

The Concept Of Social Innovation In The Disability Field



European Association of
Service providers for
Persons with Disabilities

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Executive Summary

For many decades disability rights movement has been fighting for the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities and the redefinition of their role in the society. While the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 marked a major milestone for this movement, the translation of the compromises adopted in concrete changes is still a work in progress. The transformation process involves not only the reform and development of an appropriate legal and policy framework but also the creation of new services and products, the adaptation and re-design of infrastructure, the modification of societal perceptions on disability and other complex social challenges.

Social innovation emerges as a crucial tool in addressing these challenges enabling the exploration of innovative and novel solutions to respond to the needs and aspirations of individuals with disabilities, while amplifying their voices, preferences, and desires.

However, the concept of social innovation is still under construction, with ongoing debates about its definition among academics and researchers. Meanwhile, the actors involved in the necessary transformation, such as service providers or policy makers, seek for guidelines and clarification of what constitute or not a social innovation or how to promote these social innovations in the field of disability.

In this context, this study aims to construct a working definition of social innovation applied to the disability field and identify drivers for its adoption by the public sector. The proposed definition is based on literature review, field research, and expert interviews. The study identifies key drivers for the public sector to facilitate and enable social innovation, drawing from interviews with experts and social innovators.

The document explores the concept of social innovation in relation to disability, examines the legal and policy landscape influencing it in Europe, presents drivers and enablers for public sector involvement, and concludes with findings and recommendations for future action.

Social innovation in the disability field

Although social innovation is not a new concept, it is still in construction phase, looking for consensus among academia and scientific literature. Different literature and systematic reviews (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2017; The Young Foundation, 2012) have analysed how social

innovation is defined in the scientific literature, finding a large number of definitions that vary according to the discipline or the context where they are used.

Since there is no common/agreed definition of social innovation, to understand the meaning of social innovation in the framework of support services for people with disabilities on a cross-European basis, this study proposes a working definition of what social innovation in the disability field:

“Social innovation in the disability field refers to the generation, development, testing and implementation of groundbreaking ideas and practices in a specific context that respond to people with disabilities’ needs and wishes. These practices must be person-centred solutions that enable people with disabilities to fully enjoy all their human rights, respect their voice, choice and control, promote their independent living within the community, and ensure their participation in every area of life including public affairs. In addition, people with disabilities have to play an active role, not only in the design of these new practices and solutions but also in their implementation, validation, and other stages, creating new partnerships and collaborations, while transforming social relations and empowering people with disability’s capacity to act.”

The proposed working definition is based on:

1. The identification of key ingredients of social innovation according to the analysis of different definitions from some of the most salient institutional actors, and academics based on the review done by The Young Foundation (2012), Hernández-Ascanio et al. (2017) and the SEED project (Seed, n.d.).
2. The identification of current needs, demands, and aspirations of people with disabilities reflected on key documents (CRPD, “Transformation of services for persons with disabilities” and “Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2021-2030”).
3. Feedback from experts in the field of disabilities.

The working definition of social innovation in the disability field contains various concepts that require clarification to ensure a better understanding. The following table presents an overview of the criteria that should be considered when evaluating a social innovation in the disability field. A more in-depth view of these concepts is provided in section 3 of the study.

Table 1. Social innovation in the field of disability: minimum requirements, criteria and best practice principles

Minimum requirements	A social innovation in the disability field has to respect all human rights of people with disabilities including respect the voice, choice and control of people with disabilities, moral agency, informed consent, respect for privacy, accessibility, promotion of inclusion.
A social innovation in the disability field is a practice that¹:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Represents Novelty » Effectively improves welfare and wellbeing of people with disabilities » Proposes person-centred solutions based on a human rights based approach » Proposes solutions that are gender, sexual and culture sensitive » Empowers people with disabilities, their families & communities » Creates new social relationships or collaborations » Enhances people with disabilities capacity to act » Follows a bottom-up approach » Is driven by people with disabilities » Contributes to positive changes in attitudes, mindsets, and values
Good practice principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Sustainability » Accountability » Affordability » Transferability/Scalability

¹ Adapted from EAPN briefing “Through social innovation to better social inclusion in the EU” and taking into consideration the European Quality Framework for Social Services (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=6140&langId=en>)

About the promotion and support of social innovation: main drivers

The European Union has implemented several programs and initiatives to support social innovation projects which find solutions to different social challenges including the inclusion of people with disabilities at all levels: employment, education, etc. The ESF+ and its ESF Social Innovation+ are part of the strategy followed by the European Union to promote and support social innovation and social enterprises. A revision of the most important initiatives and programmes that provide a supportive environment for social innovation at European Union level is presented in section 4 of the study.

Meanwhile, section 5 is focused on the identification of drivers and enablers of social innovation that should be implemented by the public sector. The identification of these drivers and enablers is grounded in desk and field research, which involved interviews with experts and social innovators who provided valuable insights and perspectives.

The list of drivers identified during field research is presented in the following figure.



Figure 1. Main drivers of social innovation in the disability field that should be adopted by the public sector

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Acknowledgements

This is a report of the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) subcontracted to Kveloce (Senior Europa S.L.).

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EASPD wishes to thank all those who contributed to the development of this report.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Brussels, October 2023

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor European Commission can be held responsible for them.

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of social innovation in the disability field by constructing a working definition, delineating qualifying criteria, and exploring the principles of good practices in order to understand the true meaning of social innovation in the framework of support services for people with disabilities on a cross-European basis. It also identifies key drivers and enablers that the public sector can adopt to actively facilitate social innovation within the disability field. Through a combination of desk research (literature review), and field research (interviews to experts and social innovators in the provision of services for people with disabilities), this study desires to contribute to the advancement of social innovation in the disability field, supporting positive societal change and improved outcomes for persons with disabilities.

List of acronyms

CRPD: Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

EAPN: European anti poverty network

ESF: European Social Fund

ESF+: European Social Fund Plus

EaSI: Employment and Social Innovation

EASPD: European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities

EU: European Union

EuSEF: European social entrepreneurship funds

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

SBI: Social Business Initiative

SMEs: Small and medium-sized enterprises

1 Introduction

The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 marked a major milestone in the fight of the disability rights social movement, which had been tirelessly advocating for the recognition of all human rights of people with disabilities and the redefinition of their roles assigned in the society. Since then, numerous countries have embarked on the task of overhauling their legal and policy frameworks, while a social movement has gained momentum in reshaping societal perceptions on disability.

The United Nations Organisation has continued working to guide and drive the transformation process, complementing the CRPD. For instance, last year the UN published two new key documents: “Guidelines on deinstitutionalization, including in emergencies” (United Nations, 2022a) and “Transformation of services for persons with disabilities - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities” (United Nations, 2022b).

The “Transformation of services for persons with disabilities” report, prepared by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Gerard Quinn, examines the current state of services available to individuals with disabilities. It emphasises the need for comprehensive transformation to ensure the full realization of their rights. This report underscores the importance of innovative approaches in rethinking and reshaping service delivery systems, promoting inclusion, and addressing the specific needs and aspirations of persons with disabilities.

Similarly, the “Guidelines on deinstitutionalization, including in emergencies” issued by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides a framework for transitioning from institutional settings to community-based alternatives. These guidelines emphasize the rights of persons with disabilities and highlight the significance of deinstitutionalization as a crucial step towards social inclusion and equality. The document underscores the role of social innovation in developing innovative strategies and practices that prioritize community integration, individualized support, and the provision of accessible and inclusive services.

Parallely, the European Union (EU) has demonstrated its commitment to fostering inclusion and ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities through the development of its legal and policy framework. Building upon the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the EU has integrated disability rights into its foundational document, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012). This integration firmly embeds the protection of disability rights within the EU’s legal framework, ensuring that persons with disabilities are guaranteed equal treatment, dignity, and access to essential services.

In addition, the EU has adopted a proactive approach by integrating the new challenges into its EU Disability Strategy. The 2021-2030 strategy outlines concrete actions to advance the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society. It focuses on enhancing accessibility, removing barriers, and promoting disability mainstreaming across EU policies and programs. Through the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030, the European Union is working to promote equal opportunities and to empower persons with disabilities to fully participate in social, economic, and political life.

All these documents highlight the importance of adopting innovative approaches, breaking away from traditional models, and harnessing creative solutions to address the complex social challenges behind the transformative process.

