



Mapping Support Structures for Social Innovation in Ireland (Research Report)

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List of Abbreviations

CSP	Community Services Programme
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DRCDD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EI	Enterprise Ireland
ESF+	European Social Fund+
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPS	Individual Placement and Support
ISEN	Irish Social Enterprise Network
LA	Local Authorities
LDCs	Local Development Companies
LEOs	Local Enterprise Offices
MISE	Macro-Institutional Social Enterprise framework
NCCSI	National Competence Centre for Social Innovation
SDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
SEI	Social Entrepreneurs Ireland
SERI	Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
YSI	Young Social Innovators

Executive summary

Social innovation is increasingly gaining attention among practitioners, academics and policymakers as a way to address complex challenges that our society face. Social innovation relates to new processes, products, services, solutions, relationships, which meet human/social needs, more effectively than existing solutions, improve social relationships and enhance a better use of assets and resources and society's capacity to act.

Social innovation occurs through the interactions of different actors in specific geographical, environmental, socio-economic and institutional contexts. Thus, social innovation is embedded within specific 'ecosystems' which enhance and/or hinder the emergence, development, consolidation and scaling of social innovation initiatives. Following the Quadruple Helix approach, which focuses on the interactions between actors and institutions from four sectors, i.e. public sector/government, industry/businesses, academia/university and civil society/third sector, this report maps the support structures within Ireland's social innovation ecosystem.

In first instance, the report provides an overview of the Irish social innovation ecosystem, based on a review of previous literature. Social innovative initiatives have been developed across Ireland and in different fields of activity such as community development, health, migration, youth, etc. These initiatives have been developed within a social innovation ecosystem formed by:

- **Social innovators**, including social entrepreneurs/enterprises, community and voluntary organisations, social movements, public institutions and/or (social) businesses.
- **Public bodies** that develop policies, strategies and programmes which incorporate measures related to social innovation;
- **Intermediary (civil society) organisations and networks** that support and advocate for social innovation;
- **Academic institutions** that conduct research and develop educational modules on social innovation and;
- **Financial intermediaries** (e.g. social finance lenders, foundations) which support access to finance to social innovation initiatives/organisations.

Beyond this overview, this report presents an analysis of the support structures within Ireland's social innovation ecosystem from a multi-stakeholder perspective. This analysis is

based on the data gathered through 62 surveys to social innovation organisations and 16 semi-structured interviews with representatives from social innovation support structures organisations/institutions from: the public sector, business/for-profit sector, academia, and civil society/third sector.

From the analysis of this mixed (quantitative and qualitative) data, the findings of this report, first, show some **commonalities but also some tensions in the understanding of social innovation and its key features among different stakeholders.**

Commonalities in the understanding of social innovation:

- novelty/newness and change (disruptive but also incremental). It relates to systemic change;
- aim to address social, environmental and societal challenges (diversity);
- hybrid (blended) nature;
- collective, cross-sectoral nature of social innovation - need of multi-stakeholder cooperation and engagement (trustful relationships);
- mismatch between the hybridity and cross-sectoral nature of social innovation and silo support structures;
- nascent social innovation ecosystem

Tensions in the understanding of social innovation:

- unclear boundaries of social innovation, especially with social entrepreneurship/social enterprises;
- sectoral perspectives on key features of social innovation;
- the relationship between social innovation with innovation;
- criteria/metrics for the assessment/measurement of social innovation;
- question of defining what is socially (and environmentally) good for strategic decision making and support

Second, the report also presents the **main characteristics of the support structures to social innovation in Ireland.** These are the following:

- the civil society/third sector and the public sector are clearly perceived as the sectors which provide greatest support to social innovation in Ireland.
- organisations/institutions within the civil society/third sector and the public sector are the most utilised by social innovation organisations for accessing different types of support, such as funding, education/training, collaborative projects, business/marketing support and networking.

- public institutions (especially Government) are attributed a critical role in supporting social innovation due to its capacity and legitimate mandate to develop a (policy) framework that enables social innovation, but also due to its capacity to roll-out (scaling) social innovations nation-wide, however;
- Government is criticised by the (usual) silos between Departments and scarce bridges between the (policy) fields of innovation and social innovation.

- business/for-profit sector show a low/scarce engagement as support structures to social innovative organisations, however;
- stakeholders stress the strong potential that collaborations with businesses can mean for social innovative organisations not only in terms of funding but also in providing supports such as mentoring.

- academia is attributed from stakeholders a critical role to play as a support structure for social innovation in terms of education, engagement and research, however;
- stakeholders ask for a more proactive and collaborative/horizontal role of academia in relation to social innovation organisations.

- civil society/third sector support structures are acknowledged as critical due to their leadership and their development of a suite of supports to social innovative organisations, however;
- these supports are outlined as rather piecemeal, with unclear connections and complementarities between the different support organisations/institutions and with a lack of a strategic (common) vision.

Third, the report presents findings in relation to the **strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for enhancing social innovation support structures in Ireland.**

Strengths relate to:

- accessibility to key individuals and support structures;
- great human capital for developing social innovation;
- an open and responsible society and;
- presence of some (structural) support to social innovation.

Weaknesses relate to:

- insufficient funding from Government;
- scarcity of mechanisms for impact investment and financial experimentation;
- scarce supports for scaling and piloting social innovations;
- scarce available data that shows the impact/contributions of social innovative organisations and inform evidence-based policymaking;
- scarce knowledge related to complementary supports that different organisations provide and;
- scarce development of strategic (long-term) support mechanisms/institutions.

Suggestions point towards:

- increase awareness of social innovation;
- develop capacity building in tailored strategies that support social innovative organisations to pitch and show impact to different stakeholders;
- develop structures of shared specialized staff for social innovation organisations;
- develop structures that bridge silos between Government Departments and between stakeholders operating in different sectors;
- improve financial experimentation;
- enhance research evidence/data, and;
- multiannual investments and support based on strategic thinking.

This report concludes that Ireland currently represents a fertile ground for social innovation with lots of initiatives and potential at grassroots level. The social innovation ecosystem presents support structures formed by a number of organisations/institutions operating within different sectors but especially in the civil society and public sector with support structures from the business/for-profit sector and academia being rather underdeveloped. These organisations/institutions provide support to social innovation organisations in terms of funding, training, business/marketing, networking. However, these supports are rather piecemeal and the ecosystem lacks a long-term strategy based on a common understanding of social innovation which reflect the early stage of Ireland's social innovation ecosystem. For the further development of the Irish social innovation ecosystem more strategic, structured, long-term and cross-sectoral support structures that can unlock the potential of social innovation in Ireland are required.

Introduction

The dominant discourse towards innovation has traditionally enhanced the significance of technological innovations, having neglected or subrogated other forms of innovation such as social innovation¹. Nevertheless, social innovation has been increasingly identified by academics, practitioners and policymakers as a significant element when addressing complex challenges that our societies face such as climate change, social exclusion, ageing society, depopulation of rural areas or digitalisation. Hence, social innovation has recently been taken to the forefront of European research, practice and policy discourse as mechanisms that can generate social, environmental and economic value and present potential to transform our society^{2,3}.

But how is social innovation defined? Social innovation is a contested term, it can refer to “both the means and the ends of action”⁴. For some authors, social innovations are characterised by the generation of new products, services or solutions that address social rather individual problems⁵. However, others focus on the processes through which new social relations are constructed. These new combinations entail changes in non-material aspects, such as behaviour or values, which could improve the collective solutions for an existing social problem⁶. According to Moulaert et al.⁷, social innovations should address three critical dimensions; i.e. the satisfaction of human needs that are not currently satisfied (content/product dimension); changes in social relations (process dimension) and; increase the socio-political capability and access to resources of disadvantage/vulnerable groups (empowerment dimension).

¹ Lorna Dargan and Mark Shucksmith, "LEADER and Innovation." *Sociologia Ruralis* 48, no. 3 (2008): 274-291.

² European Commission, *Social Innovation: a Decade of Changes*. (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014)

³ Frank Moulaert, Abid Mehmood, Diana MacCallum, and Bernhard Leubolt, *Social Innovation as a Trigger for Transformations The Role of Research*. (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017)

⁴ Robert Grimm, Christopher Fox, Susan Baines, and Kevin Albertson, "Social Innovation, an Answer to Contemporary Societal Challenges? Locating the Concept in Theory and Practice." *Innovation (Abingdon, England)* 26, no. 4 (2013): 438

⁵ James A Phills Jr, Kriss Deiglmeier, and Dale T. Miller, "Rediscovering Social Innovation." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 6, no.4 (2008): 34.

⁶ Michael Mumford, "Social Innovation: Ten Cases from Benjamin Franklin." *Creativity Research Journal* 14, no. 2 (2002): 253-266.

⁷ Frank Moulaert, Abid Mehmood, Diana MacCallum, and Abdelillah Hamdouch, *The International Handbook of Social Innovation*. (Chentelham: Edward Elgar, 2013)

Drawing from the TEPSIE project⁸ and the European Commission's definition of social innovation⁹, this report has adopted a working definition of social innovations as: new solutions (products, services, models, processes) that meet human/social needs, more effectively than existing solutions, and lead to new or improved capabilities and social relationships and better use of assets and resources, hence, enhancing society's capacity to act.

Social innovation presents the following characteristics, first, it entails the pilot, development, implementation and/or scaling of new ideas that meet social needs. These innovative solutions can address challenges that have not been effectively addressed and/or that have been previously neglected. Social innovations can be ground-breaking solutions developed for the first time, but also relative innovations which have been proved in some contexts but are adapted and/or scaled to other specific places and/or groups or to the wider society¹⁰. Second, social innovation presents a collective and collaborative dimension. These innovations are based on collective processes through which different stakeholders align their interests and resources when developing new solutions. Hence, social innovation usually entails cross-sectoral, collective and collaborative learning and action¹¹. Third, processes of social innovations are related to (inclusive) participation, grassroots/community engagement, harnessing and reconfiguration of ideas and (untapped) resources, negotiation, co-production and development of capabilities, thus to citizen's empowerment and capacity-building.

Social innovations can be found across multiple fields of activity and at different levels, these can range from the introduction of a new peer-support programme within a school for tackling cyber bullying among students, the development of a community-based renewable energy project to supply affordable energy to a rural locality or the nation-wide adoption of systems that enhance the working integration and independent living of people with intellectual or mental health issues. This is the case of Ireland, where social innovation initiatives can be found within a wide range of fields, including: the eldercare services (e.g. CareBright Dementia Center), agriculture (e.g. Grow It Yourself), employment (e.g. Grow

⁸ TEPSIE, *Building the Social Innovation Ecosystem* (The Young Foundation, 2014).

⁹ European Commission, *Social Innovation*, https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/strategy/innovation/social_en

¹⁰ The RurAction Network, *Social Enterprises in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Innovative Troubleshooters in Action* (Erkner, Germany: IRS Dialog, 2020)

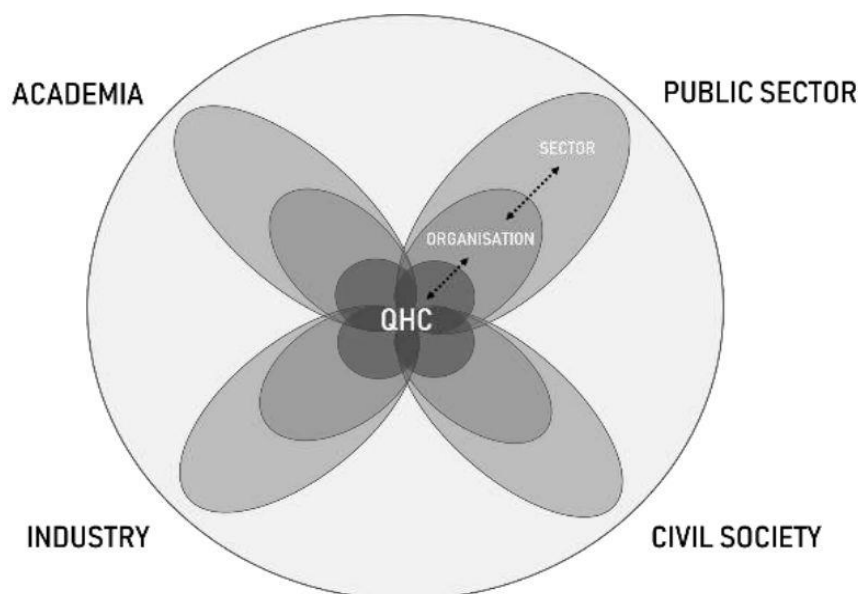
¹¹ Stefan Neumeier, "Social Innovation in Rural Development: Identifying the Key Factors of Success." *The Geographical Journal* 183, no.1 (2017): 34-46.

Remote), children (e.g. Sensational Kids), gender equality/empowerment (e.g. The Shona Project), ethnic minorities (e.g. Shuttle Knit), physical and mental well-being (e.g. Sailing into Wellness), rural development (e.g. Kildorrery Development Group) or recycling (e.g. Boomerang Enterprises).

These social innovations do not occur in a vacuum but they have been developed through the interactions of different actors situated in specific geographical, environmental, socio-economic and institutional contexts. In this regard, recent publications point towards the relevance of ‘social innovation ecosystems’¹² as the framework which enhance and/or hinder the emergence, development, consolidation and scaling of social innovation initiatives¹³.

From a Quadruple Helix approach¹⁴, social innovation ecosystems are formed by actors and institutions from the public sector/government, industry/businesses, academia/university and civil society/third sector (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Quadruple Helix¹⁵



¹² Bonno Pel, Julia Wittmayer, Jens Dorland and Michael Søggaard Jørgensen, “Unpacking the social innovation ecosystem: an empirically grounded typology of empowering network constellations”, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 33, no. 3 (2020): 311-336

¹³ Dmitri Domanski and Christoph Kaletka, “Social Innovation Ecosystems”, in *The Atlas of Social Innovation*, ed. Jürgen Howaldt, Christoph Kaletka, Antonius Schröder, Marthe Zirngiebl (Dortmund, TU Dortmund, 2018), 207-211.

¹⁴ Kenneth Nordberg, Åge Mariussen, and Seija Virkkala. "Community-Driven Social Innovation and Quadruple Helix Coordination in Rural Development. Case Study on LEADER Group Aktion Österbotten." *Journal of Rural Studies* 79 (2020): 157-168.

¹⁵ Source: Alfonso Alfonsi et al. *D6.5: Progress report for comparative analysis*. (RICONFIGURE - Reconfiguring Research and Innovation Constellations, 2020)

This approach advocates for the integration and interaction between the helices (sectors) as a key factor that facilitates knowledge sharing required for innovation processes. Moreover, the Quadruple Helix and social innovation ecosystem approaches transcend an actor-centered approach but focus on the interactions among these actors and on their wider environment including governance models/policies, financial and non-financial support infrastructures and networks and, legal and cultural norms¹⁶. Within the ecosystems, support structures to social innovation can be found in each of the abovementioned sectors. These support structures play a key role as they can enhance social innovation in terms of providing funding, networking, mentoring, advocacy or establishing an adequate policy framework for the development of social innovation.

