diversity of approaches and avoid a concentration of decision-making power (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2014).

Paradigm shift: SI and the ecological transition

Previously secondary, environmental issues are now central to territorial strategies, driven by strict regulations and climate justice (Fraisse and Laville, 2022). In France, the Climate and Resilience Law (2021) imposes ambitious targets on local authorities, but their implementation depends on their resources and their ability to mobilise local actors. The challenge is to combine ecological transition and social justice, as in Grenoble with a social energy tariff or in Barcelona with citizen energy cooperatives.

Social innovation is becoming a key lever in making this transition acceptable and inclusive. It allows for experimentation with participatory models, such as Repair Cafés or short food supply chains, and for rethinking public policies to anchor them in local realities (Dorival, 2021). Initiatives such as PTCE (Territorial Economic Cooperation Clusters) and Ecological Transition Cooperatives show that the transition can be both ecological and solidarity-based.

The ecological transition requires a radical transformation of public innovation, which can no longer be limited to optimising existing policies, but must rebuild institutional frameworks by integrating citizen dynamics (OPSI, 2022). According to Murray et al. (2010), the challenge is to prevent innovations from being diluted in rigid bureaucratic structures and to adopt agile, experimental and collaborative approaches.

To achieve this, three areas are essential (Béji-Bécheur and Bonnemaizon, 2022):

- **Territorial experimentation**: Institutions must abandon top-down solutions in favour of iterative models, tested with citizens before being rolled out more widely. This is notably the mission of the DITP (Interministerial Directorate for Public Transformation), which uses territorial laboratories to co-construct and experiment with appropriate solutions.
- **Open and collaborative governance**: Involve SSE actors, citizens and businesses through citizens' assemblies or participatory budgets. Grenoble, for example, has created a citizens' observatory for ecological transition to continuously evaluate its policies.
- **Adapting institutional frameworks**: Reform public procurement (social and environmental criteria) and financing mechanisms to move from one-off subsidies to structural investments. With this in mind, ADEME trains stakeholders in SI, combining behavioural and narrative approaches to change habits.

The work of the OPSI (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation) and local initiatives across Europe show that this change is underway, but it requires a profound shift in the design and implementation of policies. SI appears to be a key lever for initiating this radical transformation.

The dual risk of SI: the difficult positioning of the State

Social innovation faces a dual risk: on the one hand, its formatting by public institutions, and on the other, its indirect contribution to the privatisation of public services.

The risk of institutional formatting arises when public policies, by financing and regulating social innovation, impose predefined criteria concerning priority themes, calls for projects, etc. This limits the creativity of project leaders and their ability to adapt to local needs (Epstein, 2015; Béal, 2015). For example, the Popcorn scheme, a territorial SI laboratory developed in Nantes to support project leaders in the ideation or pre-incubation phase, has observed a standardisation of projects, reducing their diversity and transformative potential. According to Laura Douchet, a researcher at the Ellyx consultancy, this institutional framework reinforces a form of "controlled delegation", where the State sets the boundaries of what can be considered acceptable social innovation. Projects that do not fit into these standardised frameworks struggle to obtain funding, which hinders the ability of project leaders to experiment freely and propose truly alternative solutions. In this way, the state exercises indirect control over social innovation, risking turning it into a mere tool for implementing public policy rather than a lever for bottom-up social change (Richez-Battesti et al., 2012).

Social innovation often fills the gaps left by the state, which can potentially lead to the risk of privatisation of public services. Indeed, this substitution can reinforce a logic whereby public action is limited to regulation, while service provision is delegated to private or non-profit actors (Penven, 2015). This trend is reinforced by policies to support and structure the voluntary sector, which impose performance and management criteria inspired by the private sector (Aubry & Torre, 2022), as illustrated by the example of the Local Support Scheme for the Social and Solidarity Economy (DLA). This dynamic creates competition between structures and a commodification of social services, undermining their public interest mission, as highlighted by Estelle Camus, a researcher at ODAS. Examples such as the "1% landscape and development" initiative or the British Big Society show how the social economy can be used to justify a withdrawal of state involvement.