In tackling such challenges, social innovation emerges as a vital and strategic tool, enabling the exploration of innovative and novel solutions that address the evolving needs and aspirations of individuals with disabilities, while amplifying their voices, preferences, and desires. While substantial progress has been made in terms of recognizing the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities, there remain gaps in fully integrating them into all facets of society. This is where social innovation steps in as a transformative force.

Social innovation holds the potential to address the unmet needs and challenges that persist within the disability field. Traditional approaches often fall short in providing comprehensive solutions that consider the di-

verse and evolving requirements of people with disabilities. Social innovation, with its emphasis on novel ideas and collaborative approaches, can lead to the development of more inclusive services and products.

In this context, the interest and study of social innovation has grown among academics, researchers, and practitioners, emerging as an expanding phenomenon that captures widespread interest (Oeij et al., 2019). However, this concept is still under construction, as there is still no consensus on its definition.

In this sense this study has two main objectives: 1. “construct” a working definition of what social innovation in the disability field actually means (including criteria and good practices principles), in order to understand the true meaning of social innovation in the framework of support services for people with disabilities, and 2. identify key drivers and enablers that could be adopted by the public sector to promote and nurture social innovation applied to the provision of services for people with disabilities.

The working definition proposed is the result of an independent study based on literature review and the field research which include interviews to experts, including EASPD and other relevant actors in the field of disability.

In addition, this study identifies key drivers that the public sector can adopt to actively facilitate and enable social innovation within the disability field. The identification of these drivers and enablers is grounded in desk and field research, which involved interviews with experts and social innovators who provided valuable insights and perspectives. By analysing the findings of the field research, a set of drivers has emerged, shedding light on the actions and initiatives that can effectively support and nurture social innovation in the disability field. These drivers encompass a range of strategies and approaches that the public sector can implement to create an enabling environment for social innovation to thrive.

This document begins by establishing a comprehensive understanding of the concept of social innovation in relation to disability. Moving forward, the second section focuses on examining the legal and policy landscape that has a direct influence on social innovation within the disability field in Europe. In the subsequent section, we compile a range of drivers and enablers that could be adopted by the public sector to foster social innovation within the disability field. Lastly, the study concludes by presenting its findings and offering practical recommendations for future action.



2 What is social innovation in the disability field?

The definition of social innovation is widely disputed by academics and research institutions. The diversity of concepts and approaches, processes and actors, initiatives and practices, prevents a single, comprehensive definition of social innovation (EAPN, 2015). In practice, social innovation can take many forms, covering a variety of sectors and fields.

Thus, since there is no common/agreed definition of social innovation, to understand the meaning of social innovation in the framework of support services for people with disabilities on a cross-European basis, the present section will be focused on the “construction” of a working definition of what social innovation in the disability field actually means.

To that aim, the initial step involves reviewing definitions of what constitute social innovation. Subsequently, the analysis proceeds to identify the demands, needs, problems, and aspirations of people with disabilities, those for whom social innovation would seek to provide solutions. This comprehensive understanding will enable the proposal of a working definition of social innovation in the disability field.

2.1 Definition of Social innovation

In the last decades the concept of social innovation has gained increased interest among academics, researchers, and practitioners, being recognized as a fast-growing phenomenon (Oeij et al., 2019). Although this is not a new concept (some authors place its origins in the first half of the 20th century with the work of Schumpeter and Weber (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2017)), it is still in construction phase, looking for consensus among academia and scientific literature.

The development and evolution of the concept of social innovation has been stimulated by social, economic and civilizing changes that occurred during the last century, in which the incapacity of the classic mechanisms to cover the basic social needs and to respond to the new social demands was revealed (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2017).

Different literature and systematic reviews (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2017; The Young Foundation, 2012) have analysed how social innovation is defined in the scientific literature, finding a large number of definitions that vary according to the discipline or the context where they are used.

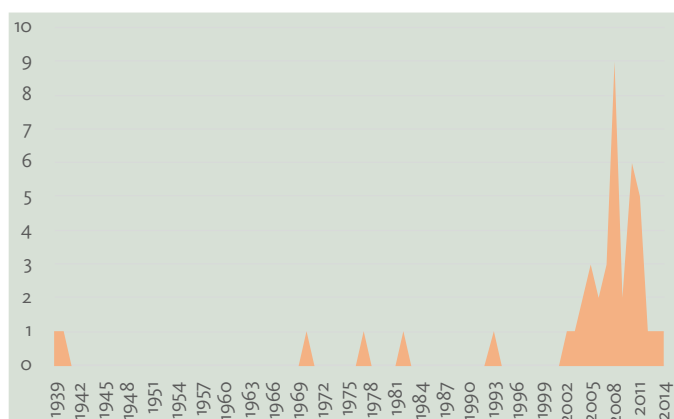


Figure 1. Number of definitions identified in scientific publications by year

For instance, the systematic review conducted by Hernández-Ascanio, Tirado-Valencia and Ariza-Montes published in 2016, which encompassed English and Spanish scientific literature, identified 48 different definitions. Notably, around 58% of these definitions belong to the period following the 2007 economic and financial crisis, reaching its maximum peak in 2008. This observation highlights how social and economic crisis have promoted the interest of the research community in social innovation.

Figure 3. Key elements of social innovation

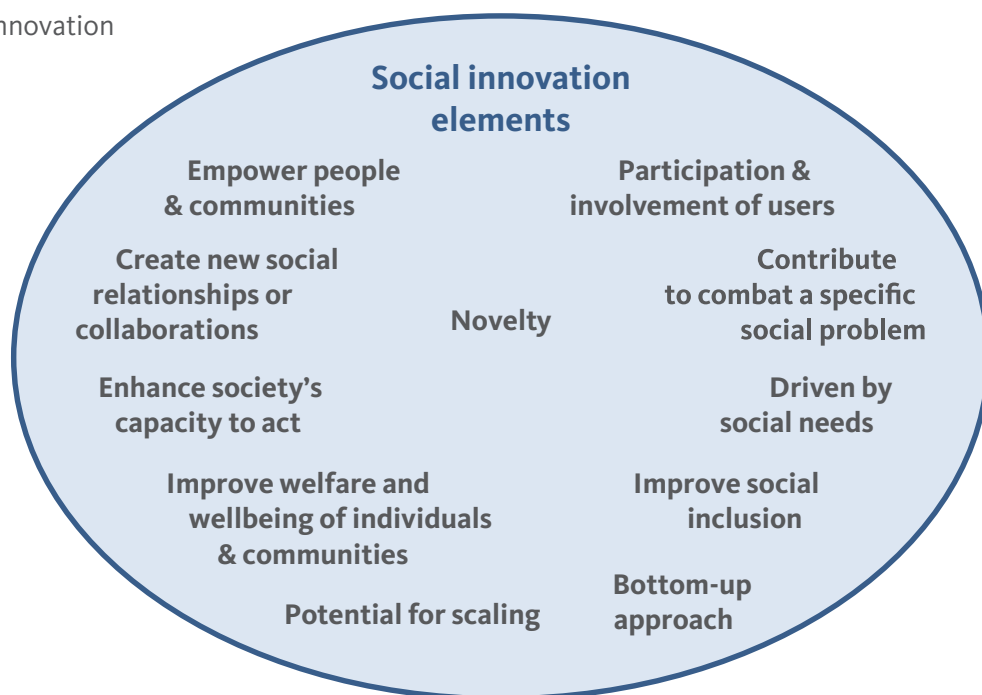
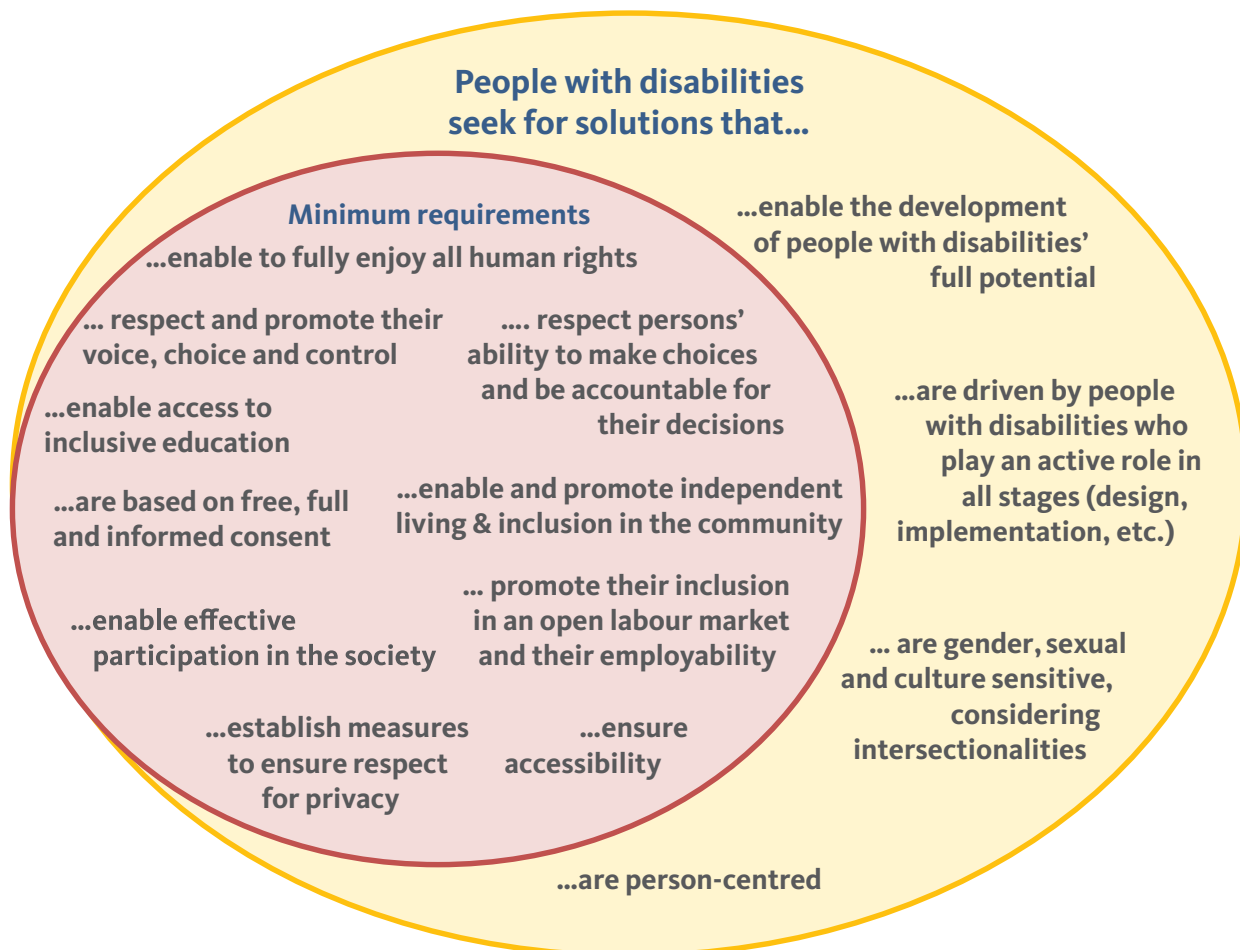