In order to contribute to an enabling Irish social innovation ecosystem this report focuses on the study of current support structures for social innovation in Ireland¹⁷. The rest of the report is structured as follows: first, a literature review of social innovation in Ireland is presented, providing an overview of the main actors, policies, support and advocacy networks-organisations, research and education institutions and programmes, and financial intermediaries which form the Irish social innovation ecosystem. Second, a mapping of support structures of social innovation in Ireland from a multi-stakeholder perspective is included. To do so, a mixed methods approach has been undertaken. On the one hand, surveys to social innovation organisations and initiatives that operate in diverse fields and are based in different (urban and rural) territories across Ireland have been conducted. This quantitative data has been complemented with qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with representatives from support structures of social innovation in Ireland. From the analysis of the evidence gathered this report maps the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of Irish social innovation support structures. Moreover, the report describes suggestions from different stakeholders related to these support structures. Third, the report provides conclusions with recommendations to be considered in the development of a blueprint for the establishment of a National Competence Centre for Social Innovation in Ireland.

¹⁶ Domanski and Kaletka, “Social Innovation Ecosystems”, 207-211.

¹⁷ It is important to note that the aim of this report is not mapping the whole social innovation ecosystem in Ireland but it focuses on specific elements of it, such as the support structures for social innovative organisations/initiatives.

Social Innovation in Ireland.

An overview of the Irish Social Innovation ecosystem

The wider (macro) context

Ireland's social innovation ecosystem is comprised of different elements such as social innovation actors, policy framework, funding and non-financial support structures and networks and cultural norms. However, these elements are embedded within a wider context which influence the shape and development of the social innovation ecosystem. In order to show the macro-environment where Ireland's social innovation ecosystem operates, Kerlin's Macro-Institutional Social Enterprise (MISE) framework¹⁸ has been adapted to include national (macro) statistical indicators that address the four pillars of the Quadruple Helix included within social innovation ecosystems, see Table 1.

In terms of public sector/government, two constructs have been included. The first refers to governance and more specifically to the quality of functioning of public institutions. The analysis of data from the World Bank on indicators such as 'regulatory quality', 'rule of law', 'voice and accountability', 'government effectiveness' and, 'control of corruption' shows that Ireland scores above the 90 percentile in each of these indicators¹⁹, denoting Ireland's high quality and mature public institutions. The second indicator refers to Ireland's public expenditure in services such as education (3,10% of GDP) and health (6,9% of GDP). These figures denote a low level of public expenditure in these fields in comparison to other EU countries as the average for the EU is 4,7% for education (2019)²⁰ and 9,9% for health (2018)²¹.

In terms of industry (economy), Ireland is characterised by presenting an 'innovation driven economic development stage', being placed in 24th position in the ranking of most innovative countries, according to the Global Competitiveness Index (2019). Moreover, Ireland presents one of the highest GDPs per capita within the EU (62.980€), which is clearly above the EU average (26.370€)²².

¹⁸ Janelle Kerlin, "Defining Social Enterprise Across Different Contexts: A Conceptual Framework Based on Institutional Factors." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42, no.1 (2013): 84-108.

¹⁹ <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators>

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_education

²¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20201202-1>

²² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_08_10/default/table?lang=en

Table 1. The macro context for Ireland's social innovation ecosystem

Government/public institutions						Industry		Academia/Research/ Education		Civil Society/Third Sector		
Welfare State	Governance					Economy						
Public Spending on Health (2018)/Education (2019) (% GDP)	Regulatory quality (2020)	Rule of law (2020)	Control of corruption (2020)	Voice and accountability (2020)	Government effectiveness (2020)	Economic Development Stage (GCI Ranking)	GDP/per capita	Education level (2019)	R&D expenditure (% GDP)	Workforce (third sector) (2018)	Volunteers	Support/Funding
6,9/3,1 (EU 9,9/4,7)	91,8	90,4	91,3	95,2	90,9	Innovation (24 th)	62.980€ (EU 26.370€)	54,4% tertiary education (25 - 54) (EU 35,9%)	0,78 (EU2,19)	7,3% total workforce	Significant levels of volunteers	Government main support (philanthropy small proportion of funding)
<p>Mature and quality public institutions Low expenditure in public services</p>						<p>Highly competitive and innovation driven economy</p>		<p>Highly educated population Low expenditure R&D</p>		<p>Strong and diversified civil society with a significant economic dependence from government support</p>		

In terms of academia and research, Ireland presents high educational levels with 54,4% of the population between 25 and 54 years having tertiary education, notably above the EU level (35,9%)²³. However, Ireland expenditure in R&D (0,78% of its GDP) is clearly below the EU average spending (2,19%)²⁴.

In terms of civil society/third sector, Ireland presents a large workforce within the third sector, this representing about 7,3% of the total Irish workforce, significant levels of volunteers and diverse-heterogeneous organisations operating within the sector²⁵. Government support to civil society (non-profit) organisations²⁶ is relatively higher than in other countries characterised by a liberal civil society structure such as Australia or the USA, while philanthropy funds represent a very small proportion of Irish civil society (non-profit sector) funding²⁷. Hence, Ireland presents a strong and diversified civil society which is largely economically dependent on public funding.

In summary, these macro indicators show that the Irish social innovation ecosystem is currently embedded within a context of mature and high-quality public institutions, low expenditure in public services (including R&D), a highly competitive and innovation driven economy with a highly educated population and a strong and diversified civil society with a significant economic dependence from government/public support.

Actors, policies, support and advocacy networks-organisations, research and education and financial intermediaries

Social innovations can flourish from a wide variety of actors operating in different sectors (see Table 2), including **social entrepreneurs/enterprises, civil society, community and voluntary organisations, social movements, public institutions and/or (social) businesses**. Due to the lack of official and comprehensive statistics on social innovation organisations/initiatives within Ireland it is not possible to estimate the number of social innovation organisations across the country and their specific characteristics. However, examples of social innovation can be found within a wide range of fields such as eldercare

²³ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational attainment statistics#Level of educational attainment by age](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational_attainment_statistics#Level_of_educational_attainment_by_age)

²⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20201127-1>

²⁵ Benefacts, *Nonprofit Sector Analysis 2018: Understanding Ireland's third sector*. (Dublin: Benefacts, 2018)

²⁶ About 43% of Irish non profits receive funding from the government, although this varies highly depending on the sector. Government funding is the biggest single source of income, especially through contract for services. Although this support highly varies across sectors (Benefacts, *Nonprofit Sector Analysis 2018*, 14-7)

²⁷ Benefacts, *Nonprofit Sector Analysis 2018*, 20

services (e.g. CareBright Dementia Center), agriculture (e.g. GIY), employment (e.g. Grow Remote), children with special educational needs (e.g. Sensational Kids), community development (e.g. Innovate Communities), gender equality/empowerment (e.g. The Shona Project), ethnic minorities (e.g. Shuttle Knit), migrants (e.g. The Great Care Coop), physical and mental well-being (e.g. Sailing into Wellness), rural development (e.g. Kilmeedy Development Group) or recycling (e.g. Boomerang Enterprises). Irish social innovations are also diverse in their stage of development, from initiatives at early-start up stages (e.g. Hour Time Bank) to those that have been scaled nation-wide (e.g. FoodCloud, Housing First). Furthermore, social innovations can be found across the whole country, from Dublin city (e.g. The Rediscovery Centre) to the coasts of Donegal (e.g. Liquid Therapy).

Table 2. Type and characteristics of social innovation organisations/initiatives

Type of SI organisations/initiatives	Characteristics
Social enterprises/entrepreneurs	Lack of comprehensive nationwide data
C&V organisations/social movements	Wide range of fields of activity
Public institutions	Different stages of development
(Social) Businesses	National territorial coverage

Besides those main actors implementing social innovation initiatives, the Irish social innovation ecosystem is also formed by **statutory/public bodies (public sector)** with competencies in the development of **policies, strategies and programmes** related to social innovation, launching calls for funding and providing support to the social innovation ecosystem (see Table 3).

Within these bodies the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) currently holds Government responsibility for ‘social innovation’. Within the DRCD also resides competencies in closely related fields to social innovation such as social enterprises/entrepreneurship and the community and voluntary sector (civil society). This Department has launched policies and strategies which include specific measures related to social innovation such as Ireland’s first ever ‘National Social Enterprise Policy (2019–2021)’, ‘A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland (2019–2024)’ and ‘Our Rural Future. Rural Development Policy (2021–2025)’. Moreover, the DRCD is also in charge of developing the future National Strategy on social innovation for Ireland.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) is also a key statutory body within the social innovation ecosystem as it is the Managing Authority of the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), which includes measures to strengthen social innovation across Ireland and Europe.

In addition, social innovation initiatives/programmes have also developed across other departments such as the Department of Social Protection (DSP), the Department of Housing, the Department of Health, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) and the Department of Justice. As an example, the Department of Justice in conjunction with the Irish Prison Service and The Probation Service have developed in the last years some socially innovative strategies for the working integration of people with criminal records, e.g. ‘Working to Change: Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021-2023’.

Table 3. Public institutions, policies, strategies and programmes supporting social innovation

Public institutions	Policies, strategies, programmes
Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD)	<p>‘National Social Enterprise Policy (2019-2021)’</p> <p>‘A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland (2019-2024)’</p> <p>‘Our Rural Future. Rural Development Policy (2021 – 2025)’</p> <p>National Strategy for Social Innovation (forthcoming)</p>
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)	ESF+
Other Departments of Irish Government, e.g. Department of Justice, DSP, Dep. Health, DETE	E.g. ‘Working to Change: Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021-2023’.
State Agencies, e.g. Pobal, HSE	E.g. SICAP, CSP.
Local Authorities (City and County Councils), LEOs	E.g. Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards, Cork Social Enterprise Development Fund
Local Action Groups	LEADER programme

Also at the national level, public agencies such as for example the HSE or Pobal, play a significant role supporting social innovative organisations/initiatives through programmes such as the Individual Placement and Support (IPS), Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) or the Community Services Programme (CSP). Enterprise Ireland (and Local Enterprise Offices at the local level), can also provide support for those social innovative organisations with a more commercial focus, namely social enterprises.

Moreover, at local level, Local Authorities (City and County Councils) also supports social innovations through programmes, workshops and/or contests such as the Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards or Cork Social Enterprise Development Fund²⁸. Furthermore, the EU LEADER programme for rural development which is administered by Local Action Groups²⁹ at local/regional level, also includes measures to support social enterprises and social innovations in rural areas.

Another significant component of Ireland's social innovation ecosystem are those **intermediary organisations and networks** (usually from the civil society) that provide different types of **support and advocacy** for social innovation organisations/initiatives (see Table 4). With a specific focus on social innovation, Rethink Ireland (previously Social Innovation Fund Ireland), Young Social Innovators, Genio and Innovate Communities provide a suite of resources for social innovative organisations and initiatives. In this regard, Rethink Ireland provides funding through competitive processes to organisations at different stages of development but also mentoring and business support. Moreover, this organisation also plays a significant role in terms of advocacy and lobbying for the social innovation field/sector. Young Social Innovators supports are focused on developing and implementing learning programmes and materials for youngsters and awards for social innovations developed by youngsters. Genio focuses on scaling social innovations, with a special emphasis on those related to public services. Innovate Communities main role relates to supporting communities to deliver social innovations, moreover, the organisation has developed social innovation hubs which acts as incubation (coworking) spaces for social innovations to flourish.

Furthermore, there are some intermediary organisations and networks which provide support to specific actors within the social innovation ecosystems such as social enterprises

²⁸ This is launched in partnership between Cork City Council and Rethink Ireland.

²⁹ Local Action Groups are (ideally) formed by representatives from different sectors of a rural area, thus stakeholders from the local government, the for-profit private sector and the community and voluntary sector.

and social entrepreneurs (e.g. Irish Social Enterprise Network, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland, Waterford Social Enterprise Network) and to community and voluntary organisations (e.g. The Wheel). In addition, other supporting organisations focus on ‘changemakers’ (e.g. Ashoka Ireland, ChangeX), social impact initiatives (e.g. Social Impact Ireland), local development (Irish Local Development Network/Local Development Companies), philanthropy (e.g. Philanthropy Ireland), indigenous tech start-ups (e.g. Scale Ireland) or young (impact) entrepreneurs (e.g. Enactus Ireland) which can include social innovative solutions.

Table 4. Social innovation support and advocacy intermediary organisations and networks

Support and Advocacy Intermediary Organisations and Networks	Type of supports
Rethink Ireland	Suite of support for social innovations – funding calls, mentoring, business support, advocacy, lobbying
Young Social Innovators	Support and learning programmes for youngsters Awards for best social innovations by youngsters
Innovate Communities	Support for communities to deliver social innovations Social innovation hub (coworking spaces)
Genio	Support for scaling social innovations
Irish Social Enterprise Network Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland Waterford Social Enterprise Network; Inishowen Social Enterprise Network	Suite of resources for social enterprises/social entrepreneurs
The Wheel	Support for community and voluntary organisations
Ashoka Ireland; ChangeX	Support to ‘changemakers’
Social Impact Ireland	Support to social impact initiatives
Irish Local Development Network/Local Development Companies	Support local and community development
Philanthropy Ireland	Support to develop strategic philanthropy
Scale Ireland	Support to tech start-ups, including social entrepreneurs
Enactus Ireland	Support to young (impact) entrepreneurs

In regard to **research and higher education (academia)**, besides some learning programmes developed by abovementioned organisations such as for example Young Social Innovators, Irish universities and institutes of technology have developed a number of courses, programmes and research addressing social innovation (see Table 5). In this regard, a significant milestone was the launched in 2018 within Trinity College Dublin of the Centre for Social Innovation which engages in research and teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level on social innovation. Moreover, Dublin City University, University College Cork, University of Limerick, University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin and Waterford Institute of Technology offer a variety of courses to university students on social enterprises/social entrepreneurship, usually at postgraduate level.

Table 5. Research and higher education programmes in social innovation

Research and higher education institutions	Educational courses, programmes and research projects
Trinity College Dublin	Centre for Social Innovation Modules (undergraduate): ‘Designing Social Innovation’, ‘Social Innovation and Social Impact’.
Dublin City University University College Cork University of Limerick University College Dublin Trinity College Dublin Waterford Institute of Technology	Modules on social entrepreneurship/social enterprises, mostly at postgraduate level
All abovementioned academic institutions + TU Dublin and LIT + some non-academic partners, e.g. Rethink Ireland	Research of social innovation and social entrepreneurship/enterprises – individual, research groups, national and international research projects

In addition to the above mentioned academic institutions, research on social innovation and social entrepreneurship has also been conducted in Technological University Dublin and Limerick Institute of Technology. This research carried out by Irish institutions has been conducted by individual researchers and research groups but Irish academic institutions have also participated in research projects with other national and international partners including stakeholders from academia, policy and practice. Some examples of these multi-stakeholders research projects on social innovation and social entrepreneurship are ‘RurAction - Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action’ with the participation of University College Cork and Ballyhoura Development CLG; ‘EMwoSE - Women From Ethnic Minorities in Social Enterprise’ with the

participation of Limerick Institute of Technology; ‘Financing Social Enterprise in Ireland - Models of Impact Investing & Readiness’ with the participation of Rethink Ireland, Dublin City University and Community Finance Ireland and the support of the Irish Social Enterprise Network or the ‘FUSE project – National Competence Centre for Social Innovation’ with the participation of Rethink Ireland and Genio.