To avoid these two risks, several solutions are proposed for an autonomous and transformative SI:

- **Participatory approach and action research**: Involve citizens from the project design stage (e.g. La 27e Région and its regional laboratories, with the idea *of "assistance in mastering use"* and structuring long-term innovation dynamics).
- **Facilitating role of the state**: Go beyond the current regulatory and financing role; redefine state-territory relations to provide a more flexible framework conducive to the development of SI.
- **Hybrid and sustainable financing**: Combine public subsidies, private investment and citizen contributions to provide a flexible framework for experimentation, then stabilise successful initiatives (Grison and Pradels, 2022).
- **Inclusive collaborative governance**: Encourage cooperation between public and private actors and citizens to avoid top-down approaches (Moulaert, 2014).
- **Stable financing mechanisms**: Incorporate mechanisms dedicated to SI into long-term institutional frameworks; Design mechanisms that are consistent with community development models and adapted to local dynamics.
- **Networks for exchange between territories**: Create collaborative platforms to pool knowledge and strengthen the impact of initiatives (e.g. mid-mountain networks).

Thus, SI oscillates between autonomy and instrumentalisation. To make SI transformative and preserve its sustainable territorial roots, the State should play a facilitating role, supporting flexible financing, collaborative governance and institutionalisation without rigidity.

Conclusion

Structures such as Ellyx, La France s'engage and La 27ème Région create spaces for dialogue between various actors (institutions, non-profits, businesses) to promote horizontal collaboration at different levels. Large-scale initiatives, such as those of AVISE, encourage these cross-sectoral collaborations. These can also take place informally, as in the City of Marseille, where the challenge is simply to "talk to each other" in order to move away from siloed public policies, which are particularly unsuitable in the case of social innovation. However, this dynamic has its limits:

- Lack of coordination between territorial levels (centralised and decentralised government services), slowing down action;
- Communication difficulties between actors with different expectations of public social innovation;
- Risk of isolation of public social innovation, sometimes focused on internal policy improvement, without collaboration with private actors or project leaders.

Thus, interviews conducted as part of this study with public SI stakeholders reveal only a partial breaking down of silos, depending on the levels of action, the stakeholders involved and political will. This will be discussed in more detail in the next part of the study, Field Analysis, using the example of three French cities: Nantes, Lyon and Marseille.

Field Analysis

This section is a direct translation of the students' work, without having been summarised.

Nantes

In Nantes, social innovation (SI) did not come about through political injunction or a national framework, but was built on a rich historical and activist foundation. Since the 1970s, there has been a tradition of cooperation and association, and a dense civic fabric. This local culture has long fostered the emergence of alternative initiatives, well before the term "social innovation" became popular. What makes the Nantes region unique is also its pluralistic but highly structured governance. There is no pyramidal model here, but rather an articulated ecosystem based on interdependence and co-construction. Nantes Métropole, Les Écossolies, CRESS and Nantes City Lab are all actors that play complementary roles, based on a clear commitment to cooperation. For example, the Métropole does not position itself as the sole leader, but as a strategic partner, capable of providing "support without interference".

Its model is therefore based on a genuine local political choice: to integrate social innovation not as a separate policy, but as a way of thinking about public action as a whole, in a cross-cutting manner. It is this patient structuring, embodied by bonds of trust and regular dialogue between institutions and actors in the field, that gives the "Nantes model" or the Nantes “approach” its strength.

Far from being a managerial injunction or an abstract slogan, decompartmentalisation manifests itself in a plurality of concrete practices, subtle arrangements and hybrid formats that bring together worlds that would otherwise remain disjointed. This decompartmentalisation operates primarily through intersectoral interfaces, which actors such as CRESS and Écossolies have learned to build patiently. CRESS, for example, carries out capacity-building work on territorial tools, which is not aimed at standardisation but at facilitation. It is not simply a question of bringing representatives from different sectors together around the same table, but of creating the relational, methodological and temporal conditions for heterogeneous logics to cooperate.

Nantes Métropole also plays an essential role in fostering cross-sectoral collaborations. The local authority acts as the architect of an ecosystem, without seeking to control everything. It draws on the skills of its partners, notably the Écossolies, with whom it maintains an ongoing political and technical dialogue. This approach to cooperation allows SI to be infused into all public policies, rather than being confined to a particular area.