Figure 4. People with disabilities' needs and demands



2.2 Key elements in the disability field

To understand social innovation in the disability field, it is essential to analyse what are current needs, demands, and aspirations of people with disabilities. In the last decades, people with disabilities and their families have succeeded in bringing their voices and demands into the political agenda, initiating profound and essential changes in how society perceives individuals with disabilities.

A major milestone in this journey was the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. This international treaty, with 164 signatories including all EU countries, identifies areas where adaptations must be made for persons with disabilities to effectively exercise their rights and areas where their rights have been violated, and where protection of rights must be reinforced (United Nations, n.d.).

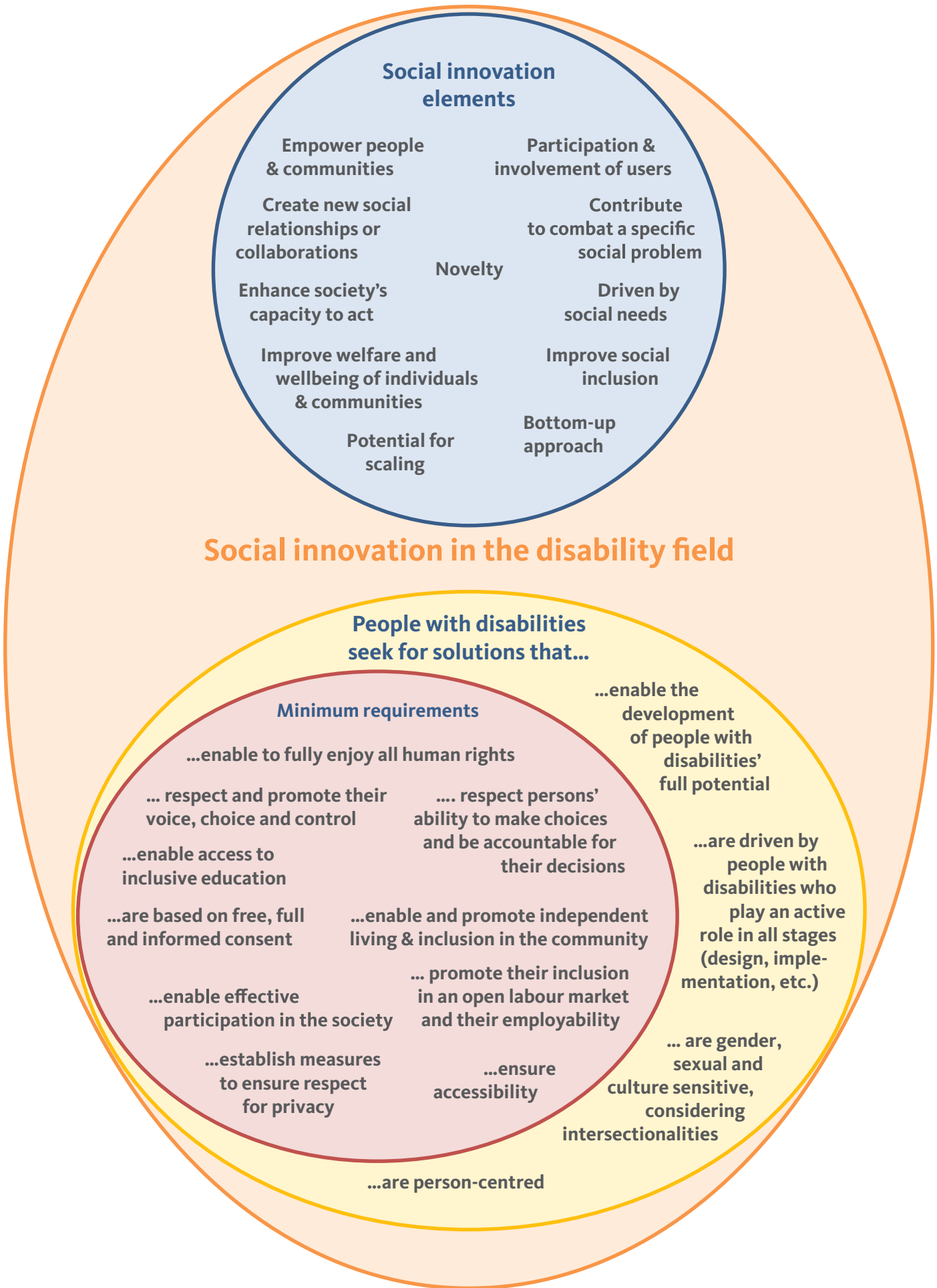
Reading into the CRPD and other key documents (i.e., “Transformation of services for persons with disabilities” and “Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2021-2030”), the solutions proposed to respond to the needs and wishes of people with disabilities are mostly related with the warranty of legal minimum requirements among other needs. In this sense, people with disabilities seek for solutions that:

- »» Effectively improve welfare and wellbeing of people with disabilities to enable them to enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms by:

- » Enabling and promoting the voice, choice, and control of people with disabilities
- » Enabling and promoting their independent living within the community
- » Enabling effective participation of people with disabilities in the society
- » Enabling access to inclusive education
- » Promoting their inclusion in an open labour market and their employability
- »» Are based on free, full and informed consent
- »» Establish measures to ensure respect for privacy
- »» Respect persons' ability to make moral choices and be accountable for their decisions or actions (moral agency).
- »» Ensure accessibility
- »» Enable the development of people with disabilities' full potential
- »» Are person-centred
- »» Are gender, sexual and culture sensitive, taking into account intersectionalities
- »» Are driven by people with disabilities who play an active role in all the stages of the solution (from design to implementation, validation, follow-up, monitoring, etc.)