Irish social innovative organisations/initiatives have applied a number of strategies when applying to **financial intermediaries** that provide funding for implementing, consolidating and/or scaling their social innovations (see Table 6).

Besides loans from commercial banks and credit unions, Irish social innovative organisations can apply to social finance lenders such as Microfinance Ireland, Community Finance Ireland and Clann Creedo (Social Finance Foundation). Moreover, some Irish philanthropic foundations also provide financial support for social innovative organisations/initiatives, e.g. The Ireland Funds, Tomar Trust, The Community Foundation for Ireland, Lifes2good Foundation. Furthermore, social innovation is also supported by impact investment organisations such as WakeUp Capital and Venture Wave. Finally, it is also important to note that Irish social innovative organisations/initiatives have often resorted to the community for financial support, either in traditional ways such as organising local community fundraisings and/or using IT tools such as in the organisation of crowdfunding.

Table 6. Financial intermediaries for social innovation

Financial intermediaries	Type of funding support
Commercial banks Credit Unions	Loans
Social finance lenders (e.g. Clann Creedo; Community Finance Ireland; Microfinance Ireland)	Loans
Philanthropic foundations (e.g. The Ireland Funds; Tomar Trust)	Donations/philanthropy
Impact Investors (e.g. WakeUp Capital; Venture Wave)	Impact Investment
Community (local, global)	Fundraising, crowdfunding

In conclusion, this section outlines a variety of actors and support structures for social innovation within the Irish social innovation ecosystem. These support structures that form the social innovation ecosystem address different key issues for the development of social innovation such as public policies and strategies/programmes, support and advocacy from intermediary organisations and networks, research and education on social innovation and/or access to finances/funding (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Overview of social innovation ecosystem in Ireland³⁰



³⁰ The logos included within the Figure 2 do not represent an exhaustive list of organisations/institutions supporting social innovation in Ireland

Support Structures within Ireland's Social Innovation Ecosystem. A multi-stakeholder perspective.

This section presents an empirical research of the support structures within Ireland's social innovation ecosystem. This research has gathered and analysed data from different stakeholders such as social innovative organisations, representatives from the public sector (Government Departments and Agencies), industry (business sector and philanthropy), academia and support networks and organisations from the civil society/third sector. This multi-stakeholder perspective provides a comprehensive picture of the supports structures to social innovation within Ireland, their main characteristics, strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for further development.

Methodology

This research has followed a mixed method approach³¹, including quantitative (survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) techniques for data collection. A concurrent embedded strategy³² for gathering data has been followed, thus both kinds of data were collected at approximately the same time. The mixed methods and embedded data collection strategy matches with the purpose of establishing a broad exploratory picture of the topic under study, i.e. mapping support structures for social innovation in Ireland, not giving preference in time to one technique but trying to integrate both kinds of data to obtain a rich and comprehensive perspective of the phenomenon under study³³.

Survey

A survey targeting social innovative organisations was developed. This incorporated different types of questions, including single and multiple choice, rating (Likert) scale and open-ended questions. The survey was formed by three main sections³⁴, i.e. 'General'; 'Utilisation of social innovation support structures' and; 'Suggestions for social innovation support structures'. The sections include background information questions about the social innovative organisations, including the type of organisation, field of activity, development stage, geographical location and reach, and size in terms of employees and volunteers. Furthermore, questions related to the level of support to social innovation; identification of

³¹ John W Creswell, *Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. (Thousand Oaks, SAGE, 2009),4

³² *Ibid.*, 214

³³ Charles Ragin and Lisa Amoroso. *Constructing Social Research*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2011),35

³⁴ These sections were preceded by a Welcome section with introductory information.

main support organisations/institutions; degree of access and utilisation of different support structures; types of supports received; satisfaction with the support received; barriers to social innovation, actions needed to overcome these barriers; and suggestions for enhancing support to social innovative organisations, were also included.

The survey was created using the programme EU Survey, an official site and software for survey creation and distribution from the European Commission³⁵. Besides the institutional credibility of using this European Commission server, EU Survey allows for including a wide range of questions, using conditional logics - which allow for building complex questionnaires reducing the withdrawal of respondents - and conforms with EU GDPR regulations.

As a census or repository of social innovative organisations is not available in Ireland, the sample of social innovative organisations was created using existing data bases of social innovation intermediary organisations that operate nationwide. These data bases were complemented with a search on websites related to social innovation in Ireland. A total of 321 social innovative organisations were identified³⁶.

All social innovative organisations included within the sample were contacted via e-mail. This e-mail included a brief explanation of the FUSE project, the purpose of the survey and a link to the survey hosted in EU Survey. All organisations were contacted at the beginning of November 2021 and were sent a gentle reminder after three weeks. The survey was opened for 4 weeks, being closed at the beginning of December 2021. A total of 62 valid answers were gathered, making a total response rate of 19,63%³⁷ (see Table 7).

Table 7. Survey

Survey	
N° Questions	20
Timeline	4 weeks (reminder week 3) [November-December 2021]
Sample	321
Valid answers	62
Response rate	19,63%

³⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/home/welcome>

³⁶ The author acknowledges that this sample is not statistically representative of the whole population of social innovative organisations in Ireland. The lack of a national register for socially innovative organisations represents a challenge to the statistical representativeness of a sample of social innovative organisations.

³⁷ Within the last years different studies have asked for the participation in surveys to social innovative organisations (and social enterprises), the response rate denotes certain survey fatigue within these organisations.

Respondents to the survey self-identified mainly as social enterprises (61%), however, also community and voluntary organisations (26%), public institutions (6%) and private enterprises (2%) filled in the questionnaire³⁸ (see Figure 3). In terms of fields of activity, respondents operate in a wide range of fields (see Figure 4). Within these, community development (20%), healthcare (18%), education (18%) and working integration of vulnerable groups (13%) are the main fields of activity of respondents.

Figure 3. Type of social innovative organisation

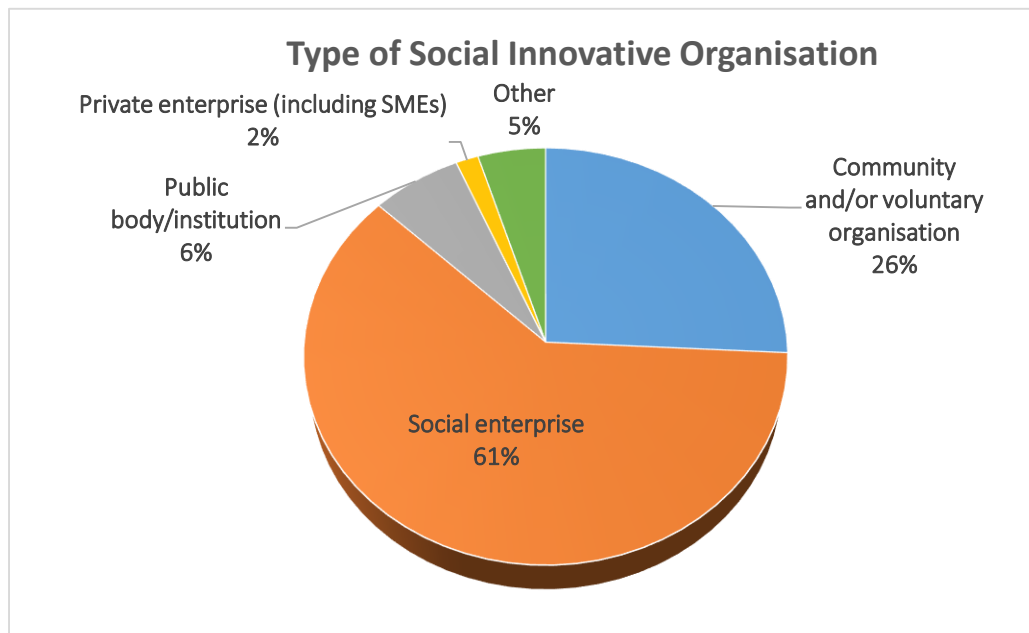
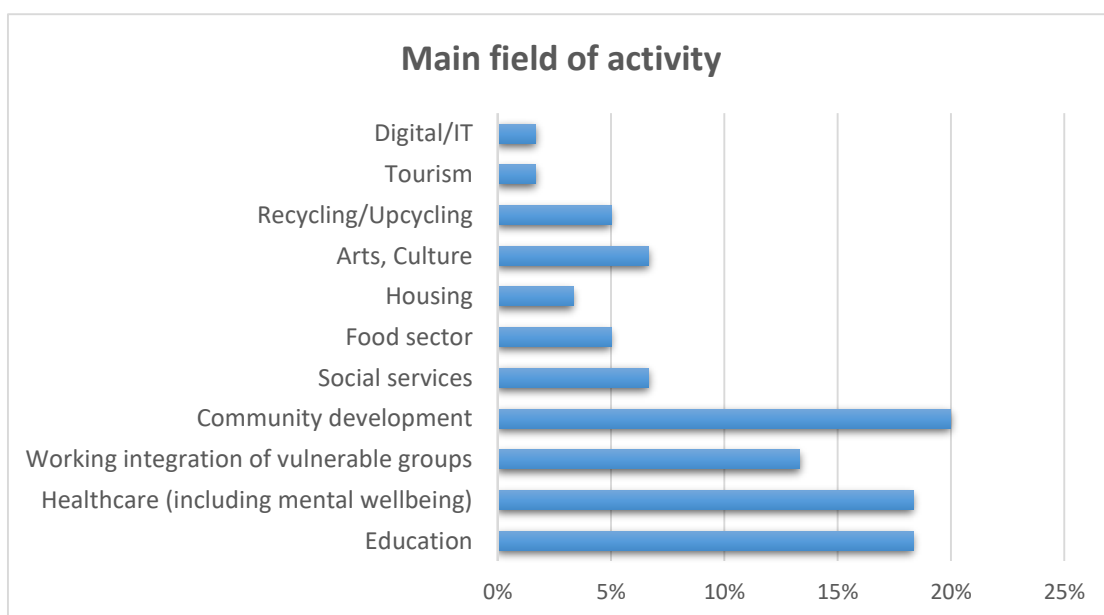


Figure 4. Main field of activity



³⁸ 5% of respondents self-identified as 'other'.

Respondents to the survey are based in 16 different counties of the Republic of Ireland (see Figure 5). Organisations with their headquarters in Dublin represents 45% of respondents to the survey, social innovation organisations based in Cork and Galway represents 10% (respectively) of survey respondents and those based in Donegal represents 8%. Furthermore, 31% of respondents are based and operate in an urban area, while 19% are in rural areas, 50% stated that they operate both in urban and rural areas (see Figure 6). In terms of their operational reach, 19% of organisations surveyed have a local reach, 16% operate regionally, 50% at national level and 15% internationally (see Figure 7).

Figure 5. Location of headquarters

County	N	%
Cork	6	10%
Donegal	5	8%
Dublin	28	45%
Galway	6	10%
Kerry	1	2%
Kilkenny	1	2%
Limerick	3	5%
Longford	1	2%
Louth	1	2%
Mayo	1	2%
Monaghan	1	2%
Offaly	2	3%
Tipperary	2	3%
Waterford	2	3%
Westmeath	1	2%
Wicklow	1	2%
Total	62	100%

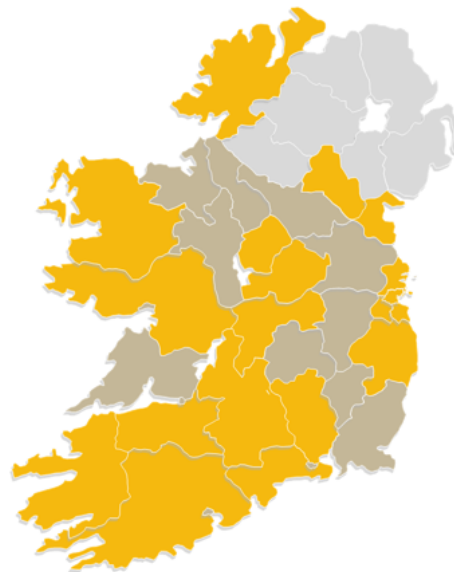


Figure 6. Urban, rural

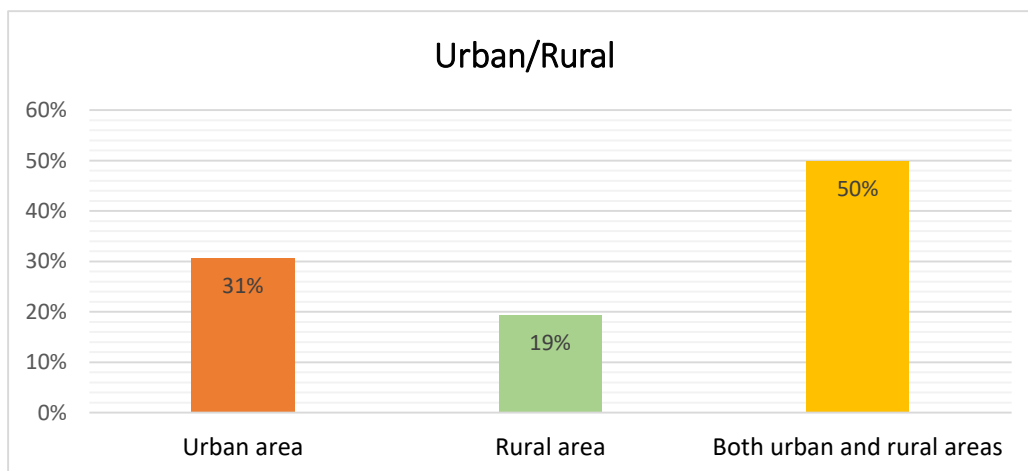
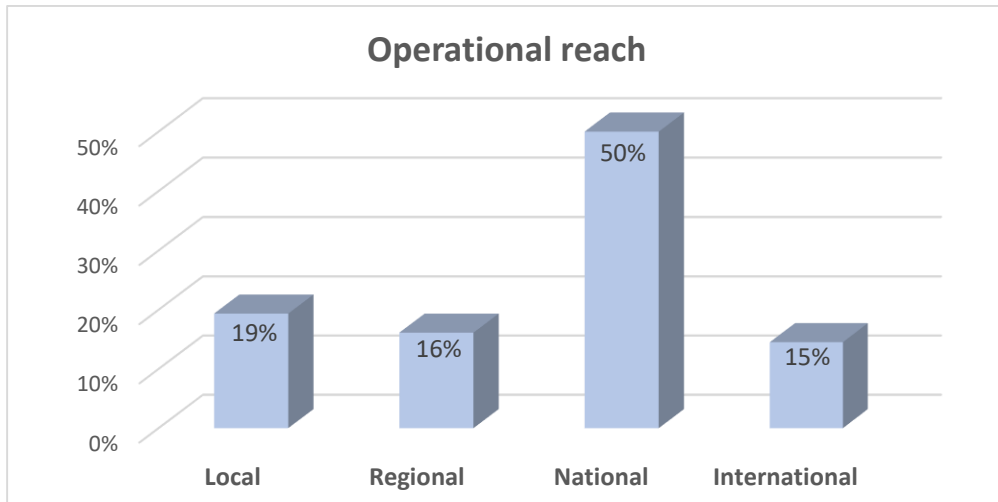


Figure 7. Operational reach



In terms of size of the organisations, most organisations surveyed have between 1 and 5 employees (39%) or between 5 and 15 (26%). However, within respondents there are also some bigger organisations, with more than 50 employees (18%) (see Figure 8). The engagement of volunteers also varies, with 28% of respondents engaging between 5 and 15 volunteers, 23% engaging no volunteers and 21% engaging more than 50 volunteers (see Figure 9).