While the breaking down of silos appears to be complete, there is still a form of uneven recognition between actors. Some critical collectives, such as Plan 9 or Humo Sapiens, sometimes feel that they are listened to, but not really included in decision-making spaces. Their views are sought, but not always heard. This raises the question of representation, but also of the forms of legitimacy accepted in the development of public policy. We can also mention that such a strong network in Nantes can make it difficult for new entrants to integrate into the ecosystem.

Social innovation does not remain on the sidelines: it is profoundly transforming public action practices. There is a real desire to institutionalise experimentation, bringing social innovation out of the margins, not to validate ready-made solutions, but to collectively rethink ways of doing things. The Nantes City Lab is one of the emblematic places of this transformation. It hosts projects that test new ways of doing things, with plenty of room for trial and error. What we learn from these experiments is sometimes fed back into

the community. This marks an important turning point: the institution becomes capable of learning from itself, embracing uncertainty, and valuing trial and error as a tool for policy adjustment.

Many actors still depend on short-term calls for projects, which sometimes forces them to reformulate their actions to fit into the boxes, as Plan 9 and Humo Sapiens have pointed out. This undermines essential practices—such as networking, documentation, and capitalisation—which often remain unfunded. This overly strict framework, due to the format of calls for projects, limits the potential for transforming public action. Furthermore, the time lag between institutional logic and dynamics on the ground remains an obstacle. Building solid partnerships takes time and requires presence and listening. However, institutions often operate on a fast-paced schedule, with a focus on results. This misalignment can hinder the emergence of truly transformative projects by limiting social innovation with such potential but which require more time to emerge.

Lyon

Social innovation in Lyon is distinguished by its highly professionalised dimension, structured around a dense economic support ecosystem. Unlike other regions where social innovation can be more militant (as in Marseille) or more institutionally accepted (as in Nantes), it is not presented as a political slogan or a claimed category. It is part of a tradition of social and solidarity economy (SSE) rooted locally, supported by structures that mobilise tools borrowed from the entrepreneurial world and adapt them to social utility.

This approach certainly allows project leaders to develop their skills and ensures a certain stability for initiatives, but it also tends to leave out more precarious or experimental forms. In this sense, it is based above all on a culture of hybridisation, cooperation and method: the actors emphasise the logic of co-construction, attention to needs on the ground, and the ability to organise collective dynamics rather than carrying out individualised projects. This common culture is made possible, among other things, by strong informal links and the sharing of documentation and experience narratives.

As in Nantes, this role of interface, facilitation and networking between structures is also played by CRESS Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, but can also draw on other mechanisms: the Lyon metropolitan area mobilises the COAESS, an informal collective of around twenty major SSE-related structures such as incubators, institutional actors, but also banks and integration agencies. They take a mutualisation approach to unmet regional needs, opportunities and projects that would be beneficial to co-develop.

Some organisations also contribute to breaking down barriers, such as the Lab Archipel, the Prefecture's public innovation laboratory, which brings together institutions and professionals from sectors that are not accustomed to cooperating. For example, with regard to violence against women, it has brought together non-profits, representatives of the justice system, the gendarmerie, social services and metropolitan authorities to develop a common diagnosis, promoting trust and the circulation of knowledge. Breaking down barriers here means creating a framework where people can talk differently, outside their institutional roles.

The decompartmentalisation of initiatives relies heavily on the often-informal relational skills of the actors involved. The effectiveness of the structures thus depends on their legitimacy and their ability to maintain cordial relations despite staff turnover or changes in institutional priorities. Although currently effective, these links remain relatively fragile due to the lack of a consolidated framework.

At the same time, the aforementioned COAESS includes only structures that are already well established in the region, complicating the development of emerging actors. As a result, this network can be difficult for small collectives or non-professional associations that do not yet have social capital or entrepreneurial codes to join, as is the case in Nantes. Their consultation and organisational activities are also often not

covered by funding mechanisms, even though they can be costly and demanding, creating a threshold effect whereby only a few actors manage to sustain themselves and consolidate their position.

Social innovation maintains an indirect link with public action, in which measures to break down barriers enable public issues to be formulated collectively. For their part, support structures such as Centsept play a bottom-up translation role and act as a critical interface by organising coalitions of actors. This is not a case of direct advocacy. What we do is produce situated knowledge, based on action, which we then feed back into the decision-making process. It is this work that creates the conditions for exchange with public policy, without necessarily guaranteeing systematic institutional recognition.