Merging the main elements of social innovation and the main needs of people with disabilities, the main elements of social innovation in the disability field are identified (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Social innovation in the disability sector main elements



2.3 “Working definition” of social innovation in the disability field

Based on the concepts presented in the previous section, the authors of this study built and proposed a definition of social innovation that was discussed during interviews with experts in the field of disability (Annex I). As a result of these interviews, and after synthesising and reflecting on their responses, the following working definition was developed:

“Social innovation in the disability field refers to the generation, development, testing and implementation of groundbreaking ideas and practices in a specific context that respond to people with disabilities’ needs and wishes. These practices must be person-centred solutions that enable people with disabilities to fully enjoy all their human rights, respect their voice, choice and control, promote their independent living within the community, and ensure their participation in every area of life including public affairs. In addition, people with disabilities have to play an active role, not only in the design of these new practices and solutions but also in their implementation, validation, and other stages, creating new partnerships and collaborations, while transforming social relations and empowering people with disability’s capacity to act.”

It needs to be highlighted that this definition includes minimum legal requirements, that should not be part of a social innovation. However, in the field of disability these requirements must be emphasized and included in the definition, as the evidence suggests that in many cases they are not met yet.

Based on the interviews with experts, it is clear that there are many issues that need to be discussed about this definition within the people with disabilities’ community. For instance, considering that many of the solutions’ requirements are considered minimums, what happens to new solutions that imply an improvement but do not meet all these minimums, or do meet them but only partially?

Moreover, experts expressed their concerns about the broadening of the definition of social innovation

to such an extent that anything could potentially be labeled as such. This is the reason why it is needed to stress and clarify the concept of “novelty”.

In addition, there is a prevailing feeling among interviewees that society is making small steps at an unacceptably slow pace, which falls short of meeting the demands of people with disabilities. Furthermore, there is a perception that despite some improvements have been made, there is a lack of genuine commitment to fully implement the necessary changes. With this regard, power relations and the need to change the power balance, is one of the most mentioned topics.

Based on the comprehensive information gathered, the defining criteria of social innovation in the disability field are developed in detail in the next section.

3 Defining criteria of Social innovation in the disability field

The definition of social innovation in the disability field contains various concepts that require clarification to ensure a better understanding. In this section, a more in-depth view of these concepts is provided by presenting a comprehensive overview of the criteria that should be considered when evaluating a social innovation in the disability field. The aim of defining these criteria is to promote a clearer and more cohesive understanding of social innovation within this context.

On the one hand, minimum legal requirements have been included in the proposed definition of social innovation in the disability field. These minimum requirements are linked to human rights and legal minimums recognised in the European Union. Then, this would be the first criteria that define social innovation in the disability field:

- »» **Minimum requirements fulfilment:** a social innovation in the disability field has to respect all human rights of people with disabilities, that is:
 - » Enables the voice, choice and control of people with disabilities
 - » Respects persons' ability to make moral choices and be accountable for their decisions or actions (moral agency)
 - » Respects free, full and informed consent
 - » Ensures respect for privacy
 - » Ensures accessibility
 - » Enables people with disabilities to be included in the society and enjoy their human rights, by (one or more of the following):
 - › Allowing and promoting their independent living within the community,
 - › Allowing effective participation of people with disabilities in the society,
 - › Allowing their access to inclusive education,
 - › Allowing and promoting their inclusion in an open labour market and their employability

On the other hand, 10 criteria to define social innovation in the disability field have been identified. A social innovation in the disability field is a practice that¹:

- »» **Represents Novelty:** i.e. it should introduce some novelty in a specific context or sector (services for people with disabilities), in one or more of the following aspects: (i) Identification of a new need that was not previously met through services or products. (ii) Provision of a new product or service that satisfies real needs (individual, collective, community, new or old ones). (iii) New methods of doing things (producing, delivering services), which can include new technologies, or new forms of organization, or new relations. (iii) New actors (or actors that were less engaged) are involved in the innovation initiative.
- »» **Effectively improves welfare and wellbeing of people with disabilities:** enabling the development of people with disabilities' full potential.
- »» **Proposes person-centred solutions based on a human rights based approach:** the solution does not focus on the disability but in the person as a whole.
- »» **Proposes solutions that are gender, sexual and culture sensitive,** taking into account intersectionalities.
- »» **Empowers people with disabilities, their families & communities:** supporting and stimulating the empowerment of people with disabilities and their families while responding to their needs and wishes, rather than providing only passive support.
- »» **Creates new social relationships or collaborations:** meaningful social innovation practice in the disability field should increase social capital – bring new actors to the scene, build new partnerships, alliances, and collaborations, especially with mainstream stakeholders, transforming social relations in a way that maximizes the participation of people with disabilities and their families.
- »» **Enhances people with disabilities capacity to act:** it should raise the reputation and influence of

¹ Adapted from EAPN briefing "Through social innovation to better social inclusion in the EU" and taking into consideration the European Quality Framework for Social Services (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=6140&langId=en>)

people with disabilities organizations, improve their capacity, create new leaders, enable more power them to advocate for improved social policies overall, enhancing their capacity to act.

- »» **Follows a bottom-up approach:** it should be driven by people with disabilities, or, if the practice is introduced 'from above' (by decision of the authorities), it needs to garner bottom-up ownership and support, adjusting to the needs and wishes of people with disabilities.
- »» **Is driven by people with disabilities:** people with disabilities play an active role and possess some decision-making authority, not only in the design of the social innovation but also in the implementation, validation, and follow-up stages.
- »» **Contributes to positive changes in attitudes, mindsets, and values:** it should increase awareness on social problems, on opportunities to improve inclusion, on benefits from increased wellbeing and better integration of vulnerable groups fighting stigma and discrimination.

In addition to the aforementioned criteria, it is essential that social innovations in the disability field adhere to other key principles. These principles serve as guiding values and standards to ensure that social innovations are sustainable, inclusive, and impactful:

- »» **Sustainability:** social innovation in the disability field should be sustainable, no one-off interventions with no follow-up, or actions with no permanent/ long-term changes. In the case of social enterprises, the practice should demonstrate financial sustainability and a viable business model overall.

- »» **Accountability:** they should be transparent, with a high level of visibility in the community. They should incorporate robust internal and external evaluation mechanisms, monitoring of key indicators, encourage beneficiary feedback, and conduct thorough impact assessments before and after implementation. This principle ensures that the innovation remains accountable and continuously strives for improvement.
- »» **Affordability:** social innovation should be accessible to all, particularly to the the most vulnerable groups within the disability community. They should either be offered free of charge or at an affordable cost, enabling equitable access for individuals with disabilities. This principle emphasizes the importance of removing financial barriers to ensure inclusivity.
- »» **Transferability/Scalability:** social innovations should possess the potential to be transferred and scaled, to be adjusted to other groups or contexts, and to create greater impact. This principle recognizes the value of knowledge transfer and replication, allowing successful practices to be adopted and adapted by others. By widening their impact, these innovations can contribute to systemic change.

By adhering to these four principles, social innovations in the disability field can strive for excellence, ensuring their long-term viability, transparency, affordability, and scalability. Embracing these principles will contribute to the overall effectiveness and positive impact of social innovations, ultimately improving the lives of individuals with disabilities.

4 Legal and Policy framework supporting social innovation in Europe

The legal and policy framework is constituted by a combination of regulations, initiatives, and measures both at European Union and national levels. While the European Union sets the overarching direction, policy framework, and financial support for social innovation across its member countries, at national level each country has to adapt these policies to their local contexts, implement social innovation initiatives, and play a crucial role in tailoring solutions to their specific needs and challenges.

This section aims to present a revision of the most important initiatives and programmes that provide a supportive environment for social innovation at European Union level. To complement this section, a summary of the main documents of the legal and policy framework that supports and ensures the rights of people with disabilities in Europe has been included in Annex 2.

4.1 Social innovation legal and policy framework

Within the European Union, there exists a rich landscape of initiatives and policies aimed at fostering and nurturing social innovation, define by the European Commission as “new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships and form new collaborations. These innovations can be products, services or models addressing unmet needs more effectively” (European Commission, n.d.-k). These initiatives recognize the transformative power of social innovation in addressing complex societal challenges and driving positive change across diverse sectors. By creating a supportive environment, the EU encourages the development and implementation of innovative solutions that tackle pressing social issues.