Figure 8. Number of employees

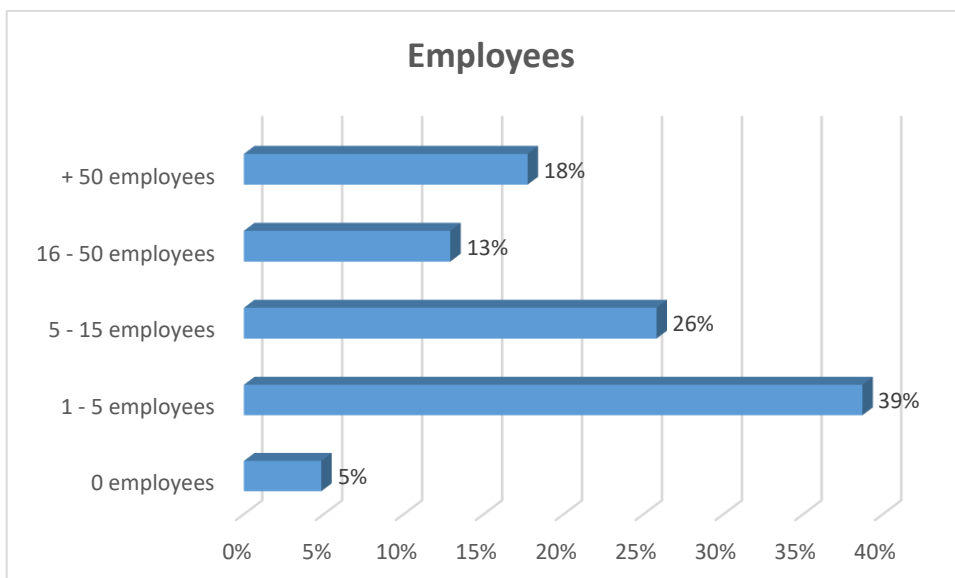
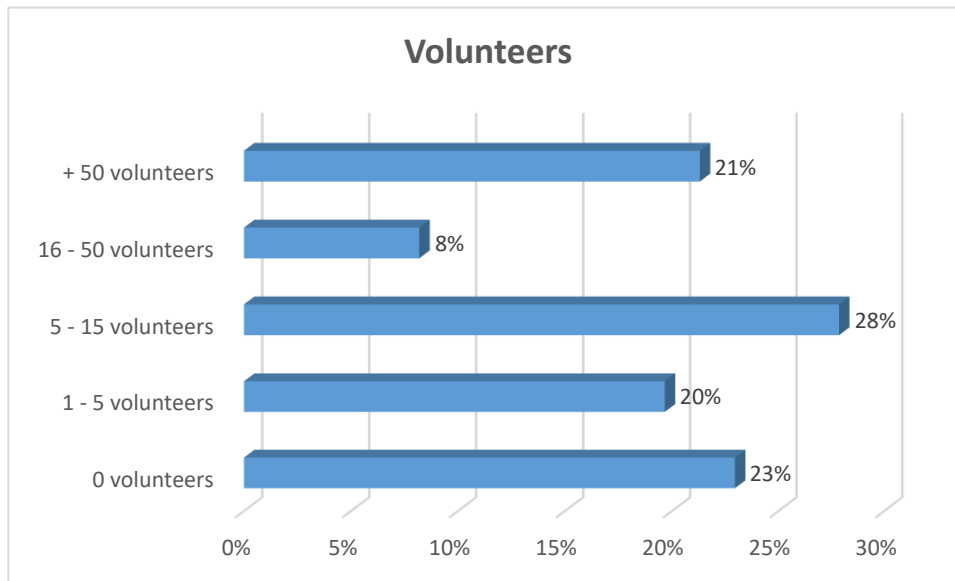


Figure 9. Number of volunteers



Despite the lack of statistical representativeness of the sample of the survey for the whole population of Irish social innovation organisations, the respondents' characteristics present the great diversity of social innovation organisations in Ireland, in terms of types of organisations, field of activities, geographical coverage and levels of employees and volunteers.

The analysis of the data from these social innovative organisations provide some exploratory insights in their relation with support structures for social innovation in Ireland. A descriptive statistical analysis of the data from the survey was conducted using the software SPSS 27 and Microsoft Excel. Moreover, a network analysis of data from the survey was performed using the software Gephi.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with representatives of social innovation support structures in Ireland were also conducted (see Table 8). An interview guideline was built, this includes a first, general section in which interviewees were asked about the work of their organisation/institution, their understanding of social innovation (main features/characteristics) and the types of supports their organisation/institution offers to social innovative organisations/initiatives. In a second section, interviewees were asked about the characteristics of support structures for social innovation within different sectors (public; business/for-profit; academia; civil society/third sector) and about the role of these support structures within the Irish social innovation ecosystem. Finally, in the third section,

interviewees were also asked about the strengths and weaknesses of support structures within the Irish social innovation ecosystem and suggestions for improvement of social innovation support structures in Ireland were gathered. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility for new themes/topics to emerge and for the investigation of the abovementioned sections in different order depending on the flow of the interview.

The sample for the semi-structured interviews were purposely selected using contacts drawn from the FUSE National Consultative Advisory Group and other key informants known by the researcher. The potential interviewees were contacted directly by the researcher via e-mail, explaining the overall objective of the FUSE project and the specific purpose of the interview. Interviews were schedule at the most convenient data and time for the interviewee. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the interviews were conducted online using, generally, Microsoft Teams. The interviews were audio and video recorded previous written consent from the interviewees (see Appendix A).

Table 8. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured Interviews		
Interview guideline	<p>Section one (general): type of work of represented organisation/institutions and support to social innovation; understanding social innovation (main features)</p> <p>Section two: characteristics of social innovation support structures from different sectors; role within the Irish social innovation ecosystem of different support strucutres</p> <p>Section three: strengths and weaknesses of support structures for social innovation in Ireland; further suggestions.</p>	
Interviewees (sample)	Representatives from	N°
	Government Departments	3
	Public-State Agencies	4
	University	1
	Business (intermediary organisation)	1
	Impact investment	2
	Philanthropy (intermediary organisation)	1
	Social innovation (intermediary organisations)	4
	Local Development Companies	2
	Social enterprise (intermediary organisation)	1
	Total interviewees	19
Total length	835 minutes (range: 36 – 65 min.; av. 52 min.)	

A total of 16 interviews (including 19 people) were conducted with multiple stakeholders representing support structures for social innovation from different sectors. These include civil servants from Government Departments and State-Public Agencies; a university academic; representatives from a business intermediary organisation (CEO), from an impact investment organisation (CEO and staff) and from a philanthropic intermediary organisation (CEO); representatives from social innovation intermediary organisations (CEOs) and from a Local Development Company (CEO and research manager) and, a representative from a social enterprise intermediary organisation (board member). The interviews were conducted from mid-October to mid-January 2022. A total of 835 minutes of audio records were gathered, interviews ranging from 36 to 65 minutes with an average length of 52 minutes (see Table 8). Thematic analysis of the data from the semi-structured interviews was performed using the CAQDAS NVivo 12 and Microsoft Word.

The following sections present the findings from the integrated analysis of the data gathered from the surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Understanding and key features of social innovation from stakeholders (support structures)

Social innovation is a contested concept, this section shows the understanding (commonalities and tensions/challenges) and key features of social innovation from different stakeholders who represent support structures to social innovation in Ireland (see Table 9).

Table 9. Understanding and key features of social innovation (commonalities and tensions/challenges)

Commonalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - novelty/newness and change (disruptive but also incremental). Systemic change - aim to address social, environmental and societal challenges (diversity) - hybrid (blended) nature - collective, cross-sectoral nature of social innovation - need of multi-stakeholder cooperation and engagement (trustful relationships) - mismatch between the hybridity and cross-sectoral nature of social innovation and silo support structures - nascent social innovation ecosystem
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Tensions and/or challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unclear boundaries of social innovation, especially with social entrepreneurship/social enterprises - sectoral perspectives on key features of social innovation - the relationship between social innovation and innovation - criteria/metrics for the assessment/measurement of social innovation - question of defining what is socially (and environmentally) good for strategic decision making and support
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Commonalities

A number of commonalities can be outlined in the understanding of social innovation of different Irish stakeholders. First, social innovation is intrinsically linked with **novelty/newness and change**. However, these new ideas, processes, relationships, solutions (services, products) can be **disruptive but also incremental**. In this regard, stakeholders agree that existing ideas, processes, solutions can be considered a social innovation if applying to a different target group, to a new geographical territory and/or scaled to a bigger population or territory. Social innovation can (and usually does) develop at the local and community level, however, many stakeholders stress the relevance for social innovation to address societal challenges and **systemic change** – therefore the question of replication/adaptation and scaling is key for the development of support structures to social innovation.

“I see social innovation as a mean to harnessing ideas to address major social challenges [...] and potentially allows those ideas to be scaled up to a systemic level”
[Interview_13]

Second, stakeholders stress that **social innovations aim to address social, environmental and societal challenges**, thus to “improve the wellbeing of people, communities and the environment” (Interview_15). These broad aims relate to the **diversity** of fields of activities where social innovations are developed. It is important to note that stakeholders generally stress that profit making and distribution is not (should not be) the main aim of social innovative organisations, however, they tend to recognise the **hybrid (blended) nature** of social innovative organisations and do not exclude their possibility of profit making (especially by social enterprises).

“The world of social innovation is a world of hybridity and blurring boundaries, we have organisations combining social and financial goals” [Interview_5]

Third, a key message from stakeholders is the **collective, cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder nature of social innovation and the need for multi-stakeholder cooperation and engagement** to tackle systemic challenges. Building **trustful relationships** between different social innovation stakeholders (support structures) was highlighted as a critical aspect for this engagement and cooperation.

“I think we [different stakeholders] all have a part to play in social innovation, and that multi-stakeholder approach is absolutely fundamental to social innovation working, the engagement of those with the ideas, those helping to scale or who support the ideas and those who have public policy or political responsibility to create a framework where those ideas can be put in practice” [Interview_13]

“It is about bringing the various dimensions [stakeholders and sectors] together so there is collectively one voice [...] this is something it needs real investment of time to get to the stage where you have them [different stakeholders] on the table, when you get them to the table you have to be absolutely crystal clear on what are the actions they can take but equally be open to hear what are the challenges [...] I know it sounds cliché, I know it sounds corny, but it has to be a collaborative built, if I am not part of it I am not going to own it” [Interview_8]

Fourth, stakeholders generally stress the **mismatch between the hybridity and cross-sectoral nature of social innovation and silo support structures**, especially referring to finance and policy/programmes, which do not usually understand and recognise the blended and cross-sectoral nature of social innovations.

“The challenge is that the world is structured and regulation isn’t blended, isn’t hybrid, beyond the notion of for example public-private partnerships, and it tend to view that activities are falling into a clear box, public or private, or non-profit, public venture or private, for financial gain, or not” [Interview_5]

Fifth, stakeholders stress that there is a **nascent social innovation ecosystem** in Ireland which is in its early stages and still rather unstructured. They emphasise the increasing development of support structures for social innovation and the growing awareness of social innovation between different stakeholders (support structures).

“It [social innovation ecosystem] is in its infancy still, it is an evolutionary stage of social innovation, but given how organised the [European] Commission are becoming about this there is a good chance for these dots to be connected and for a more strategic and more coherent approach” [Interview_10]

Tensions and challenges

Besides these commonalities, some tensions and challenges can also be outlined in the understanding and key features of social innovation stressed by different Irish stakeholders.

First, **unclear boundaries especially with social entrepreneurship/social enterprises**.

While some stakeholders express the broader nature of social innovation, including for example (social) innovation within public services or in education, others mostly circumscribe social innovation to social entrepreneurship/social enterprises, often interchanging the terms. In addition, different stakeholders usually present a **sectoral perspective** on social innovation, stressing particular aspects related to their own sector when articulating their understanding and main features of social innovation. Those stakeholders working closely with public and social services emphasise the social inclusion dimension of social innovation; those working in local and community development stress the territorial and community engagement dimensions, or; those stakeholders working closely to tech start-ups and to social entrepreneurs highlight the relevance of technology and social entrepreneurial action for social innovation.

Second, stakeholder express **different perspectives** in regard to the need/relevance of **including social innovation within innovation** policies, programmes, thus as part of the broader innovation ecosystem and support structures. Some stakeholders state that social innovation is one of the different types of innovation and its inclusion within the broader innovation ecosystem can mean the recognition and increasing relevance, awareness and support of this kind of innovation. However, other stakeholders emphasise that social innovation is a very particular type of innovation which requires its own space, and that if included within the mainstream innovation framework/paradigm, dominated by tech-business (for-profit), the social side and main aim of social innovation can be jeopardised and/or diluted within that space.

“Innovation and social innovation should be completely interconnected, they should be moving forwards in lockstep. I am concern that if the innovation policy is in one Department and the social innovation policy in a different Department they do not communicate with each other and they don’t see each other as relevant”
[Interview_12]

“It’s tricky, innovation can happen everywhere and anywhere, it can be micro it can be macro, whereas I see social innovation as being very specific about addressing major social or societal challenges [...] There are very good reasons of why social innovation should be treated separately [...] You have lots of focus around innovation and business, digital innovation and all of that type of thing. So for me

social innovation is very particular, I don't think it should be locked in within broader efforts to foster innovation, unless we are classifying different innovation efforts and we treat social innovation as part of that" [Interview_13]

Third, stakeholders stress as a relevant aspect for social innovation to develop assessment/measurement tools that can provide evidence about the contribution (impact) of social innovation, however, the research shows some **tensions between stakeholders in relation to the criteria/metrics for the assessment/measurement of social innovations**. Some stakeholders express a significant advantage in terms of availing of support structures for those social innovations that by their nature can present measurable targets (e.g. people from rough sleeping to having a home) in comparison to those more focused on procedural and more intangible aspects (e.g. enhance the creativity of young children), usually the latter having more difficulty to show short-term concrete results but more focused on a long-term change. In this regard, some stakeholders stress the relevance of showing measurable change while others stressed that "if you're really doing things that are outside the box you don't have a measurement system, by the very nature of it" (Interview_15). In addition, another tension highlighted by stakeholders is if the same metrics/assessment tools should be used for accessing support by social innovative organisations or if aspects such as the territory where the social innovation is being developed or the (lack of) purchasing power capacity of the target groups should be also weighted when availing of access to support structures.