Despite their local success, the projects developed by incubators struggle to be replicated on a larger scale of public action, particularly at the national level. As far as local authorities are concerned, neither the City of Lyon nor the Metropolis has an explicit or unified SI strategy. Even the Lab Archipel, for example, remains marginal in scope, and there is no guarantee that issues will be placed on the political agenda.

The recent decision by the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region to cut €200,000 in subsidies to CRESS has further limited the means available to the social economy and its ability to influence public policy in the long term, marking a political loss of institutional recognition. At the same time, the rise of private funders, particularly corporate foundations, is reshaping the balance of power. For larger organisations, multiple and hybrid funding guarantees independence, allowing them to remain both credible and critical. But for smaller organisations, this runs the risk of selecting projects geared towards performance, to the detriment of social objectives.

Marseille

In Marseille, social innovation (SI) does not stem from an explicit political project. It emerges out of necessity, in response to structural shortcomings in public action, often in what could be called interstices, in an effective but unstable "DIY" mode. SI in Marseille thus emerged very spontaneously in response to strong social needs and was then gradually structured and taken up by local public action. It therefore has a very strong relational dimension, as in Lyon, but is developing in a more alternative way.

The Marseille area is characterised by weak coordination between the City, Metropolis, Department and Region, which have different political leanings, sometimes making it difficult to work together. Social innovation is less technical than in other cities, such as Nantes: it is based on co-production, listening, cooperation and mediation between different types of actors, but also on knowledge of local ecosystems, which confirms what we had observed during our previous phases of investigation. Many initiatives are tailor-made and SI takes place on the margins, often without being named as such: innovation occurs "without saying so", in a profound and transformative but discreet way (Le Cloître, Cosens, Bouillon de Noailles: "we didn't say to ourselves 'we're going to do social innovation'"). The aim is not to recreate a separate, "watertight" box, but rather to incorporate it into local dynamics and institutional/economic language (City of Marseille).

These cross-sectoral collaborations are happening spontaneously, thanks to vibrant relational ecosystems that are evolving on the fringes of public action. Institutional actors such as the Metropolis play a much less important role than in Nantes, for example, but other alliances are being created. Structures such as InterMade, Cosens, Bouillon de Noailles, Marseille Solutions, and Le Cloître are creating cross-alliances (public-private-non profit). They are hybrid in their functions: incubation, mediation, facilitation, advocacy, which allows for rich relationships. Projects arise from trust rather than formal mechanisms; the social economy is based largely on relationships and long-term work. Furthermore, actors that can be described as interfaces are very present in Marseille and play an essential role in the development of ecosystems such as Marseille Solutions and France Active. To this we could add the significant number of actors with complex

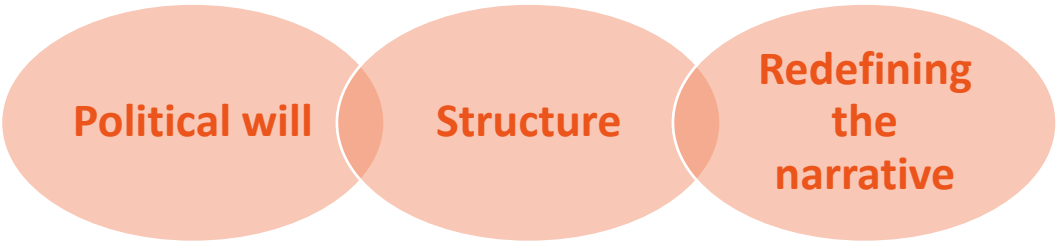
professional backgrounds, who present themselves as hybrid figures (former elected officials, agents from the social and solidarity economy) who facilitate the circulation of ideas by blending different work cultures.

What makes Marseille strong in terms of cross-sectoral collaborations is also its weakness. Indeed, the spontaneity of the alliances that are created between SI actors sometimes also leads to a lack of structure and organisation. The Marseille system relies heavily on mutual acquaintance dynamics, which for the most part work very well, but do not necessarily follow a "common thread". This can lead to a lack of efficiency or consistency in the projects carried out, which sometimes "tread on each other's toes". The development of ecosystems can thus be confined to a closed circle of SI and local SSE, which is not as open and structured as it could be. As in Lyon, certain activities are not sufficiently recognised, and actions in favour of the social and solidarity economy are thus rendered invisible and relegated to the "margins", when they could be more clearly reflected in Marseille's public policies.

