Entrepreneurial and Social Innovation Skills Driving Inclusion and Tackling the Innovation Divide

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INTEGER INTERCONNECTING 4 HELIX INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS IN EUROPEAN REGIONS

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On Wednesday, 11 October, as part of the **7th edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels**, a participatory lab was held exploring European perspectives on promoting entrepreneurial and social innovation skills to boost innovation and development that leave no one behind.

The event was co-hosted by the organisations UNITEE (Belgium), SHINE 2Europe (Portugal), Friends of Europe (Belgium), Eurochambres (Belgium), AFEdemy (the Netherlands), and i2CAT Foundation (Spain), along with the EU-funded projects SIRENE, NET4Age-Friendly and INTEGER.

BACKGROUND

The world as we know it is evolving, impacting many areas of our societies, including the way we live, move around, communicate and work. Given today's evolving landscape, entrepreneurial skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and community leadership are becoming indispensable for European regions and cities to face ongoing and future economic and societal transitions. These skills not only drive social innovation, but also foster social cohesion, inclusion and job creation while promoting a fair and just social contract, inclusive communities, and enriched environments.

Community-based solutions and multi-stakeholder alliances across cities, regions and sectors, actively work towards the promotion of a more inclusive and striving society. As European cities and regions become increasingly diverse, skills such as intercultural communication and empathy are becoming more and more relevant to address the risk of polarisation and social exclusion.

KEY MESSAGE

Thinking and acting together, through collaboration and co-creation, in times of increasingly superdiverse cities, while emotional and relational intelligence have become skills that are key to transforming and innovating regions and cities.

CHALLENGES LAUNCHED

Together with innovators, researchers, city representatives and business practitioners from different backgrounds and countries, the participants in the session shared their ideas and promising practices to promote entrepreneurial, digital, and social innovation skills. Considering different citizens' and communities' needs and focusing on strengthening alliances between the public and private sector, we asked ourselves:

1. What are the key messages to build a more sustainable, inclusive and just future?
2. What is needed for societal actors to work together – with and for the people?
3. What are the most important skills needed to promote more innovative and inclusive European regions and cities?
4. As our societies continue to develop and innovate at a fast pace, who is at risk of being left behind? And how can we prevent that?
5. How should these skills and knowledge be shared?

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR SOCIETAL ACTORS TO WORK TOGETHER TOWARDS THE TWIN TRANSITION?

Interdisciplinary collaboration

It is crucial to cultivate interdisciplinary collaboration by actively involving all stakeholders, under the concept of the Quadruple Helix, which encompasses not only traditional academia and industry but also the participation of policy makers and local communities.

Policy makers need to take on an active role in bringing together various actors to facilitate collaboration. They play a pivotal part in bridging the gap between different interests and objectives.

Engaging local authorities proves to be the most effective approach to involve local communities. It bridges the divide between envisioned goals and practical realities on the ground.

Skills Development and Inclusivity

Dialogue plays a crucial role when discussing the importance of skill development. It is imperative to identify the specific needs of various populations, leaving no one behind irrespective of their age, geographic location, or cultural background. Everyone must be equipped with the most appropriate tools to navigate the twin transition.

Specific attention should be directed towards specific groups at certain risk of being left behind, including women, youth, newcomers, people with disabilities, unemployed, low-skilled, and those with less access to key infrastructures, for example, those living in rural areas. These groups require tailored support and consideration.

Management skills for policy makers are key. To turn multidisciplinary collaboration into a reality, policy makers need to develop specific management skills. This involves understanding the dynamics of diverse actors and fostering effective communication and coordination.

WHICH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS DOES A SOCIAL ACTOR NEED TO IMPLEMENT SOCIAL INNOVATION SUCCESSFULLY?

Multidisciplinary knowledge is necessary to effectively lead innovations that can address social and environmental issues.

We need a greater **in-depth understanding of our communities**, through ethically collected data indicating their specific needs and aspirations. We need to be familiar with the relevant stakeholders, identifying and engaging them where needed. **Networking** is key to engaging with the relevant stakeholders and building a robust network will help us better understand the various stakeholders involved, ensuring no one is left behind.

Also needed is greater familiarity with the arena you are working in. We need to recognise the right platforms to use to achieve impact, whether this is through **funding**, **political influence** or **civil society involvement**.
Policy expertise and financial acumen are important when working with policymakers and navigating the policy landscape, including understanding what financial or political support is available, what stage of projects require specific support, and how best to mobilise these resources.
We also need to foster **social inclusivity**. But to do this, we need to create space within society where these diverse groups can come together. By providing more third spaces and opportunities for stakeholders from different backgrounds can meet, we can cultivate intersectoral collaboration. This allows stakeholders to connect with different sectors and identify opportune moments for collaboration.

Finally, **journey comprehension**, understanding the process and evolution of initiatives, and ethical considerations, particularly in the context of data usage, are important factors of multidisciplinary knowledge to keep in mind.