"Because of the involvement of private money, people [stakeholders] are influenced by the language of the business sector, to the point that they actually think that you make impact larger in the way that you would in the private sector [...] but in the social and environmental areas it is a much much more complex situation because the end beneficiaries are the people who don't have the buying power" [Interview_10]

Fourth, stakeholders stress the social, environmental and societal aims of social innovation; however, some stakeholders stress the relevance of developing more strategic support structures of social innovations to align with specific goals such as those contained within national policy objectives and/or with the Sustainable Development Goals. On the other hand, some stakeholders stress the bottom-up nature of social innovation, including the types of goals that social innovative organisations develop which should surge at community and even individual level. The (philosophical and political) **question of defining what is socially (and environmentally) good** ('good for society') does not mean tensions in terms of the development of specific social innovations, however, when considering **strategic**

decision making and support at higher levels (for example in terms of national scaling social innovations) it is rather a relevant point of discussion for developing social innovation support structures.

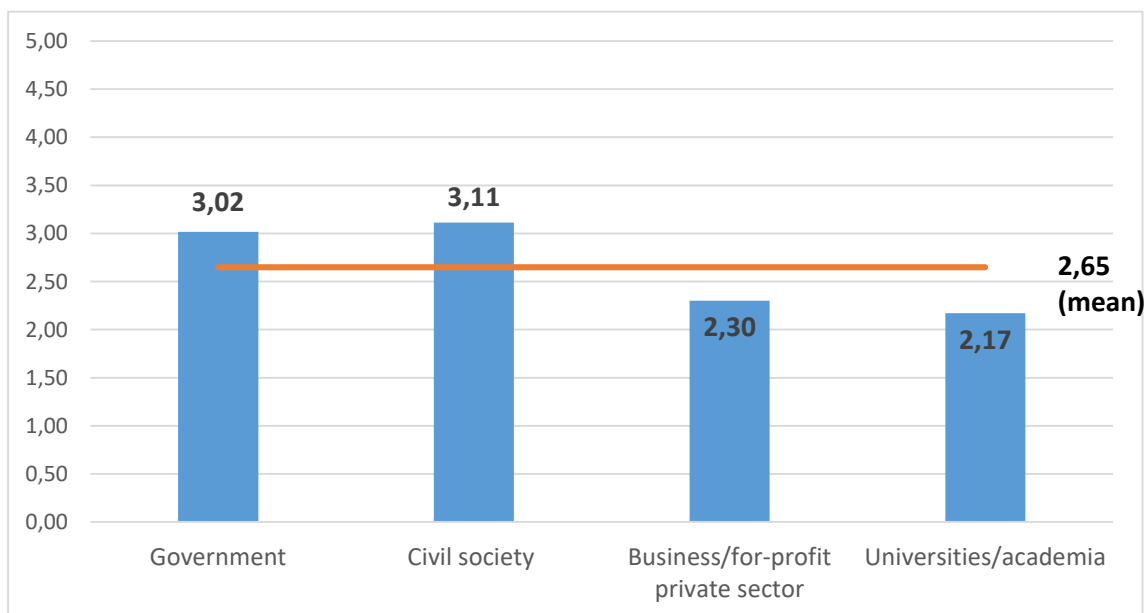
Characteristics of support structures for social innovation

This section presents the main characteristics of the support structures for social innovation in Ireland. The section presents, first, descriptive statistics and a network analysis that provide cross-sectoral information of these support structures. Second, the main characteristics of the support structures within each of the four sectors (helices) that form the social innovation ecosystem, i.e. public sector/government; industry (business/for-profit sector); academia, and; civil society/third sector are outlined.

Cross-sectoral comparison of social innovation support structures: descriptive statistics and network analysis from the survey

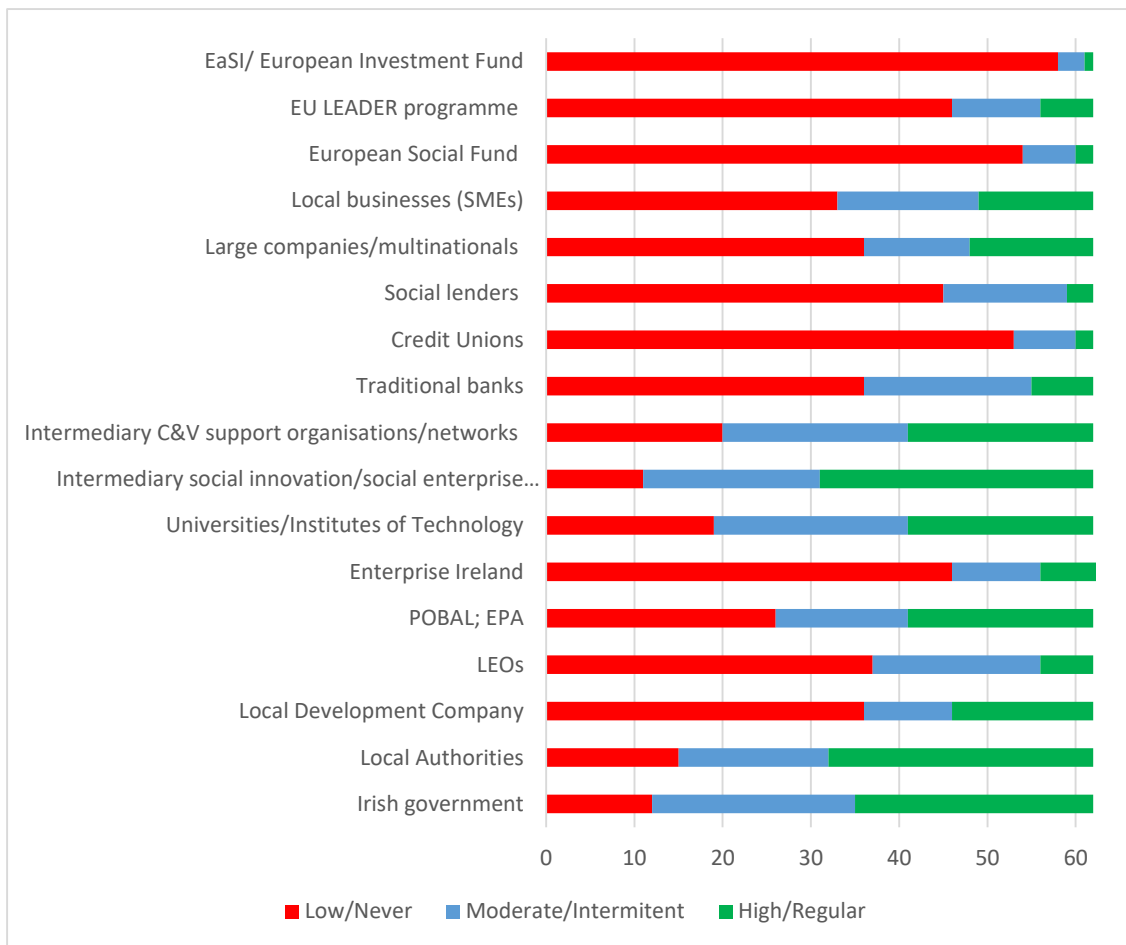
Respondents to the survey of this study show that civil society/third sector (3,11) and government/public sector (3,02) are perceived as the main sectors supporting social innovation in Ireland. On the other hand, business/for-profit private sector (2,30) and academia (2,17) degree of support to social innovation is perceived as lower (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Rating of perceived support to social innovation



Survey respondents were also asked about their regular utilisation of 17 support structures from different sectors (see Figure 11). A number of civil society/third sector support structures were largely selected by respondents, in line with the previous questions.

Figure 11. Utilisation of different support structures by social innovation organisations



Within these, intermediary social innovation/social enterprises organisations/networks, intermediary community and voluntary organisations/networks and Local Development Companies (LDCs) were respectively the most utilised support structures by social innovation organisations in a regular fashion.

Furthermore, within those support structures from the public sector, the Irish Government and Local Authorities were the most utilised by social innovation organisations. Interestingly, the regular use of support from public agencies differ depending on the main focus of the agency. In this regard, agencies such as Pobal – focused on social inclusion – were more used by social innovation organisations than others such as Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) or Enterprise Ireland (EI) – focused on business development.

Within the business/for-profit sector, large companies/multinationals and local businesses/SMEs were the two type of actors which provide greater support to social innovation organisations in a regular fashion. Despite this, the use of these support structures from the for-profit private sector is clearly below others from the public sector and civil society/third sector.

Respondents show a moderate use of supports from academia (universities and/or institutes of technologies) as, on the one hand, approximately one third of respondents (33,8%) had used regularly support from academia during the last year, but on the other hand, 30,6% of respondents have never engaged with academia as a support for their social innovative organisation.

When analysing different types of supports that social innovative organisations avail of (see Figures 12 – 16), the data shows how the Irish Government and intermediary social enterprise/social innovation organisations are the two most used support structures in terms of providing funding/financial support. Moreover, intermediary social enterprise/social innovation organisations are also the most used support structures in terms of education/training, business/marketing support and, networking. However, Local Authorities and Universities/Institutes of Technology, are the most utilised support structures by social innovation organisation when developing collaborative projects. Hence, despite the predominant role of intermediary social enterprise/social innovation organisations as support structures for social innovation the data shows some degree of complementarity between different support structures used in relation to the types of support provided.

Figure 12. Type of support to social innovation organisations. Funding, financial support

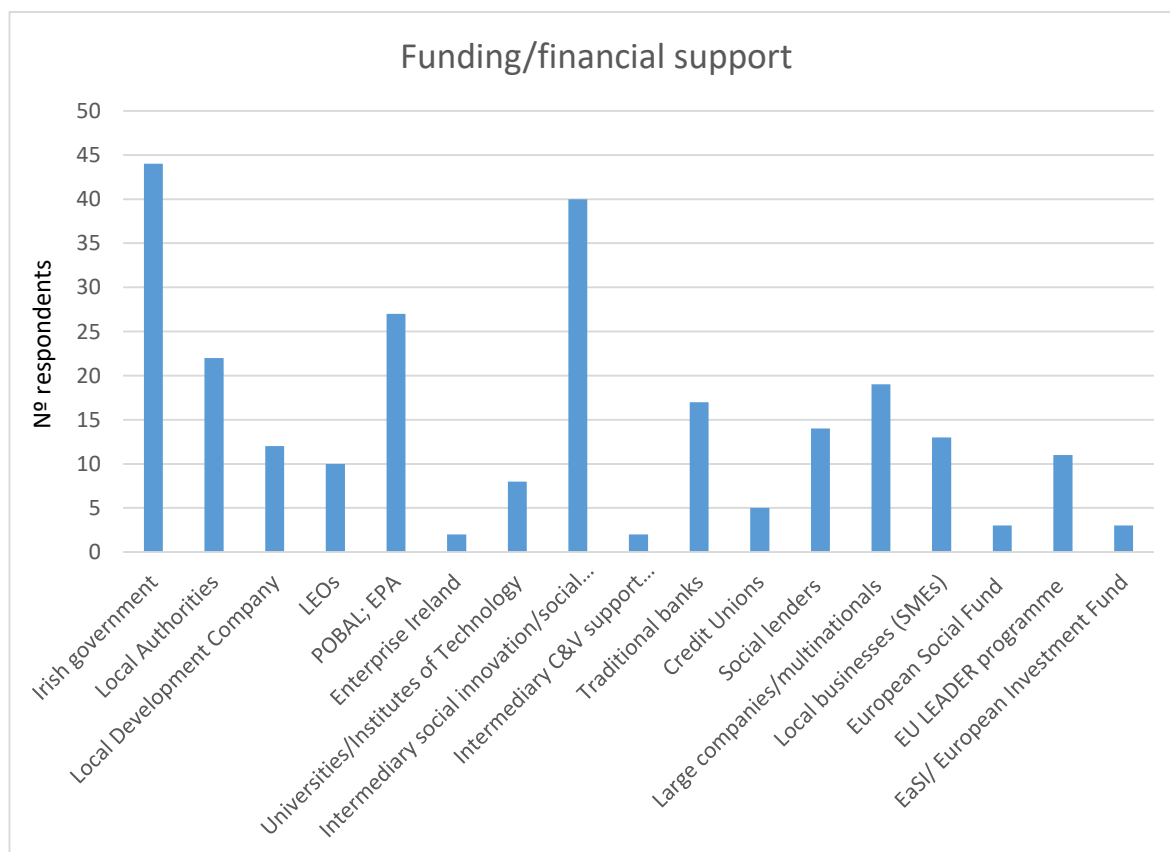


Figure 13. . Type of support to social innovation organisations. Education/training

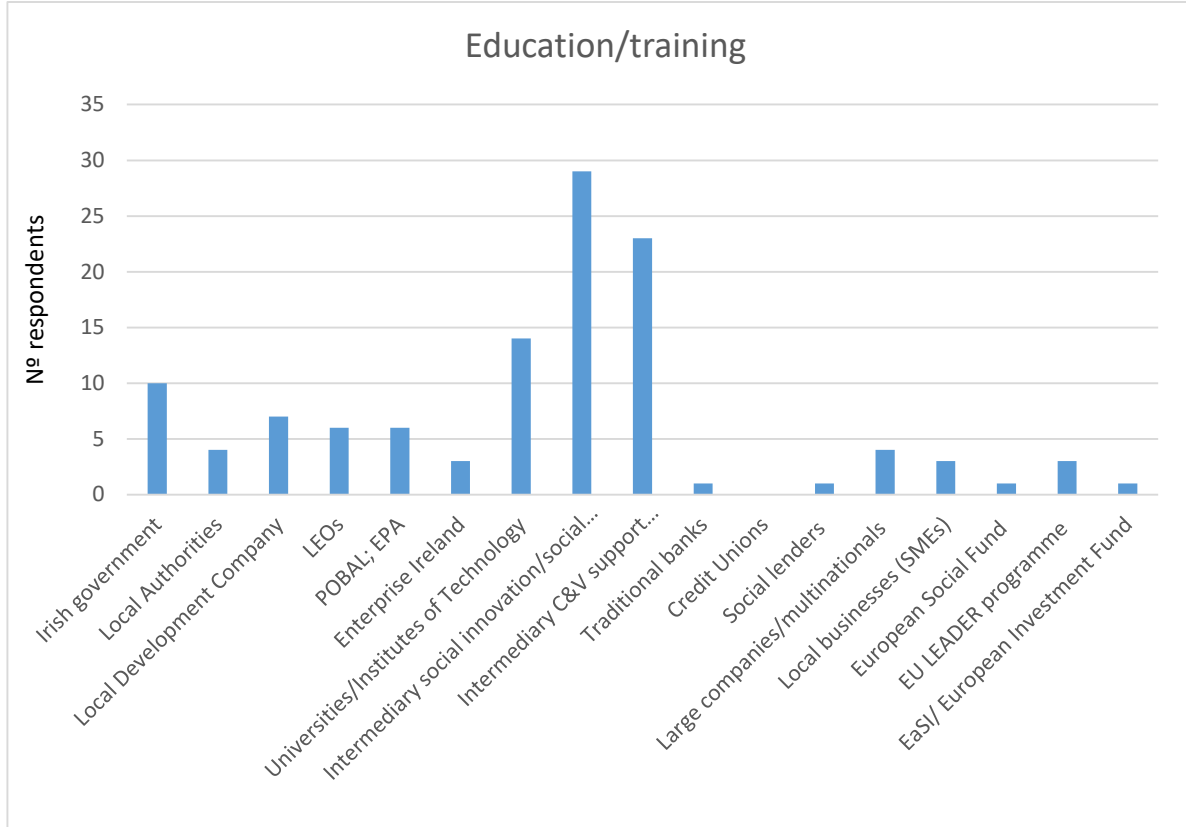


Figure 14. Type of support to social innovation organisations. Collaborative projects