Despite the absence of guided political governance, forms of co-construction have emerged within public action. For example, food coordination during the Covid crisis via the Lab des Possibles, mobilising 12 deputy directorates-general of the Metropolis. This hybrid structure, the Lab des Possibles, which is somewhat similar to the Lab Archipel in Lyon, oscillates between social innovation and public action and presents itself as a place of co-production, inspired by social design methods that aim to "create the conditions for action and not replace services". Similarly, in the City of Marseille, "La Collective" is currently being created: this is a space that aims to develop both within and outside the municipality, with the aim of bringing together the actions of several services, while relying on external actors to co-produce innovative projects. The goal is to view the institution from the inside while maintaining a posture of listening to the field. Social innovation in Marseille is therefore increasingly seen as an issue that needs to be addressed, and is beginning to develop in an increasingly cross-cutting manner.

However, social innovation is not sufficiently recognised by the public authorities. Although institutions express a willingness to develop SI, operational support is often inconsistent. The structures are not perceived as strategic, but as project leaders among others, and are therefore not given sufficient consideration. This makes it difficult to gain recognition for crucial functions such as mediation and coordination (which are often unfunded). As in the other two areas, the framework of public institutions is often ill-suited to the dynamics of social innovation: short timelines, quantitative indicators, rigid reporting. The conclusion on this subject is harsh: public mechanisms tend to pre-format expectations, timelines and forms of action. The main problem in Marseille is the overly fragmented institutional context, which prevents the development of a common strategy. This creates structural precariousness, preventing actors from making long-term plans.

Recommendations



Area	Political will	Structure	Redefining the narrative
Recommendations	Define a clear political direction and an overall strategy for social innovation in the region to avoid fragmentation of initiatives.	Clarify the roles of local authorities, facilitators and project leaders to avoid confusion and miscommunication in collaborations.	Promote shared narratives of social entrepreneurship in the regions to enhance visibility and political legitimacy, and position social entrepreneurship actors as strategic pillars of the region with whom it is important to collaborate.
	Stabilise local intermediation structures by giving them a clear and recognised status.		Focus on bottom-up and non-institutionalised forms of cooperation as sustainable levers, and better integrate them into the work of public institutions.
	Do not impose a rigid public framework: support rather than control, and adapt tools to the realities on the ground.	Strengthen links between the local and national levels in terms of social innovation by creating a flexible inter-territorial coordination space to pool learning without standardising practices.	Promote professional and inter-territorial mobility as levers for mutual acculturation.
	Accept and support slowness as a condition for public transformation.	Create collective forums for dialogue, more or less informal, with a view to sharing, monitoring and mutual understanding.	Establish mechanisms for transmitting information in order to preserve the collective memory within ecosystems, including the successes and difficulties of projects.

Conclusion

Social innovation in France is based on a variety of dynamics, marked by the creation of spaces for dialogue between different types of actors: institutions, associations and businesses. Thanks to the support provided by specialised structures such as Ellyx, La France s'engage or La 27ème Région, these spaces enable actors to get to know each other better, build mutual recognition and exchange ideas in a more horizontal manner. Large-scale initiatives, such as those of AVISE, encourage these cross-sectoral collaborations. This can also happen informally, as is the case within the services of the City of Marseille. The aim is to move away from siloed public policies that are ill-suited to the challenges of social innovation.

However, this dynamic has its limits, particularly in terms of coordination between different levels of government. A lack of mutual understanding and service congestion slows down collaboration between centralised and decentralised government departments, which can undermine public policies promoting social inclusion. Furthermore, actors often operate in separate spheres, with different expectations, which complicates exchanges between spaces dedicated to social innovation. Another limitation lies in the sometimes-insular nature of *public social innovation,* which focuses mainly on improving public policies without consistently incorporating collaboration with private partners or social innovators. Thus, interviews conducted with social innovation actors as part of this study reveal a relative decompartmentalisation, influenced by the scale of action, the type of actors involved and the underlying political will.