Successful integration of academia, government, industry, and civil society is also a key requirement for social actors to work together toward innovation. There are three steps to achieve successful integration of these actors:

First and foremost is narrative building, where initiatives craft a compelling story that underscores the significance of the cause for each stakeholder group. Secondly, seeking common ground is imperative, as it entails identifying areas of convergence among the diverse actors and fostering constructive dialogue.

Lastly is the importance of allocation of responsibilities, with an emphasis on sharing the burden among the parties involved. By addressing these aspects, a more cohesive and collaborative effort can be achieved in bringing together academia, government, industry, and civil society for a common purpose.

Finally, when it comes to the **individual level**, there are several actions to take to increase the effective formation of multisector partnerships for innovation.

Collaboration is crucial and requires willingness and capability to share and work effectively with others. Effective communication is essential for conveying ideas and concepts clearly, while people engagement skills are crucial for engaging and motivating individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The ability to build and maintain meaningful connections is encompassed by **networking**, and **creativity** is vital for generating innovative solutions. **Critical thinking** is necessary for analysing situations and making informed decisions, and **social-emotional intelligence** involves understanding and managing emotions in social interactions.

Additionally, **lobbying skills** are valuable for advocating for a cause despite challenges, and possessing **tactical and operational skills** is essential for executing plans and strategies effectively. Cultivating **cultural empathy**, particularly when dealing with diverse backgrounds, contributes to a positive and inclusive environment.

Leadership skills are indispensable for leading initiatives and presenting new solutions, while the ability to communicate ideas persuasively is encapsulated by **presentation skills.**
Finally, **resilience** is a key attribute, enabling individuals to persist and ensure the sustainability and scaling up of initiatives.

HOW CAN DIGITAL SKILLS BE IMPROVED IN EUROPE, INCLUDING FOR UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS?

In terms of **education**, it is crucial to provide on-site opportunities to boost accessibility. Digital education should not solely rely on online platforms but should adopt a hybrid format. This ensures that people from diverse backgrounds and age groups, including older individuals or those with lower educational levels, can access and enhance their digital proficiency.

Employment plays a vital role in raising awareness about the value of digital and automation literacy. Effective communication is essential to convey why digital literacy is not only beneficial but also necessary for active participation in the labour market.

Highlighting the **real-life applications** of digital systems, such as healthcare, fiscal exercises like filing taxes, and identification, is essential for promoting the practical utility of digital skills. Ensuring that digital tools are accessible and user-friendly enables all members of society to develop their skills gradually.

Cross-fertilisation across countries, socioeconomic groups, and sectors, particularly within Europe, facilitates the sharing of best practices and lessons learned. This collaborative approach accelerates the evolution of digital skills on a broader scale.

Different sectors of society can help us on this path as enablers of improving the digital skills of underrepresented groups in Europe.

Civil society remains the primary driving force for change. The **public sector**, particularly at the local level, serves as a bridge connecting citizens, private enterprises, and civil society by offering facilities and support. In this collaborative effort, the **public sector** becomes a key facilitator of progress as it raises questions about suitable business models that can bridge the gap between social entrepreneurship and corporate interests. In the realm of social entrepreneurship, we need to ask how socially conscious business models can be extended more broadly, both within national borders and more widely in international structures. We also need to consider the intersection of such business models with the achievements made so far in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals.

The collaborative engagement of civil society, the public sector, and the private sector is integral to addressing these challenges and fostering inclusive digital skill development.

WHAT IS NEEDED FROM A LOCAL STRATEGY TO PROMOTE ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE TOWARDS DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND NEEDS?

A local strategy for fostering entrepreneurial skills inclusively should focus on **social and cultural empathy**, **cross-cultural communication**, and **cooperation skills**, as well as encouraging **a culture of informed risk-taking**. This approach ensures that the strategy addresses diverse backgrounds and needs within the community, creating an inclusive environment for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial thinking should be promoted throughout the entire education cycle, starting from early childhood education and continued through lifelong learning offers. Skills centres, mentorship and mobility programmes must be accessible to all. The aim should be to empower people to have agency and to create an innovative ecosystem that responds to people's agency, promotes multi-stakeholder engagement and partnerships, and reduces red tape.

Here, our society can learn from New European entrepreneurs as people who have a migrant background and bring with them ties to a third country, a multicultural background, a high level of adaptability to new circumstances and innovative ways of thinking from which European cities and regions can benefit immensely. By listening and attending to New European entrepreneurs' needs and priorities, such as their access to better professional networks and financing and upskilling programmes, public authorities and policy-makers can improve existing policies around economic inclusion that will benefit everyone.

To this end, as a network representing entrepreneurs with a migrant and cross-cultural background, UNITEE aims to foster a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem across Europe that can tap into unique skills and experiences, bridge cultures, spark new ideas, enrich societies and sustainably grow our economies. Creating a Europe-wide, evidence-based policy on inclusive entrepreneurship can provide a clearer vision for achieving inclusive and sustainable growth along with enhanced social rights. Further proposals can be found in UNITEE's call for a European Agenda for Inclusive Entrepreneurship.