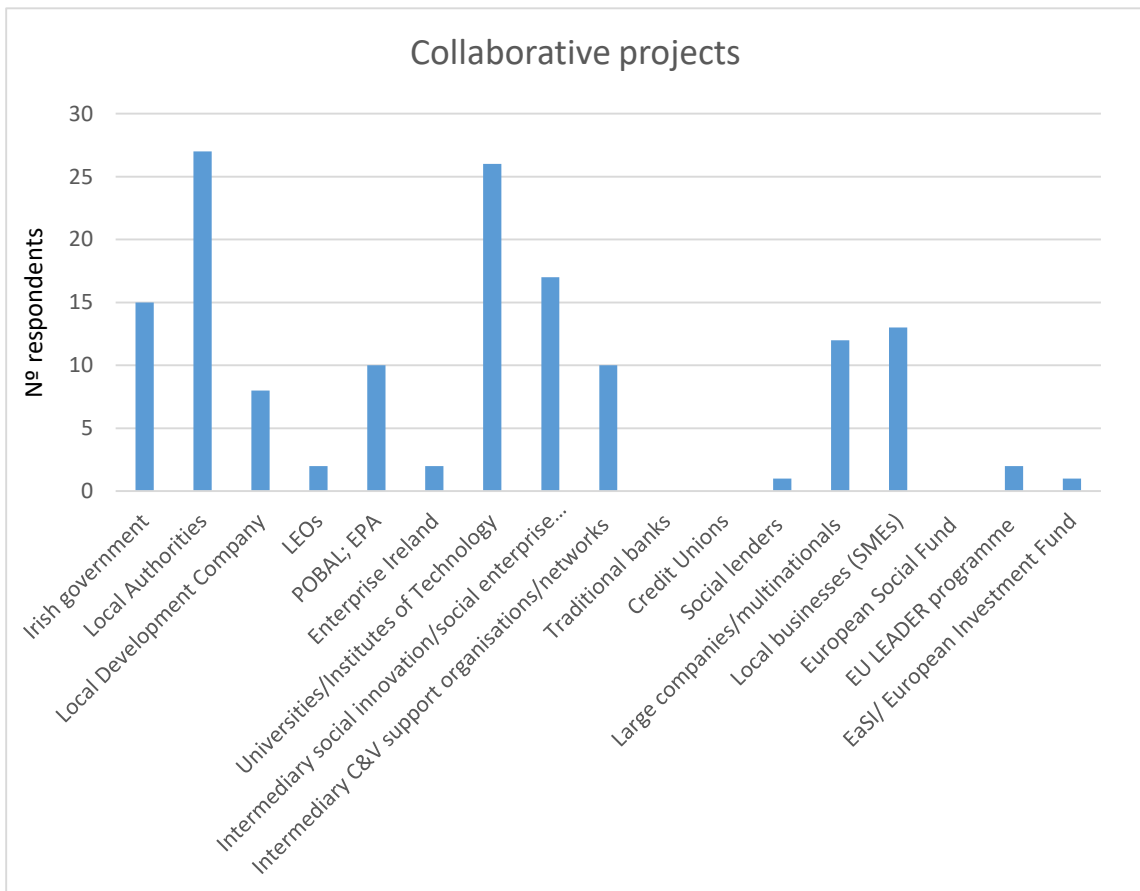


Figure 15. Type of support to social innovation organisations. Business/marketing support

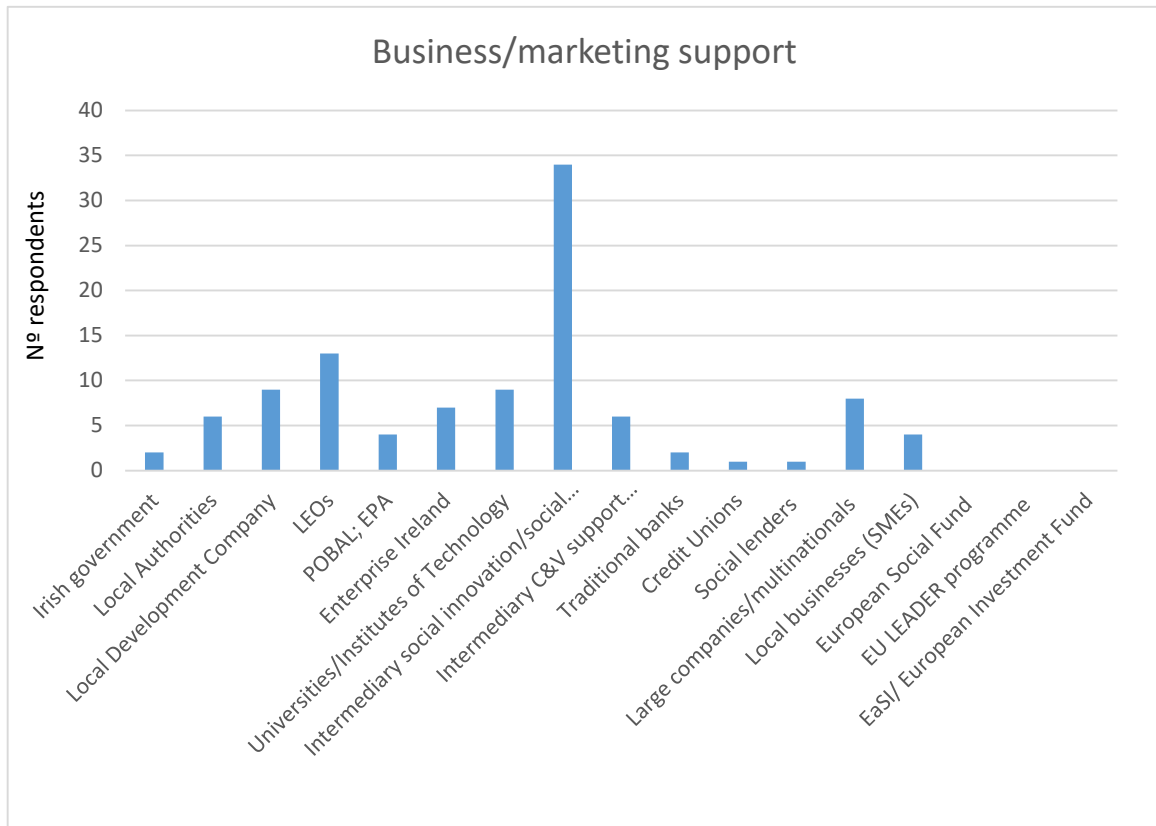
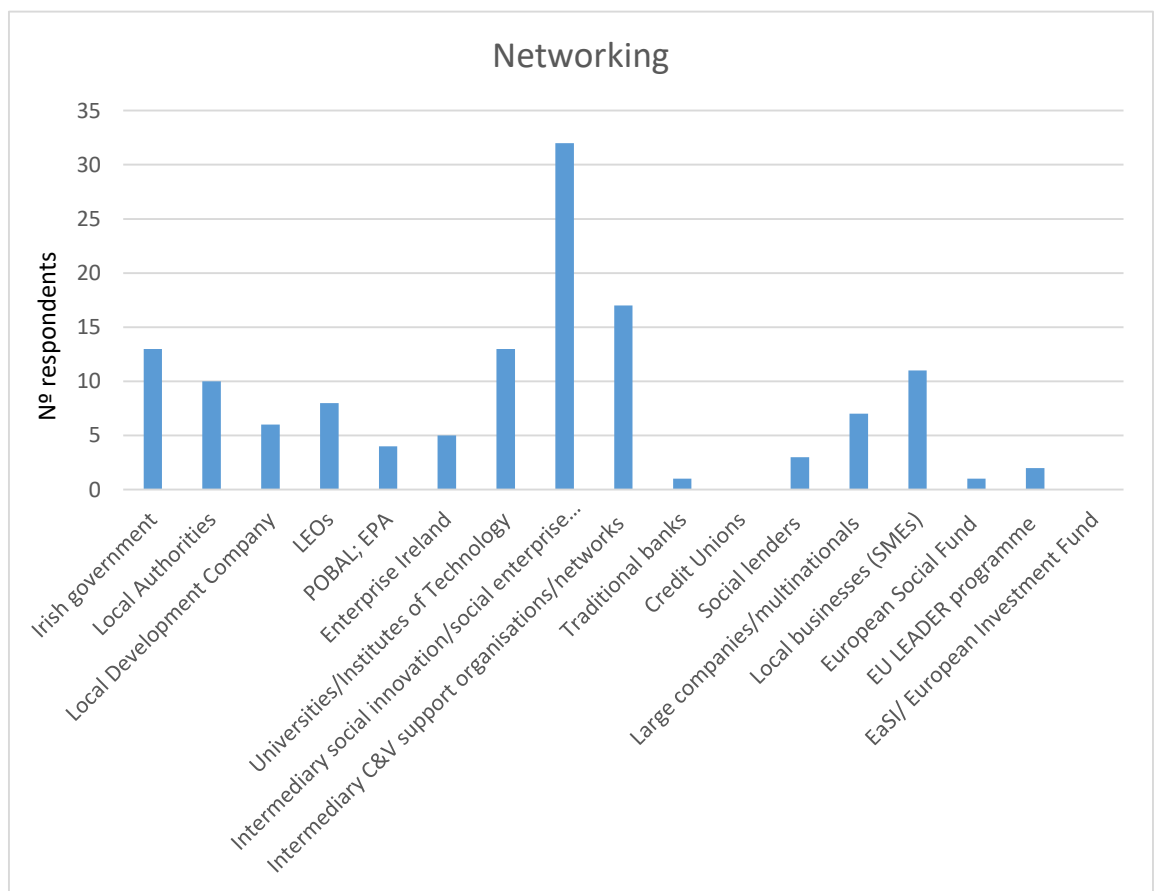


Figure 16. Type of support to social innovation organisations. Networking



The predominance of utilisation by social innovation organisations of support structures from the public sector and civil society/third sector is reinforced by a network analysis performed with data from the survey in which respondents were asked to identify organisations/institutions important for their work (5) and those that they would ask for support in case of developing a new product, service and/or organisational process (3). Within the network analysis framework adopted in this research³⁹, the most influential organisations are those 'bridging' organisations that interact with more social innovative organisations and that at the same time link more organisations together (see Figures 17 – 18). Within the Figures (sociograms) the colors of the nodes represent the different volume of connections ('degree of centrality'), while the different sizes of the nodes represent their 'bridging' capacity.

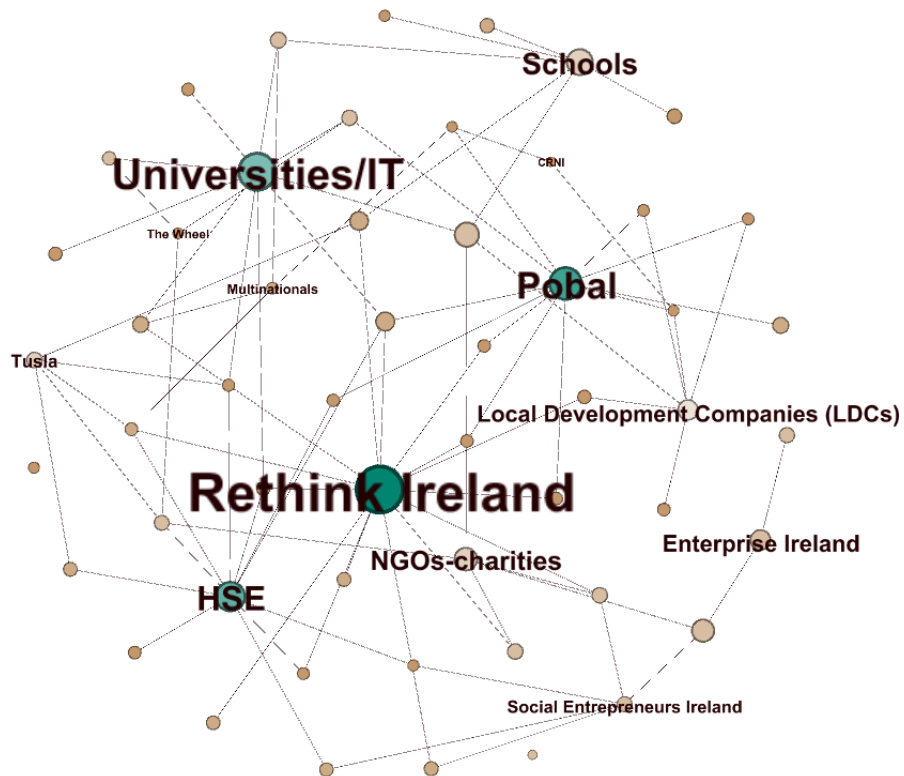
The analysis of the respondents' networks shows the central and predominant role that Departments from the Irish Government and Local Authorities play as support structures of social innovative organisations in Ireland. Complementary to these, the network shows a multiplicity of agents acting as support structures for social innovation in Ireland. In a second layer, institutions/organisations such as Rethink Ireland, Universities/ITs, Pobal and the HSE also appear as key support structures for social innovative organisations. In a third layer, the role of schools, LDCs, Túsla, NGOs/charities, Enterprise Ireland and Social Entrepreneurs Ireland are also outlined as important support structures for social innovative organisations. What needs to be underlined is that prima facie this seems to be a very centralised network, with the public authorities (Government Departments and Local Authorities) being high up in the hierarchy (see Figure 17). Yet, if we remove public authorities from the analysis, what we have is rather a decentralised network, with several organisations playing a central role (Rethink Ireland, Universities, Pobal, HSE, Schools) (see Figure 18). In that sense, the results show how public authorities (Departments from the Irish Government and Local Authorities) are the main 'bridgers' of the network. However, these results also outline the significant role of other support structures for social innovation in Ireland that despite presenting a higher diaspora/decentralisation also act as significant 'bridgers' for Irish social innovation organisations.