After a year of work on this study, the literature review, coupled with the experience of local and national actors, has provided a better understanding of the dynamics of social innovation in France. Subsequently, a detailed analysis of three metropolitan areas – Nantes, Lyon and Marseille – highlighted the richness of local social innovation ecosystems, as well as the persistent challenges related to their structuring and their capacity to transform public action sustainably. Some cities, such as Nantes, have succeeded in anchoring social innovation at the heart of their public policies, while others, such as Marseille and Lyon, are struggling to institutionalise these dynamics. Although alliances between actors often emerge spontaneously, they sometimes lack structure and political support.

The next stage of the study – mapping social innovation actors – demonstrated that the links between actors are complex and multiple. In terms of funding, networking, experimentation and governance, the actors in the ecosystem form a genuine network based on interconnectivity. Compartmentalisation is being broken down quite satisfactorily at the local level, where project leaders communicate with each other, sometimes informally, due to mutual acquaintance linked to the scale of their work.

In terms of recommendations, in order for the social economy to develop fully, it is essential to create hybrid communication spaces, more flexible public frameworks and appropriate timeframes. AVISE plays a key role in facilitating intermediation, tooling and dialogue between stakeholders. At a time when public policies must respond to major social, ecological and economic challenges, social innovation represents a strategic lever. Its future will depend on its ability to articulate with more inclusive and participatory public policies, further integrating knowledge from the field and strengthening collaborative links.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social innovation must be recognised not only as an experimental response, but as an essential component of the ecological and social transition. Social innovation actors are invited to consolidate these dynamics by identifying the various possible lines of action, whether political, structural or narrative.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of national organisations interviewed

- ADEME
- ANSA – the New Agency for Active Solidarity
- Avise
- LEST-CNRS (Laboratory of Economics and Sociology of Work)
- Ellyx
- The DGEFP – General Delegation for Employment and Vocational Training
- La Fabrique à Initiatives (Avise)
- La France s'engage Foundation
- The Ministry of Solidarity and Health
- The Mouvement Associatif
- The ODAS – Observatory for Decentralisation and Social Action
- The 27ème Region
- SciencesPo Bordeaux (Emile Durkheim Centre)
- City of Marseille

Appendix 2: List of local organisations interviewed during field visits

- Alter'Incub Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes
- Plan 9 Association
- Le Bouillon de Noailles
- Le Centsept
- Le Cloître
- CoSens
- The CRESS Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes
- The CRESS Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur
- The CRESS Pays de la Loire
- Les Ecossolies
- France Active Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur
- Humo Sapiens
- InterMade
- Lab l'Archipel (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Regional Prefecture)
- Lab des Possibles (Aix-Marseille-Provence Métropole)
- Marseille Solutions
- Greater Lyon Metropolis
- Nantes City Lab
- Nantes Métropole
- Nantes University
- Ronalpia
- Lab Public Factory, Sciences Po Lyon
- City of Lyon
- City of Marseille

Appendix 3: Mapping of social innovation actors and the concept of decompartmentalisation

The mapping carried out as part of the study is dynamic. To access it and view all its features, please follow this link:

https://embed.kumu.io/f068daa636a14abd3fba6234f1e26fd1

This map identifies and analyses social and public innovation stakeholders in France — institutions, associations, businesses and academic stakeholders — as well as their relationships and interactions within the ecosystem. It provides a clear overview of the stakeholders and their links within the social innovation ecosystem. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it allows for quick understanding of the roles of each actor involved in SI and public innovation (funding, support, research, experimentation, dissemination, advocacy) and the dynamics of cooperation, while revealing synergies, points of convergence and areas of rupture. The aim is to help actors orient their strategies towards better coordination.

The mapping of actors results from a three-stage survey process. First, a documentary analysis in the form of a literature review identified the institutional actors, existing mechanisms and networks, as well as trends and potential difficulties in cooperation. Next, interviews with national stakeholders expanded and refined this initial dataset, providing examples of concrete projects and practices, as well as details on the relationships between structures. Finally, a structuring phase resulted in the final version of the mapping.