Relevant organisations such as chambers of commerce, industry and business, but also research organisations and NGOs representing diverse groups, can contribute to these goals. Multi-sectoral and intersectional collaborations can lead to more inclusive professional and educational programmes and policies that are tailored towards the needs of different groups.

Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) programme

Entrepreneurial skills, i.e. creativity, problem-solving, and community leadership, as drivers of social innovation, social cohesion and job creation, are essential for European regions and cities. The EYE programme provides aspiring European entrepreneurs with the skills necessary to start and/or successfully run a small business in Europe. New entrepreneurs gather and exchange knowledge and business ideas with experienced host entrepreneurs with whom they stay and collaborate for a period of 1 to 6 months. The stay is partly financed by the European Commission. New entrepreneurs benefit from on-the-job training in a small or medium-sized enterprise in another participating country. This eases the successful start of their business or strengthens their new enterprise. They can also benefit from access to new markets, international cooperation and potential possibilities for collaboration with business partners abroad. Host entrepreneurs can benefit from fresh ideas from a motivated new entrepreneur in their business. Set up in 2009, the programme operates across the Participating Countries with the help of the local contact points, competent in business support (e.g. Chambers of Commerce, start-up centres, incubators etc.) and counts already more than 11.500 exchanges.

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR SOCIETAL ACTORS TO WORK TOGETHER – WITH AND FOR THE PEOPLE?

SHAFE IMPLEMENTED through NET4Age-Friendly and SIRENE

A happier, healthier and more inclusive society is only possible with the coordination of stakeholders in each city, region, country and transnationally, having them talking to each other and, more importantly, building together their own communities. This is exactly the focus of the SHAFE approach - Smart Healthy Age-Friendly environments - that is driven in practice through the **SHAFE Foundation** and has two lighthouse funded initiatives: the **COST Action NET4Age-Friendly**, with over 700 participants of 51 countries; and **SIRENE**, a Coordination and Support Action funded under Horizon Europe.

The main aim of SIRENE is to support the growth of social innovation ecosystems delivering eco-friendly and sustainable community-based services for SHAFE implementation in Europe to improve the wellbeing and housing conditions of the European population by empowering social and private entrepreneurs.
SIRENE is connecting stakeholders of all EU countries and below, namely through the creation of an Expert Hub with 50 renowned experts and having them jointly working towards a Social Innovation framework and supporting tools, creating a platform for mutual collaboration that will stay beyond the project lifetime. The main approach is the empowerment of local or regional ecosystems in Europe, to work on environments that promote active and healthy living in an inclusive digital world, including citizens, public authorities, industry, NGOs and research in a continuous joint collaboration.

BeCentral

Cities and regions have a key role to play in advancing social innovation, they can support communities and promote collaboration between different actors, while provide a sort of agility. As such, private and public actors can benefit from working together, as can be seen from the example of the Belgian digital tool ITSME

Campuses and tech hubs, such as BeCentral are crucial drivers of local development. Digital inclusion is a big topic, and as such, tech hubs should belong to all people and be established in accessible locations such as municipal halls or train stations. Hubs such as BeCentral are made to be replicated also in other cities and regions.

Drawing from local experiences and innovation, advancing cooperation and exchange at the European level is key to promoting a digital Europe. Programmes fostering mobility, diversity and intercultural skills are needed to develop digital skills at the European level, as well as the creation of strong links between different ecosystems.

INTEGER

An approach to elaborate the knowledge and skills of social innovators (or in the INTEGER project: collabers) is to apply the European Standard Classification of Occupations (ESCO). ESCO identifies the occupation of social entrepreneurs and their knowledge comprises aspects such as design thinking, impact investing, participatory decision-making and social alliances. Skills are divided in networking and representation, business and finances, monitoring and evaluation.

By applying ESCO and prioritising the skills identified, social actors improve collaboration, ensuring well-informed decisions and promoting inclusion through diverse connections. The emphasis on social entrepreneurship skills equips the initiatives with a strategic vision, promoting adaptability to the needs of the community. Skills in business, finances and monitoring guides efforts towards sustainability and responsiveness, ensuring a people-centred approach, which in turn promotes a culture of informed and inclusive decision-making.

FOR THE FUTURE

Who are the key actors for social innovation? All - from public to private sector as well as civil society.

There are benefits from private and public institutions working together to develop digital tools, rather than working separately. The public sector can also be a shareholder.

Some questions were left unanswered:

How do we incentivise the private sector to promote social good?

How do we instil stronger responsibilities of the private sector towards communities?

How do we incentivise the hiring of underrepresented groups?

NEW DISCUSSIONS ARE NEEDED TO PROMOTE MORE INCLUSIVE AND FAIRER COMMUNITIES ACROSS EUROPE.

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