³⁹ Reza Yousefi Nooraie, Joanna Sale, Alexandra Marin and Lori Ross, "Social Network Analysis: An Example of Fusion Between Quantitative and Qualitative Methods". *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 14, no. 1 (2020):110-124.

Figure 17. Network analysis (core network) of support structure for social innovation organisations



Figure 18. Network analysis (core network without public authorities) of support structures for social innovation organisations



Characteristics of public sector, business/for-profit private sector, academia and civil society/third sector as support structures for social innovation: analysis of interview data

This section presents the characteristics attributed to the four sectors (helices) in terms of their support to social innovation in Ireland. The findings are based on the analysis of the data from the semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders.

Public Sector

The critical role attributed to Government, and the public sector more generally, as a support structure of social innovation in Ireland is related to the (legitimate) mandate that Government has in order to pursue the public good and to the fact that Government is (usually) the greatest budget holder. According to different stakeholders the Irish **Government** has a twofold role as a support structure for social innovation. First, due to its **regulatory capacity** to establish/develop policies, strategies and programmes directed to **enable a social innovation ecosystem**. Second, as a **driver –via Public Agencies and/or Departments-** of social innovation mainly through the **national roll-out (scaling)** of socially innovative initiatives that has been previously tested at local and/or regional level.

“The Government can play a very important role in creating an environment which is conducive to the development of social innovation, so the regulatory role of Government is key. [...] The other side is, you know, I can’t think of any social challenges facing our country where the Government isn’t the biggest budget holder, so they have both the money and the mandate to make change” [Interview_10]

The transversal/cross-sectoral character of social innovation is reflected in the lack of agreement between stakeholders about which Government Department should have the main responsibility (in policy terms) on social innovation in Ireland. Different stakeholders suggest the DRCO (currently with core competencies on social innovation and social enterprises), DFHERIS (Management Authority for the European Social Fund+ and with core competencies on innovation) or DETE (with core competencies on employment and entrepreneurship) as the most suitable Department where social innovation policy/strategy should seat. Despite these different views, interviewees agree in line with the cross-sectoral nature of social innovation, that none of the before mentioned Departments represent a ‘perfect fit’ for social innovation. Hence, the data shows the **need for breaking/diminishing the (usual) silo work between Government Departments in Ireland and enhancing greater inter-Departmental linkages/collaborations to support social innovation**. In this regard, stakeholders mentioned a number of Departments (besides the three abovementioned) which involvement could be critical for

the development of social innovations in different sectors, such as DSP; Dep. Health; Dep. Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Dep. Justice; DCEDIY; Dep. Education; Dep. Environment, Climate and Communications; Dep. Public Expenditure and Reform; Dep. of the Taoiseach.

“When I talk to the civil servants [about social innovation], they don’t think the other Department is relevant, they are just looking at their own piece and they don’t encourage collaboration or cooperation or joint development policy or interconnection, and that concerns me” [Interview_12]

“There has to be better cross-departments communication and collaboration, social innovation should be set up as a structure and then relevant Departments feeding into it. Because obviously it belongs to different departments [...] I think it needs to seat across Departments” [Interview_03]

Moreover, different paths for enhancing this inter-Departmental collaboration related to social innovation were proposed. First, stakeholders stress the significant role that **champions** within these Departments can play as enablers of social innovation within each specific sector of the Irish Government. Second, some stakeholders stress the relevance of developing **inter-Departmental structures** for social innovation. The data from the interviews show some examples of socially innovative programmes, e.g. Individual Placement Support, Housing First, in which different Departments collaborate, also with other stakeholders such as LAs, NGOs, State Agencies, private employers. Despite certain shortcomings and difficulties expressed by stakeholders in their implementation these programmes represent good practices to be looked at to enhance Government inter-Departmental collaboration but also broader collaborations between multiple and cross-sectoral stakeholders.

The greater need for enhancing more joined-up thinking and collaborations between Government Departments is also stressed as a way to **build bridges between the (policy) fields of innovation and social innovation**. In this sense, stakeholders stressed the limited engagement of those socially innovative organisations which are more commercially focused with public agencies such as LEOs and Enterprise Ireland. The main reasons expressed by stakeholders that hinder this support are the selection criteria used by these public institutions which mainly focus on job creation, business growth and exporting. These criteria, according to different stakeholders, do not provide incentives for these public agencies to support social innovation organisations which complement their commercial activities with social and/or environmental aims. Despite this very limited engagement, stakeholders expressed an increasing awareness from these public agencies (EI and LEOs)

and their strong potential to support social innovative organisations (with a commercial focus) not only in terms of funding but also providing other supports such as expertise, mentoring, training.

“There is very limited engagement by organisations like Enterprise Ireland or the Local Enterprise Office when it comes to social innovation, because the mandate of Enterprise Ireland is around job creation and enhancing export markets and the LEOs essentially follows that model. There are some cases, for instance I know Enterprise Ireland has invested in some very unique social innovations for instance a social enterprise in Waterford, called Grow It Yourself, and that is a genuine social innovation [...] but I think that’s rare to be honest, so I would say there is a limited involvement at the moment but that’s not say that there is not an opportunity [...] very simple things can happen for example signposting, ensuring a fair level playing field for social economy actors, social enterprises, through standard business supports for example, possibilities to participate in training and networking events, that type of thing, so there is a cross-fertilization as well” [Interview_13]

Finally, it is stressed the potential that the ESF+ (2021 – 2027) represents for funding social innovation in Ireland. A great incentive is identified in the substantial degree of funding (up to 95%) that ESF+ can provide to social innovative initiatives. On the other hand, stakeholders identified as challenges to the implementation of social innovative projects with ESF+ fund previous experiences related to high levels of bureaucracy and complicated reporting systems of previous ESF programmes. The development of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovation (NCCSI) is expressed by DFHERIS/ESF+ officials as a great opportunity to inform and build the capacity of ESF+ officials in relation to social innovation.

Industry – Business/For-profit Private Sector

The findings from this research show a **low/scarcely engagement between the business/for-profit private sector**, broadly represented by investors, large corporates/multinationals and SMEs, **and social innovative organisations**. Despite this limited role of the business/for-profit sector as a support structure for social innovation in Ireland, the data shows relevant examples that points towards the **strong potential** that collaborations with businesses can mean for social innovative organisations, in terms of funding but also in terms of mentoring, expertise and/or capacity building due to the great human resources that, often, businesses possess.

“I don’t think social innovation projects really figure for them [corporates, for-profit businesses] [...] I would not be convinced they are under their radar in any real, significant or substantive way. Do I think there is opportunity? Yes, I do” [Interview_8]

“Companies with philanthropic foundations [...] they can play a big role [in social innovation] [...] they’ve got such great knowledge, they’ve got such great experience, they’ve got resources, they’ve got lots, lots to offer. So it is then, how this can be best used for social innovation [...] that sometimes happen we have wonderful corporate partners, we have now Virgin Media, we could have not foreseen how good they were because they have such amazing resources and expertise in areas that we absolutely need, particularly with Covid, they helped us to move all our events online, they created videos, they created advertising, all of that, we could not have done without them, so they are an essential part of our network”[Interview_15]

According to different interviewees, there is a need of **enhancing the awareness** of business/for-profit actors of the potential **win-win scenario** if supporting social innovation organisations. This win-win scenario, for example, refers to the development of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors within business through the implementation of strategic (and more horizontal) partnerships with social innovative organisations and/or through the incorporation of a significant percentage of social enterprises as suppliers of products and/or services to businesses.

“If you look at the massive push towards ESG of businesses, there is opportunity there for social enterprise and social innovation to connect in those forums and to be part of the conversation about ESG [...] We need to build simple strategies to build understanding, and the best way of building that understanding is by them [businesses] experiencing that social enterprises are as valid as suppliers or customers as the for-profit” [Interview_8]

Finally, the role of philanthropy appears as a significant theme in the relation between business (and individuals) and social innovative organisations. The data from this study shows examples of the significant role that philanthropy has played and can play for social innovation, especially in terms of providing match funding to public resources for the piloting and/or development of social innovative initiatives. For example, different Rethink Ireland funds can be considered a good practice in this regard. On the other hand, stakeholders stress the limited role of strategic philanthropy in Ireland – which address relations between donors and social innovation organisations in a systematic, regular fashion and aligning with overarching goals such as national policy objectives and the SDGs. According to interviewees the **underdevelopment of strategic philanthropy** is also related to the lack of strong institutions in this field, together with the reduce incentives for donors and scarce mechanisms that enhance financial experimentation.

“Philanthropy is underdeveloped in this country, very significantly underdeveloped I would say” [Interview_13]

Academia

The analysis from the interviews show that **academia** is attributed from stakeholders a **critical role** to play as a support structure for social innovation in Ireland. This support is manifold, including: **education**, through university programmes that enhance skills of individuals but also awareness about social innovation; **engagement** with different stakeholders, through different means such as the organisation of workshops and meetings for sharing knowledge on the field or through projects and placements of students with communities/organisations working in social innovative solutions and; **research**, through bringing frontier and international knowledge to the field and providing data/evidence for the support/assessment of social innovative organisations/initiatives, evidence-based policymaking and the evaluation of policies/programmes.

“I think academia has a critical role to play, because I think they can provide the objectivity [...] they will be the demonstrators that will provide that solid evidence-based” [Interview_8]

“Universities can provide leadership, can provide help to plug gaps in evidence bases, can put to good practices in terms of international experience, and most importantly maybe of all, they can incorporate potentially, the ideas, the methodologies, the experiences of social innovation in their teaching, learning and research” [Interview_13]

Despite the acknowledgment of the critical role of academia as a support structure of social innovation in Ireland and the description of several examples of engagement between academia and social innovative organisations, stakeholders also stressed that these collaborations are rather based on specific projects/programmes and on personal relationships between members of social innovative organisations and academics. There is also a **call for enhancing more engaged and collaborative research** with practitioners, thus a greater co-production of knowledge in research projects.

“I think academia takes from practitioners and does not give enough, they take the experience, they take the learning but they do not feed that back in the way that they need that [...] if there is somewhere where social enterprises could express an interest on an area of research that they want” [Interview_3]

In spite of the presence of a Centre for Social Innovation within Trinity College Business School and other independent researchers working in the field of social innovation, it is stressed that **research on the field of social innovation is rather underdeveloped in**

Ireland, with scarce data about the field/sector, evaluation/assessment tools and structured and sustained collaborative research programmes.

Civil society/Third sector

The civil society/third sector has been identified, together with the public sector, as providing key support to social innovative organisations/initiatives and has been recognised as playing a key role in terms of **leadership** within the field of social innovation in Ireland. The primary data gathered in this research shows a number of intermediary organisations within the third sector, e.g. YSI, ISEN, SEI, The Wheel, LDCs/ILDN, Genio, Rethink Ireland, Philanthropy Ireland, that provides a **suite of supports to social innovative organisations**, including: education/training, mentoring, funding/grants, (stimulating), capacity building, engagement-facilitation, signposting, information, advocacy-policy submissions (lobbying).

However, the findings from this study also show that the system of support structures to social innovation provided by civil society/third sector intermediary organisations is characterised by being **rather piecemeal**, with **unclear connections and complementarities** between the different support institutions and with a **lack of a strategic (common) vision** of the supports available and needed for social innovation in Ireland.

“Even though we [civil society/third sector intermediaries] all say we work together, we don’t. I think we just need to realise that if we are actually make an impact on change, we need to get rid of our biases and start to work together. Understand exactly what we are all doing, what is what we are actually doing. Understand that we all are doing slightly different things in terms of social innovation and what the difference is. Understand that there is space for all of us to come together to add value to social innovation as a whole. [...] What is what we all are doing? How can we all come to the table to fix the jigsaw together” [Interview_6]

Strengths, Weaknesses and Suggestions for social innovation support structures

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the data from the surveys and interviews in relation to the strengths, weaknesses/barriers and suggestions for enhancing social innovation support structures in Ireland (see Table 10).

Table 10. Strengths, Weaknesses and Suggestions for support structures of social innovation

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - accessibility to key individuals and support structures - human capital – lots of social innovations at grassroots level - Irish society open and civic responsibility - some (structural) support to social innovation (early stages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘inadequate and/or insufficient funding from Government’ and ‘bureaucracy and/or administrative burden’ - silo approach (funding and policy) - scarcity of mechanisms for impact investment and financial experimentation - scarce supports for scaling and for piloting - scarce available data that shows the impact/contributions of social innovative organisations - scarce knowledge related to complementary supports that different organisations provide - scarce development of long-term, strategic mechanisms
Suggestions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase awareness - development of capacity building tailored strategies that support social innovative organisations to pitch and show impact to different stakeholders - shared services of specialized staff - develop structures for bridge gaps/silos between Government Departments and between stakeholders operating in different sectors - improve financial experimentation - enhance research evidence/data (strategic/structured ecosystem, awareness, assessment of policy programmes and development of evidence-based policymaking) - long term - multiannual – investments and support based on strategic thinking 	

Strengths

The findings from this study demonstrate that a first strength of support structures to social innovation in Ireland is related to the **accessibility** to information and individuals that occupy key roles within Irish social innovation support structures, including Government Departments. Stakeholders emphasise that Ireland is a small-size country and people tend to be well connected which enhance this accessibility.

“We are a small country, is very easy to get access to people. If you know what you are looking for is easy to get access to them” [Interview_3]

“One of the strengths is that we are a small country and we are highly networked, so if you can find the right people you find them quickly and easily” [Interview_12]

Second, stakeholders stress the great **human capital** within Ireland, with lots of individuals presenting significant features connected with developing socially innovative solutions such as being proactive, committed, responsive and entrepreneurial. These individual features are, according to stakeholders, essential to explain the great amount of socially innovative initiatives within Ireland at grassroots level.

“We [Ireland] have people who are really good at recognising challenges and coming up with solutions” [Interview_5]

“There is a huge level of commitment, a huge level of passion and of experience. Human capital, really incredible human capital that can be tapped into in this [social innovation] space. That’s the first strength, the people, there is unique experience there” [Interview_13]

“We [Ireland] have huge amount of innovation at grassroots level, we are very innovative at grassroots, community level. I would always say that there is no short of innovations in this country” [Interview_12]

Third, complementary to the latter, in general terms **Irish society** is viewed by stakeholders as **open** to changes and with an increasing level of **civic responsibility** which also lead to greater awareness and acceptance of social innovation.