The mapping was designed to be dynamic and modular. It provides an overview, with the possibility of "zooming in" on an actor or network, accompanied by a descriptive sheet. Filters (location, type of links, status) and graphic elements (colours, shapes) allow the visualisation to be adapted as needed. The aim is to present a flexible model that can be enriched with new data to best reflect the complexity of social innovation ecosystems. For greater clarity, the actors and their interactions have been classified.

Social innovation actors were first classified according to their main role: public institutions (implementing and financing policies), support and financing organisations, and research and dissemination structures. Given the complexity of the networks, this classification was further refined into nine categories, taking into account overlapping missions. Some actors, which carry out several functions (such as funding and support), are assigned a secondary role to reflect their diversity.

1. **Institutional actors and public agencies** – Responsible for developing and implementing public social innovation policies at various levels; crucial in strategic guidance, funding and support for local authorities.➔ *E.g.: ANCT, ADEME.*
2. **Policy makers and steering bodies** – Responsible for designing, overseeing and coordinating public SI policies through local and national strategies.➔ *E.g.: DGCS, regions and local authorities.*
3. **Social financing and investment organisations** – Crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of SI initiatives through financing in the form of grants, investments or calls for projects.➔ *E.g.: La France s'engage Foundation.*
4. **Support and expertise structures** – Providers of methodological and strategic support to social economy actors, offering assistance with project development, structuring economic models and accessing financing.➔ *Examples: AVISE, ODAS.*
5. **Incubators and innovation laboratories** – Their mission is to provide a secure testing ground for innovations before they are rolled out on a wider scale, and to support project leaders by providing

them with resources (mentoring, training, access to funding). ➔ *Examples: La Fabrique à Initiatives, La 27ème Région.*

6. **Research and forward-looking analysis stakeholders** – Responsible for producing studies, analyses and evaluations on SI policies and mechanisms. ➔ *Examples: SciencesPo Bordeaux, Ellyx.*
7. **Networks and federations of SSE actors** – Responsible for facilitating the structuring and development of SSE ecosystems, as well as bringing together, coordinating and representing the interests of SSE structures with public authorities and economic actors. ➔ *E.g.: Le Mouvement Associatif or CRESS.*
8. **Actors involved in disseminating and promoting innovations** – Responsible for promoting, disseminating and raising the profile of social innovations and public initiatives. They play a key role in the adoption of innovative solutions and in raising awareness. ➔ *Examples: Think tanks and specialised observatories.*
9. **Companies and private partners involved in SI** – Economic actors developing or supporting SI projects by integrating responsible practices into their economic model, i.e. through the adaptation of innovative models or through sponsorship, impact investing or the development of partnerships with SSE actors. ➔ *E.g.: Social enterprises and cooperatives, integration companies.*

Relationships between actors are then classified into seven categories:

1. **Funding and economic support**: interactions related to the provision of financial resources (public subsidies, private investment, philanthropic funding).
2. **Steering and development of public policy**: relationships between actors responsible for defining, implementing and monitoring public social innovation policies (collaboration between national and local institutions and operators in the field to structure and coordinate interventions).
3. **Support and incubation relationships**: involving structures specialised in supporting project leaders and structuring initiatives, through networking, training, etc.
4. **Experimentation and production**: interactions between actors who analyse, evaluate and experiment with new approaches in social and solidarity economy.
5. **Process of networking and structuring actors**: relationships between actors facilitating cooperation and structuring of SSE and SI ecosystems.
6. **Territorialisation and local dissemination**: interactions between actors supporting SI in terms of adapting SI to local contexts and implementing it in different territories.
7. **Communication and advocacy**: relationships between actors who raise the profile of social and public innovations and influence public policy.

This mapping provides an initial analysis of the social innovation ecosystem, but it has certain limitations. First, it is not exhaustive due to the large number of actors and limited access to certain data. Second, there is a degree of arbitrariness in the definition of categories to simplify complex interactions, as well as the ambiguous and plural status of certain actors. Finally, it will require regular updates to keep pace with the sector's rapid evolution in terms of dynamics, structural changes and new collaborations.

Despite these limitations, this mapping provides a structured and analytical framework for a better understanding of the social innovation ecosystem in France. It can serve as a basis for further development and guide discussions towards better coordination between actors and mechanisms.

Funded by the European Union.

The views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Social Fund Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Granting Authority can be held responsible for them.

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