The main instrument proposed by the European Union to promote projects, programs and policies to create a fair and socially inclusive society is the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) (<https://ec.europa.eu/europe-an-social-fund-plus/en>). Within the ESF+ program, the European Union launched the ESF Social Innovation +

initiative with a budget of € 197 million for the period 2021-2027, representing an important source of funding for social innovation projects.

The following is a compilation of the most important initiatives and policies in the framework of social innovation, including the ESF+ and the ESF Social Innovation+.

4.1.1 Funding

»» **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+):** this is the main financial instrument of the EU to address challenges related to employment, social inclusion, education and skills policies, supporting the implementation of the 20 principles included in the European Pillar of Social Rights. It merges four funding instruments that were separate in the 2014-2020 programme: the European Social Fund (ESF), the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). For the period 2021-2027 it has been allocated with € 99.3 billion. The ESF+ provides funding for projects and programs related to social innovation and social entrepreneurship (European Commission, n.d.-g). (More information about legislation that regulates the ESF+ [here](#)).

- »» **ESF Social Innovation +:** this EU initiative aims to expand the adoption of innovative solutions addressing current societal challenges, particularly in areas such as employment, education, skills, and social inclusion. It serves as a facilitator, enabling the transfer and upscaling of these solutions to effectively tackle pressing issues. The initiative will be implemented through two work streams: Social innovation grant scheme; and a European Competence Centres for Social Innovation (European Commission, n.d.-b) More information [here](#).
- »» **ESF+ direct (EaSI):** former EaSI Programme is now a strand under the ESF+. It is centred on main policy priorities: employment and skills, labour market and labour mobility, social protection and active inclusion and working conditions. (More information [here](#)).
- »» **EuSEF regulation:** the Regulation 2013/346 establishes a European label for social enterprise funds to identify funds focusing on European social businesses and help them to attract investment. (More information [here](#)).

4.1.2 Competitions and Awards

- »» **Social Innovation Match:** dissemination platform to support the visibility of social innovation initiatives, the dissemination of good practices. In addition, it facilitates partnership-building. (European Commission, n.d.-l) (More information [here](#)).
- »» **European Social Innovation Competition:** An annual initiative organized by the European Commission to support innovators to develop their ideas, and to facilitate a network of radical innovators. It includes a EUR 50.000 prize for three winners. Each year the competition is focused on a specific societal challenge. (European Innovation Council, 2023) (More information [here](#)).
- »» **Socio Innovation Tournament:** annually, this tournament acknowledges and supports three innovative ideas that make a significant contribution to social, ethical, and/or environmental impact. The prizes are awarded to initiatives in various areas including education, inclusion, employment, aging, and more. (European Investment Bank, n.d.) (More information [here](#)).

- »» **REGIOSTARS Awards:** this award aims to inspire and recognize regions for their impactful regional policies. It serves as a prestigious distinction for EU-funded projects that showcase the effectiveness and inclusivity of regional development. In 2023 projects are competing in six categories, including “Social and inclusive Europe”. (European Commission, n.d.-h) (More information [here](#)).

4.1.3 Skills development and support

- »» **National competence centres for social innovation:** 6 consortia were selected to set up national competence centres and drive social innovation covering 25 countries. These centres are currently investigating national ecosystems for social innovation aiming to cultivate networks, build capacities and synergies, spotlight efficiencies and develop the tools and methods that will be essential to growing social innovation across the EU. (More information [here](#)).

4.1.4 Networking

- »» **Social Challenges Platform:** the platform’s goal is to establish a marketplace where actual social challenges can meet innovative solutions. It serves as a space where Public Authorities, Private Companies, and Third Sector Organisations collaborate to transform challenges into new business opportunities. By fostering the active participation of social innovators, startups, and SMEs, the platform facilitates the identification, funding, co-development, and testing of concrete solutions to address these pressing needs. (More information [here](#)).

4.1.5 Other initiatives

- »» **Social Business Initiative (SBI):** short-term action plan with concrete measures to establish a favourable environment for social enterprises. The SBI aimed to promote social entrepreneurship and create an enabling environment for social enterprises through policy recommendations and support measures with respect 3 main topics: facilitate

social enterprises to obtain funding, increase the visibility of social enterprises and create a friendlier legal environment for social enterprises. (European Commission, n.d.-j)

»» **Social Economy Action Plan (SEAP):** building on the results of the SBI the European Commission adopted a new action plan with concrete measures to help mobilise the full potential of the social

economy, enhance social investment, support social economy actors and create jobs. This plan includes initiatives to create the right framework conditions for the social economy to thrive; to open up opportunities and support for capacity building; and enhance recognition of the social economy and its potential (European Commission, n.d.-i). (More information [here](#)).



5. Drivers and enablers of social innovation in the disability field – the public sector

To identify the drivers and enablers of social innovation, first it is important to understand how the social economy works, the various actors involved, and the inter-relationships among them. According to Murray et al., the social economy can be defined as a hybrid system in which four subeconomies coexist and interact: the state (public sector), the market (private sector), the household (families, individuals and civil organisations) and the third sector (charities, NGOs).

In the next diagram, the social economy is represented by the shaded area, reflecting how none of the four sub-economies is exclusively focused on the social economy (Murray et al., 2010).

The diagram also shows the interactions between the different sub-economies. Since this study primarily focuses on exploring the drivers that the public sector can implement to foster and facilitate social innovation in the disability sector, our attention will be directed to the relationships between the state and the other sub-economies.

In the Open Book of Social Innovation (Murray et al., 2010), several interactions between the state and the other sub-economies are identified. These interactions include:

- »» Funding through grants, procurement, and investments
- »» Taxes and fees establishment
- »» Regulatory, fiscal, and legal conditions
- »» Platforms to promote interactions among actors
- »» Tools and skills provided by state for other actors

These interactions are the channels through which the public sector can introduce drivers and enablers for social innovation.

In a separate study conducted by João-Roland and Granados in 2020, the main drivers of social innovation in social enterprises were examined through a systematic review (João-Roland & Granados, 2020). In this study, drivers are classified in three categories: contex-

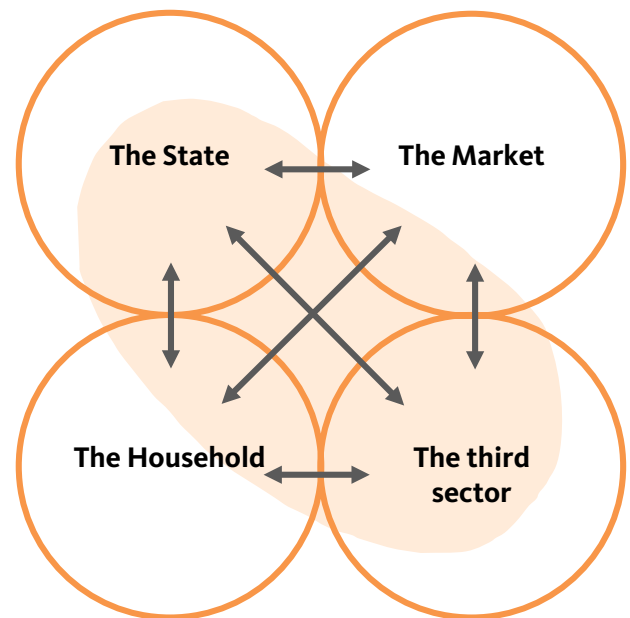


Figure 6. The social economy. Source: Adapted from The Young Foundation (Murray et al., 2010)

tual, managerial and organizational. The public sector influence is focused on the contextual factors through political support that includes all the factors seen in Murray's work.

This framework formed the basis for the field research conducted, where experts and representatives from good practices identified of social innovation in the disability field were interviewed. On the one hand, the experts provided general insights into specific drivers and enablers currently present in the disability field. On the other hand, representatives from good practices shared their perspectives based on their experience implementing their innovative initiatives in the disability field.

Based on both desk research and field research, we have identified the main drivers and enablers of social innovation in the disability field that should be implemented by the public sector, which are divided in five categories:



Figure 7. Main drivers of social innovation in the disability field that should be adopted by the public sector

5.1 Regulatory and fiscal framework

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant advancement in the recognition of the voices and demands of people with disabilities and their families, leading to fundamental changes in societal perceptions of individuals with disabilities, and consequently in a legal and policy framework to integrate the new paradigm.

A pivotal moment in this journey was the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, which started a revolution in the legal and policy landscape, not only in Europe but around the world.