“In Ireland people are very open to international ideas and collaborations, we are quite an open minded people. There is an openness in that sense, rather than closeness, culturally” [Interview_12]

Fourth, stakeholders generally agree that there is **some (structural) support to social innovation** in Ireland within institutions before mentioned, e.g. Government, universities,

intermediary organisations, LDCs. Different stakeholders stress that these supports are rather for **early-stage** social innovative organisations rather than for piloting (incubating) social innovative ideas and especially for scaling social innovations.

“Providing capacity building and a little bit of finance at the early stage is an easier thing to do and it’s where we [Ireland] are strongest [...] so we are relatively strong in small scale support for small scale innovations” [Interview_10]

Weaknesses

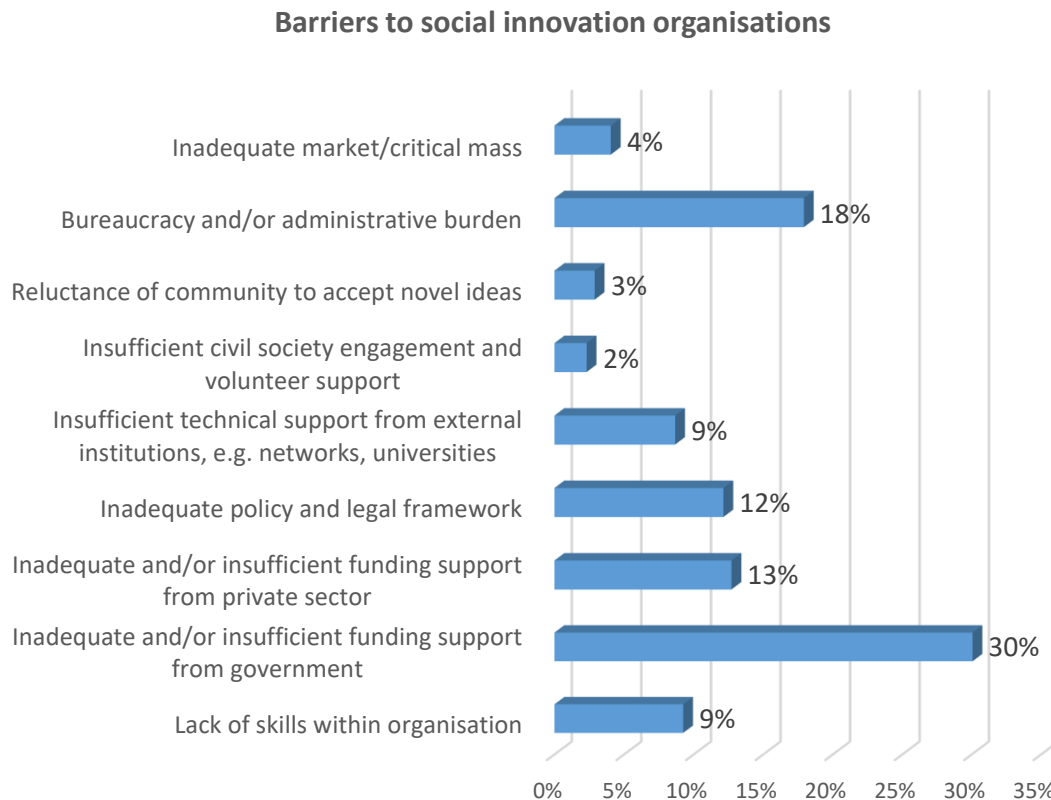
Regarding the weaknesses of support structures to social innovation in Ireland, respondents from the survey identified **‘inadequate and/or insufficient funding from Government’** and **‘bureaucracy and/or administrative burden’** as the two main barriers to Irish social innovative organisations (see Figure 19).

Data from the interviews stress how the **silos approach**, especially in terms of **funding and policy**, that often lead to clear cuts in terms of for-profit/non-profit and sectoral divisions also constitute a weakness in terms of developing support structures for social innovation. The hybrid (blended) and cross-sectoral features of social innovative organisations/initiatives is linked by stakeholders with their difficulties in accessing support from specific institutions, e.g. EI and LEOs, and with a tendency from funders to push social innovative organisations to over-report. In this regard, it is identified a **scarcity of mechanisms** related to the support of **impact investment** and **financial experimentation** which acknowledges blended outcomes from social innovations.

“What they [(social) finance bodies] are limited are in the different mechanisms they can use to make resources available, so for example there is a lot of experimentation [in other countries] about payment for results, we are very limited in our ability to use those in Ireland. We are very limited in the use of debt instruments, very limited scope for the use of equity” [Interview_5]

“The opportunity for impact investment is very small in Ireland [...] There is only very few organisations that can take impact investment at the moment due to their legal structure [...] and I think funders don’t help, funders push social enterprises [social innovative organisations] to over report their results, there is a big issue there with funders in how they steward social enterprises and social innovations” [Interview_3]

Figure 19. Barriers to social innovation organisations (survey)



Stakeholders also identified **scarce supports for scaling** social innovations, with a lack of clear paths in terms of available mechanisms/support structures for those social innovations aiming at scaling. On the other side of the spectrum, some stakeholders also stress the **difficulties for availing of support for piloting** social innovative ideas, as supports are usually available/accessible once social innovative solutions have already been tested and organisations can provide some evidence/proof of concept.

“The social enterprise ecosystem and social innovation ecosystem in Ireland is still relatively underdeveloped when it comes to scaled solutions, when it comes to really scaled solutions I am not sure we have necessarily managed to harness whatever experience we have and I am not sure we have that many examples and that in itself is a challenge” [Interview_13]

“A lot of funding on social innovation is targeting evidence-based social innovation [...] but there is very big space before that, everybody is looking for evidence. What do you do before evidence? Lots of social innovation initiatives have come from community based or civic based groups [...] where they got their support to test their ideas? That’s a big block to social innovation” [Interivew_15]

Scarce support has also been identified in **available data that shows the impact/contributions of social innovative organisations** and in mentoring support and mechanisms that help these organisations to articulate their impact to different stakeholders.

“At the moment there is no data, so can’t really educate [increase awareness of] people, because we actually don’t have the data. I’ve been working in this for 30 years but I can’t still give you the data” [Interview_12]

Furthermore, stakeholders stress that support structures to social innovation present weaknesses in terms of **scarce knowledge related to complementary supports that different organisations provide** which leads to a certain duplication of resources. Besides, there is scarce formal collaborations and cooperative work among social innovation support structures, despite informal collaborations are regular and the participation in some joint projects.

“There is so much waste of resources [...] better collaboration between the networking organisations is key” [Interview_3]

“I think something that is underutilised is the work that other institutions are doing, I think we have not as much connectivity as we should have” [Interview_7]

Finally, a lack of support structures for the **development of long-term, strategic mechanisms** from robust institutional infrastructures that support social innovative solutions is identified.

“What we [in Ireland] struggle with is the longer term, more robust institutional infrastructure [...] we are really weak in that in Ireland, we don’t have this historical infrastructure” [Interview_5]

Suggestions

The data from this study show a number of suggestions, often related to the weaknesses abovementioned, from the different stakeholders included within this research.

A first suggestion points towards **increasing awareness**, demystifying and clarifying the terminology, understanding and key features, around social innovation to the general public but also to individuals working within current and potential support structures for social innovation in Ireland.

“Demystifying that terminology [social innovation, social enterprise, social entrepreneurship], that’s really important” [Interview_4]

In the same line, the increasing understanding (awareness) of the cross-sectoral and hybrid features of social innovation is suggested as a way for greater recognition of blended outcomes. This is suggested to be coupled with mandates/strategies of positive discrimination measures, through which can be ring fenced some resources of institutions such as LEOs or EI for supporting especially social innovations with commercial focus.

“It could be positive discrimination type of model, giving for example 20% of LEO funding to social enterprises, that maybe never export but they can employ 7 or 8 people in the locality” [Interview_9]

Moreover, related to the recognition of the hybrid (blended) nature of social innovation, it is also suggested the **improvement of financial experimentation**, with lots of room for assessing and developing financial mechanisms such as impact investment, social investment, social impact bonds, strategic philanthropy, community shares, social finance structure - payment per results (social outcome contracting).

“There is a huge amount of wealth in Ireland, you get absolutely nothing for having your money in the bank at the moment, I think we can take advantage of that in an investment structure, but there isn’t a mechanism to take advantage of that.” [Interview_3]

“There remains a lot of room for development of more financial that reflect and recognize this blendedness” [Interview_5]

Stakeholders agree on suggesting the need for the **development of capacity building tailored strategies that support social innovative organisations to pitch and show impact to different stakeholders.**

“If you are in the social or environmental area where you need buying from a lot of stakeholders, I think some support that would help them [social innovators] to see world from the budget stakeholders they are trying to engage would be helpful, [... for example] segmenting different stakeholders they need to engage in and coming up with very tailored strategies” [Interview_10]

Besides, it is encouraged the development of **shared services**, including co-working hubs and supporting companies/organisations from which social innovative organisations can avail punctually from **specialized staff** which they are unable to incorporate otherwise within their staff.

“I would love to see a move towards a shared services model where social enterprises [social innovation organisations] can take advantage of a financial director for 3 hours a week, they don’t need a full financial director” [Interview_3]

It is also suggested from interviewed stakeholders to **develop structures for bridge gaps/silos between Government Departments but also between stakeholders operating in different sectors**, e.g. foundations, businesses, universities, community and voluntary organisations, public agencies. In this regard, it is suggested that those support structures for social innovation with previous experience in working with various Government Departments and stakeholders can take leadership in building these bridges. It is also pointed that a key aspect lies in to be able to articulate and demonstrate clearly the relevance of the participation of each different stakeholders (awareness) and to demonstrate clarity of what is/can be the role of each stakeholder

Stakeholders also suggest to **enhance research evidence/data** in order to support a more **strategic/structured ecosystem, awareness, assessment of policy programmes and development of evidence-based policymaking** related to social innovation. Finally, it is suggested the need of **long term - multiannual – investments and support based on strategic thinking**.

“A multiyear funding, if you get 3-year funding instead of 1-year funding, you actually get 10 times the impact not 3 times the impact [...] Government funders seem to believe that they can only provide 1-year funding but you what, they manage to provide 3-year funding to other people from the business side. So how is it possible over there and is not possible over here [in social innovation]?” [Interview_12]

Conclusions

This study provides an exploratory and comprehensive perspective of the support structures to social innovation in Ireland. From the analysis of the multi-stakeholder perspective presented in the previous section a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, there is a **social innovation ecosystem** in Ireland that is in its **early stages**. This is formed by multiple stakeholders operating in different fields of activity and sectors. Within the Irish social innovation ecosystem, support structures can be found within the public sector, business/for-profit sector, academia and civil society/third sector. However, and in consonance with its early stage of development, the support structures of the Irish social innovation ecosystem are rather piecemeal, with a lack of clarity in the complementary roles among the different support structures and a lack of a strategic (cohesive) planning for the further development of the ecosystem. The latter is also related to tensions/challenges in the understanding of the concept of social innovation and its main features by different stakeholders, which would be needed to be addressed for a more cohesive and strategic social innovation ecosystem.

Second, the **civil society/third sector and the public sector** are clearly **leading the support towards social innovation in Ireland**. Stakeholders stress the critical role that different civil society/third sector intermediary organisations and public sector institutions play in providing a suite of supports to social innovation in Ireland, in terms of funding, training, business mentoring and networking. Interestingly, the Irish Government, through Departments and Agencies, is acknowledged as one of the key support structures for social innovation but at the same time inadequate and insufficient funding from Government and bureaucracy and administrative burden are pointed as the two main barriers to social innovation. Despite this dichotomy, the findings reinforce the critical role attributed to the public sector as a support structure to social innovation in Ireland, either directly or through intermediary civil society/third sector organisations as many of these are (partly) funded by public resources.

Support to social innovation from the business/for-profit sector is rather underdeveloped in Ireland, however, stakeholders stress the **strong potential** that this sector can represent for supporting social innovation in Ireland. Some factors contributing to this low engagement of the business/for-profit sector are attributed to a lack of awareness of the potential win-win scenario of strategic partnerships between (for-profit) businesses and social innovative organisations and a scarcity of incentives and mechanisms for the

development of strategic philanthropy, impact investments and enhancing financial experimentation linked to blended outcomes (financial and non-financial).

Academia is acknowledged as playing a **critical role in supporting social innovation in Ireland** through different means, such as providing social innovation and social entrepreneurship education, promoting engagement and awareness of the field and providing data/evidence. However, the role of academia as a support structure of social innovation in Ireland is also rather **underdeveloped** due to scarce nation-wide available data, comprehensive and regular research programmes that can support evidence-based policymaking and evaluation and, (at times) low engagement of academia with social innovation organisations.

Third, stakeholders stress an **increasing awareness of social innovation** reflected for example in the inclusion of social innovation as a key stream within the ESF+, the development of educational modules/programmes at different education levels from primary to third level education, and an increasing use of social innovation among the general public (becoming a 'buzzword' within some sectors/groups). In spite of this, stakeholders highlight within this study that there is **still much work to be done in terms of awareness. Despite some common understanding between social innovation stakeholders, the boundaries and key features of social innovation are still unclear even among representatives of social innovation support structures.** Social innovation is often used interchangeably with social entrepreneurship and (less often) with social inclusion. Strategies for a clear communication to stakeholders and the general public about the key features and boundaries of social innovation for enhancing awareness are pointed as relevant. Moreover, further evidence/data about social innovative organisations, the characteristics of social innovative processes and assessment/evaluation tools are also identified as key for enhancing this awareness.

Fourth, this study stresses the relevance of **multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral collaboration/cooperative work as key for social innovation.** The data from this study has revealed a number of initiatives and programmes in this direction, e.g. Housing First, Rethink Ireland funds, social innovation hubs, sustainable energy communities. Moreover, the regular work of LDCs with multiple stakeholders in order to address place-based challenges can also be highlighted as a significant example in this line. However, different stakeholders have also stressed the usual silo between Government Departments, funding and actors/institutions from different sectors which contrasts with the hybrid (blended) and cross-sectoral nature of social innovation. In this sense, organisations and institutions that

can build and develop bridges between different stakeholders can play a key role as support structures of social innovations. The develop of a National Competence Centre for Social Innovation can be a paramount institution in this regard provided it plays an inclusive role in terms of engaging actors from different sectors, creating room for discussions but at the same time providing clear guidelines and raising awareness of social innovation and its relevance in terms of bringing systemic change.

In summary, this study shows how Ireland currently represents a **fertile ground for social innovation** with lots of initiatives and potential at grassroots level and some degree of support structures for social innovation formed by a number of actors operating within different sectors and rather informally connected. However, for the **further development of the Irish social innovation ecosystem more strategic, structured, long-term and cross-sectoral support structures that can support and unlock the potential of social innovation in Ireland is required.**

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Appendices

Appendix A – Informed consent (template)



FUSE Informed Consent Form

I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves a conversation about social innovation in Ireland. No previous preparation from the interviewee is required.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in technical/research reports and scientific articles.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____



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