European countries, guided by the European Union, have been working in working to translate the commitments

adopted through the CRPD into meaningful changes, where a well-structured legal framework is imperative, not only to secure the rights of people with disabilities but also to drive societal transformations and social innovation that foster inclusivity and equality. In Annex 2 an overview of the key legal and policy documents that are playing a vital role in shaping this transformative movement in European countries is provided.

“The public sector must guarantee equal opportunities and rights for persons with disabilities through laws and policies that promote their inclusion and active participation in society.”
(*Lourdes Márquez from Fundación ONCE*)

While the legal and policy framework of the European Union serves as a guiding force, encouraging and supporting member countries in harmonizing their national legal systems with the commitments articulated in both the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the CRPD, the pace of progress varies across European nations, and there remains substantial work to be undertaken, as differences persist in the rate of progress and the extent of implementation.

The process of legal framework transformation holds crucial significance, not only because of its scope of influence that encompasses all activities, relations, and sector, but also because it possesses the dual capacity to either facilitate or impede social innovation. Operating as both an enabler and a potential constraint, this transformational facet can either smooth the path toward discovering novel approaches or erect barriers that hinder the exploration of innovative solutions.

For this study, and based on the interviews done, we have chosen one specific topic where legal framework can act as a driver of social innovation: Social Enterprises.

5.1.1 Social Enterprises

Social enterprises play a significant role in the social economy, participating in the provision of essential care services for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities. In numerous cases, social enterprises have contributed to improve the delivery of social services proposing innovative approaches to create opportunities where mainstream business or the public sector could not find one. (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion., 2020, p. 5).

In 2020 the European Commission published “Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe. Comparative synthesis report”, a comprehensive report that explores the landscape of social enterprises and conducts an analysis of the legal and policy frameworks in place to foster and support these enterprises across various European countries. While recognizing that social enterprises are understood differently by national legislations, policy strategies, academics, and social entrepreneurs, the report proposes a general definition that reflects the principles shared by most Member States. According to this definition, “social enterprises run commercial activities (entrepreneurial/economic dimension) in order to achieve a social or societal common good (social dimension) and have an organisation or ownership system that reflects their mission (inclusive governance-ownership dimension)” (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion., 2020, p. 28). Fundamentally, the concept of social enterprises bears a strong resemblance to the notion of social

innovation, particularly when social entrepreneurship is understood as a catalyst for driving beneficial social transformation. At times, social entrepreneurship is even described as an approach that fosters social innovation, emphasizing its role in generating novel solutions to societal challenges.

In this sense, supporting the creation of social enterprises through a good legal and policy framework facilitates and enables the generation of social innovation.

Social enterprises face various obstacles and challenges throughout their entrepreneurship process. Examples of such constraints include rigid legal frameworks that limit their activities, extensive bureaucratic processes that hinder their efficiency, a lack of adequate funding to support their initiatives, and intense competition within the market (Biggeri et al., 2017, p. 300).

According to the report of the European Commission, positive changes have been made in the last decade, mostly in countries where the development of social enterprises was merely testimonial ten years ago. In 2020, it was remarkable that an increasing number of countries were in the process of adopting new legislation to regulate social enterprises, although this was only a first step.

The establishment of a specific legal definition that frame social enterprises is stressed in this report as a pre-requisite for designing adequate policies and management tools. In addition, it is highlighted that this definition should embrace the diversity present in these areas, acknowledging the various legal structures that social enterprises may adopt, the diverse range of activities they engage in, and the different target groups they aim to serve (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion., 2020, p. 137). Likewise, during interviews, social innovators emphasized the need for the establishment of these legal forms as a way to access funding and provide a certain flexibility in funding utilization to support the operational viability and sustainability of entities.

This legislative effort has to be complemented by the implementation of appropriate policies and the establishment of a comprehensive ecosystem (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, So-

cial Affairs and Inclusion., 2020, p. 142). Unfortunately, it is in this aspect that many countries face significant challenges and shortcomings.

While progress has been made, several challenges persist in many European countries. These include: lack of legitimisation of social enterprises (legal forms), lack of stability in current policy framework (constant changes and cuts in public spending), lack of support for scale up and consolidation (tax breaks), lack of capability building and access to customized financial resources that respond to their specific needs (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion., 2020, p. 136).

5.2 Funding

Funding was recognised as a key enabler of social innovation in the disability field, as emphasized by the interviewees during the field research. As mentioned earlier, funding is channelled from the public sector to the other subeconomies within the social economy through diverse instruments, such as: grants, procurement, or investment.

“Funding has been and continues to be a major challenge as a nonprofit organization that depends on financial support from funding sources, be they charities, government departments or project pots” (Michael Gstöttenbauer from LIFEtool)

“That would be very useful if there was a mechanism or a recognition or a way to support the various stages [of social innovation]. When you are innovating the last thing you need to be doing is chasing money or chasing funds because you lose a lot of what you are trying to do at those early stages at least. And you get very frustrated, and a lot of ideas die because they can't get funds to move from a first stage to the second stage” (Brian Smyth from Social Farming Ireland)

“The public sector can create specific support programmes for social innovation projects and initiatives in the field of disability.” (Lourdes Márquez from Fundación ONCE)

Within the field of grants, there exist several funding models that can be implemented. These models define distinct incentives and possibilities for the actors involved in a particular sector. The choice of funding model significantly impacts the outcomes and effectiveness of the policies and their objectives.

In this section, our focus will be on a funding model that experts and social innovators interviewed stressed as a key driver of social innovation in the disability field: user centred funding models – Personal budgets.

5.2.1 User-centred funding model: Personal budgets

Funding models for long-term care are an instrument of social services to support and allow vulnerable people, including people with disabilities, to enjoy their social rights, live independently and actively participate in the society. Although it may be assumed that funding models are neutral instruments, they affect the way services are developed and provided, and their quality (EASPD & UNIC project, 2021, pp. 6–7).

Although there is no unified definition, user-centred funding models could be defined as the ones designed to facilitate choice and control of persons with care and support needs, giving them space to exercise these rights when managing their disability supports (EASPD & UNIC project, 2021, p. 9). This approach enables people with disabilities to exercise their right to legal capacity and empowers them to make autonomous decisions and lead their lives. For these reasons, user-centred funding models are considered to be aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The implementation of user-centred funding models varies across countries, leading to different terminology to name them. Some of the common terms include Personal Budgets, Individualised funding, Direct Payment, Self-directed

support, or Care Allowances. One of the most widely used terms is Personal budget, that refers to a funding amount allocated to individuals by a state body. This allocation enables them to decide how this fund is going to be used and choose how to meet their specific support needs.

These models suppose a radical transformation not only of the traditional funding streams, but also of mindsets, challenging change resistance. Going from traditional funding models, where public authorities directly fund service providers, to user-centred funding models, involves several challenges and a shift in power from the state to beneficiaries, empowering people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups to have more choice and control. This shift creates a new landscape, where the design and provision of services is more flexible, thereby enabling a more responsive market of services to meeting the demand and needs of beneficiaries.

In this sense, experts and social innovators interviewed highlighted the importance of personal budgets to promote innovation in services for people with disabilities and transform traditional structures focused on clinical aspects to other kind of services, more diverse and innovative based on the demand of people with disabilities.

With traditional funding models, several innovative services that respond to support needs of people with disabilities are not covered, because they are not medical services. Personal budgets and other user-centred funding models, give the necessary flexibility to incorporate new and innovative services to the package of support needs for people with disabilities.

Due to these reasons, user-centred funding models are considered catalysts and drivers of social innovation among researchers, as well as the experts and social innovators interviewed. The inclusive and flexible nature of user-centred funding models nurtures an environment where new ideas and solutions can flourish, ultimately leading to meaningful advancements in social innovation.

However, despite the growing recognition of user-centred funding models, their implementation remains limited to only a few countries. Examples include Sweden, United Kingdom, Czechia, Australia or New Zealand, which have adopted these models at national level, as well as Belgium and Italy, where regional or local implementations have been established. Nevertheless, there

is a notable trend of other countries initiating pilot projects to assess the effectiveness of these models as is the case in Austria, Finland, Ireland, Spain, or Israel.

In this regard, interviewees stressed the importance of allocating adequate resources, both technical and financial, to support the implementation of user-centred funding model pilots.

“[The pilot of Individual budgets in Ireland] didn’t progress quickly, it wasn’t resourced properly, it wasn’t researched properly” (Brian Smyth from Social Farming Ireland)

While the willingness to adopt this new model is valued, it is crucial to ensure that there are sufficient resources available to gather the necessary information and data within a reasonable timeframe. This will enable a comprehensive evaluation of the new system and facilitate its actual implementation. Therefore, a robust allocation of resources is essential to effectively assess and validate the viability of Personal Budgets as a means of enhancing support and services.

Furthermore, interviewees also pointed out some challenges faced by currently implemented user-centred models. For instance, experts indicated that personal budgets are sometimes not sufficient to cover basic support needs of people with disabilities. They also indicated that this kind of system needs to be complemented by other services that help the beneficiary to identify their support needs while respecting their choice and control. In addition, they remarked that the system must be flexible and adaptable to respond to the person’s changing needs.

Although these challenges and limitations have been identified, and there are areas that require resolution and adjustment, there is a widespread consensus among the experts and social innovators interviewed regarding the imperative to transform traditional funding models into user-centred ones. However, it is important to note that the pace of this transformation is being rather too slow, despite its recognized importance.

It is essential to address the existing challenges and expedite the transition towards user-centred funding models to fully unlock their potential for driving social innovation.

5.3 People with disabilities' participation boosters

Voice, choice and control are fundamental issues for people with disabilities, which have constantly been highlighted during interviews with experts and social innovators. Therefore, any tool or instrument that enhances the empowerment and active participation of people with disabilities becomes a pivotal driver for social innovation in the disability field, promoting a bottom-up approach to projects and ideas.

However, to speak about participation first it is needed to speak about inclusion. Inclusion in the community is the basis of participation, as it requires the removal of barriers and social structures which impede participation (Jones, 2010, p. 1). This section presents a selection of practices that seek to boost the involvement of individuals with disabilities in shaping novel solutions, services, and products, ultimately safeguarding their rights and enhancing their well-being and personal growth. Nevertheless, as underscored by some interviewees, participation hinges on the extent to which individuals with disabilities are integrated into society.

In this sense, three factors have been highlighted by interviewees as pivotal pillars of inclusion, as they decisively shape the landscape within which participation becomes feasible: (i) effective accessibility, (ii) inclusive education and (iii) inclusive employment.

"If they can't participate in the life of their small communities then it is so hard to come to the university to be a participatory teacher. [...] Inclusive idea of schooling is a basic factor to it. If persons with disabilities are not empowered, if they are afraid to tell their opinion, because nobody listens to them ever, then they won't be part of higher education to tell their stories. If they do not have the opportunity in the labour market to work together with other people, then there won't be stories about their lifetime." (Csilla Cserti-Szauer from "Together we Teach" - ELTE University, Disability / Studies / and Social / Innovation Lab)

"Most of the building are not accessible and then you can't invite people to the lectures if they can't come in. Most of the transportation is not accessible so they can't come to work. [...] Curricula, books, the textbooks are not accessible [to persons with disabilities] from a communication point of view, so persons with intellectual disabilities can't read things we are working together." (Csilla Cserti-Szauer from "Together we Teach" - ELTE University, Disability / Studies / and Social / Innovation Lab)

The public sector's obligation to establish a foundation encompassing these three pivotal elements is a prerequisite needed by other practices that promote the participation of people with disabilities. And although there have been important advances in some European countries, mostly in accessibility, it still constitutes an ongoing endeavour for many other European nations.

The following paragraphs present a selection of three practices that, if applied by the public sector, could act as drivers for social innovation in the disability field. This selection is based on the field research conducted with experts and social innovators who identified instruments to boost the participation of people with disabilities as an essential driver for social innovation.

5.3.1 Participatory research and teaching

In the last decades, researchers have been studying the possibilities of the involvement of civil society in innovation ecosystems. New research approaches emerged such as inclusive research define by Walmsley in 2001 as a range of research approaches in which people with learning difficulties are involved as more than just research subjects or respondents (Walmsley, 2001). In 2009, Carayannis and Campbell proposed the quadruple helix innovation ecosystem (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009), incorporating civil society as one of the core component of an innovation system together with the government, academic research and society. Today many researchers recognise that "user involvement, citizens' science, responsible science (Buchner et al., 2016) and processes based on different collaboration

strategies with users are all integral, inalienable parts of the quadruple helix ecosystem (Osborn et al., 2016; Ryan, 2012; Katona & Sándor, 2020)” (Cserti-Szauer et al., 2022, p. 275).

Social innovation in the disability field feeds from the inclusive research approaches allowing people with disabilities to be involved in the research process and the design of solutions that effectively respond to their needs and wishes, following the principle “Nothing about us without us” and enriching the repository of social innovation practices.

*“Promoting research, knowledge, innovation and economic and technical resources, fostering collaboration and participation of social entities and especially with users, is fundamental to achieve this, it is another key piece of the puzzle.”
(Lourdes Márquez from Fundación ONCE)*

Participatory research is one type of inclusive research where people with disabilities and non-affected researchers work together as equals in the design and development of the research process, learning from one another (Marton & Könczei, 2009). This practice empowers people with disabilities, giving them a space and an opportunity to make a positive impact in their community. Methods of participatory research are being applied in different fields, not only in the creation of products and services, but also in education.

Participatory teaching practice proposes to involve persons with disabilities in the creation of education knowledge content that is about or affects their lives, assuming the roles of “participatory co-instructors”. Participatory co-instructors draw upon their lived experiences of disability to help reconsider special needs teacher education complementing the learned knowledge of the academics in a process of co-production (Sándor et al., 2023, p. 61). This practice has been successfully applied in higher education seminars in universities in Hungary and Austria (Sándor et al., 2023).

When it comes to innovative services for people with disabilities, one of the key factors in the success of that service is the care that workers provide to customers.

However, in the current context of social transformation, it can be difficult to find professionals who have received adequate training and who respond to the needs expressed by users today. Voices of people with disabilities is still not heard in teacher education, which is especially problematic in the context of special needs education (Sándor et al., 2023, p. 62). In this context, participatory teaching constitutes an innovative and essential practice to adapt the curricula through the participation of people with disabilities working alongside university professors.

However, as highlighted by social innovators interviewed, there are still obstacles that need to be sorted to implement these innovative approaches in higher education systems in Europe.

“We have a dream that in the future we may change higher education legislation, and we will have like a participatory assistant professor / lecturer position” (Csilla Cserti-Szauer from “Together we Teach” - ELTE University, Disability / Studies / and Social / Innovation Lab)

The public sector has an enormous responsibility in the promotion and support of these practices within the public education system. By actively endorsing participatory research, wherein persons with disabilities actively contribute to the creation of knowledge through hands-on experiences, the public sector enables social innovation.

5.3.2 Co-production

Public sector is not only a source of funding for social innovation but can also function as social innovator itself, generating and implementing ideas and projects. Having direct responsibilities in the provision of specific social services assigned by law, public sector government at local, regional or national level have the resources and the structure to generate systemic social innovation.

Within this framework, co-production appears as a crucial practice to promote social innovation in the provision of services provided by the public sector to

people with disabilities. Although there is no unified definition, co-production is generally defined as a practice where experts by experience (in this case people with disabilities), service providers (in this case public organisations) and other stakeholders work together in the identification, creation, design and delivery of services that will meet the needs, wishes and preferences of beneficiaries (EASPD & UNIC project, 2021, p. 49). The idea is to create “a situation in which the state and citizens come together to find a solution to a challenge, with both parties going beyond their normal processes and building an altogether new solution based on their synergy” (Lines & Makau, 2018, p. 422). In the field of disability, this partnership ensures that the solutions are truly person-centred and tailored to meet the unique requirements of individuals with disabilities.

The involvement of people with disabilities in a co-production model extends beyond mere consultation or occasional workshops to gather their ideas. The core of the co-production practice is the organizational shift in power dynamics aimed at establishing a more equitable relationship between service users and providers. In this sense, several authors discuss the possibilities of co-production to “renewed vision of citizenship, based on residents’ voice, participation, and control in the decision-making process” (Moretto et al., 2018). By the implementation of co-production practices, the importance of giving individuals who use services a voice in the decision-making process, valuing their perspectives, expertise, and lived experiences is recognized. By fostering genuine collaboration and shared decision-making, co-production ensures that services are co-designed and co-delivered in a manner that truly reflects the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities.

Once again, the issue of “choice and control” for individuals with disabilities takes centre stage. Co-production serves as a valuable mechanism to facilitate a bottom-up approach, empowering people with disabilities and amplifying their voices and demands within the decision-making process. By actively involving them as equal partners, co-production ensures that their perspectives, needs, and preferences are not only heard but also integrated into the design and delivery of services. This collaborative approach recognizes the inherent expertise and life experiences of individuals with disabilities,

enabling them to exercise greater autonomy and influence over the decisions that directly impact their lives.

5.3.3 Peers support

Receiving assistance or guidance can sometimes be challenging, as it may unintentionally highlight one’s perceived inadequacies (Fisher, Nadler, & DePaulo, 1983)” (Mead et al., 2001, p. 221). However, the introduction of peer support has brought about a paradigm shift in the way help is provided within human services.

Peer support entails an initiative in which individuals who have gone through similar experiences offer knowledge, emotional support, social connections, experiential insights, or practical assistance. The underlying principle is that individuals who have shared experiences can establish deeper connections and provide more genuine empathy and validation. Additionally, it is not uncommon for those with similar lived experiences to offer one another practical advice and suggest strategies that may not be offered or known by professionals. (Mead & MacNeil, 2006). This unique aspect of peer support allows for a valuable exchange of information and resources that complements the support provided by professionals.

In the last decades, peer support has been successfully used in many fields, including mental health, addiction treatment, chronic illness, and disability.

The integration of peer support within the public sector’s services for individuals with disabilities is an innovative approach that has demonstrated its effectiveness in numerous ways. Firstly, peer support plays a valuable role in assisting beneficiaries with navigating complex administrative tasks, including the management of funds associated with personal budgets (EASPD & UNIC project, 2021, p. 50).

Secondly, peer support serves as a powerful tool for empowering individuals with disabilities, fostering their active participation, and enabling them to assert their voice and exercise control over their lives. The participation of people with disabilities in the design and implementation of new services is a key factor for social innovation. Experts interviewed highlighted peer support as a basic tool to increase people with disabilities’ participation and empowerment.

“[...] peer support is really key [...] for us this is the best way, [...] you shouldn't be empowered by somebody who holds control over you, but you can be empowered by your peers, somebody who is in a similar situation and who maybe already has had more experience [someone that] can guide you and help you” (Ines Bulic, ENIL Director)

Finally, peer support builds a space where beneficiaries can share their needs, problems, and suggestions to improve the service, to a peer who can channel those suggestions to the service providers, fostering innovation.

5.4 Networking and cooperation

Effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders is crucial for driving social innovation. Several researchers stress the importance of networking and collaboration to lead social innovation (e.g. Murray et al., 2010; Estensoro, 2015; Biggeri et al., 2017; João-Roland & Granados, 2020). As highlighted previously, the social economy thrives on the interconnectedness of various actors from different sub-economies and depends on the ability and possibility of all the actors to network and generate new modes of cooperation. However, fostering collaboration among these diverse actors is not always straightforward and requires dedicated efforts to promote and facilitate it.

One of the main challenges is related to the connection of people with disabilities with the rest of actors. As it has been discussed in this study, social innovation in the disability field entails the meaningful engagement and active involvement of people with disabilities in the process of innovation and the implementation of novel solutions. This shift towards active participation represents a significant change from the traditional perception of individuals with disabilities as passive dependents or beneficiaries, requiring overcoming some barriers and obstacles that may hinder their involvement.

These challenges can arise from societal attitudes, limited accessibility, communication barriers, and a lack of inclusive practices. Addressing these challenges involves creating inclusive environments that foster equal opportunities for meaningful engagement, promoting accessible communication channels, and raising awareness about the valuable contributions that individuals with disabilities can make.

Moreover, to facilitate collaboration among all stakeholders involved in the social economy, it is imperative to establish platforms and spaces specifically designed to bring together these different stakeholders. These platforms can serve as dedicated spaces where individuals and organizations from various sectors can meet, share knowledge, exchange ideas, and collaborate on innovative initiatives.

“Good networking with important stakeholders such as social institutions, therapists, schools, universities, training centres and the international exchange with comparable institutions were and are important cornerstones of success.” (Michael Gstöttenbauer from LIFEtool)

With the aim to facilitate and encourage collaboration among stakeholders, it is crucial for the public sector to take an active role in promoting the creation of dedicated platforms and spaces. These platforms serve as catalysts for collaboration and play a vital role in fostering partnerships and social innovation.

The public sector has a unique responsibility to promote collaboration between public service institutions and people with disabilities' community and other civil organisations. By closing the gap between these two actors, valuable synergies can be created, enabling the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and resources. This collaboration can lead to more effective solutions that respond to people with disabilities' needs and wishes.

Furthermore, promoting collaboration among external stakeholders is equally important. Organisations of people with disabilities, social enterprises, non-profit organizations, academia, businesses, and other relevant entities need to work together to generate new ideas and solutions to tackle complex issues and drive meaningful change in the field of disability.

In addition to external collaboration, it is essential to foster internal collaboration within the public sector itself. As experienced by some social innovators interviewed, different departments and institutions within the public sector often work in silos, which can hinder effective collaboration and coordination. By breaking down these barriers and fostering collaboration across departments and institutions, the public sector can leverage internal expertise, streamline processes, and ensure a more cohesive and holistic approach to addressing societal challenges.

“The cross-government are more or less silos and what we were trying to do is have conversations about similar things with the two of them (Health Department and Agriculture Department) and even to get them come together has proven challenging” (Brian Smyth from Social Farming Ireland)

Overall, the public sector plays a key role in creating an enabling environment for collaboration and, consequently, social innovation. By actively promoting and creating platforms and spaces that facilitate collaboration among stakeholders, both internal and external, the public sector can foster a culture of cooperation, enhance knowledge sharing, and drive collective action towards achieving common goals.

This can be achieved through targeted initiatives, such as capacity-building programs, networking events, and knowledge-sharing platforms, which enable stakeholders to connect, learn from each other, and co-create innovative solutions (Murray et al., 2010).

5.5 Dissemination and awareness

Over the past few decades, individuals with disabilities and their families have made significant progress in raising awareness and advocating for their rights, leading to transformative shifts in societal perceptions of disability. This collective movement has been challenging preconceived notions and dismantling barriers, facing significant resistance to change.

Innovative services that respond to the new detected demands and wishes of people with disabilities, often encounter challenges stemming from this resistance when they embark on their initiatives. One primary source of resistance is the prevalence of prejudice and a lack of information, which hinders the acceptance and adoption of innovative practices. In response to these challenges, social innovators who were interviewed emphasized the critical role of dissemination in facilitating social innovation.

Dissemination plays a vital role in overcoming resistance to change by raising awareness, challenging misconceptions, and providing accurate information about the potential benefits and positive outcomes innovative practices proposed by social innovators in the disability field. It serves as a powerful tool to educate and engage different stakeholders, including policymakers, insurance companies, individuals with disabilities, their families, and the wider community.

“Professional public relations, public appearances, e.g. through newspaper articles, television reports, trade fair appearances are also important factors to demonstrate the importance of our services to the greater public.” (Michael Gstöttenbauer from LIFEtool)

By actively disseminating information about innovative approaches, best practices, and successful case studies and experiences, social innovators can inspire and encourage a shift in mindset in key stakeholders. They can address prevailing prejudices, combat stigma, and debunk misconceptions, ultimately fostering greater acceptance, support, and collaboration.

The public sector bears a strategic responsibility in fostering the dissemination of information and promoting new and innovative services. Recognizing the importance of disseminating knowledge and best practices, the public sector should take proactive steps to create dedicated platforms that facilitate the sharing of information and resources related to social innovation in the disability sector.

Furthermore, the public sector can play a vital role in promoting the adoption of new and innovative services by raising awareness and advocating for their value and impact. Through strategic communication cam-

paings, targeted outreach efforts, and partnerships with relevant stakeholders, the public sector can ensure that these services reach the intended beneficiaries, and that the broader society understands their significance.

By actively engaging in dissemination efforts and creating platforms that connect stakeholders, the public sector can facilitate the spread of knowledge, encourage the adoption of innovative solutions, and contribute to the broader societal transformation towards a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities.

5.5.1 Awards / Prizes

A particularly effective strategy for dissemination is the organization of competitions and awards. These initiatives serve to publicly recognize and showcase exceptional social innovation projects and services. By highlighting these outstanding initiatives, competitions and awards play a crucial role in disseminating innovative ideas and inspiring others to engage in similar endeavours.

These competitions not only provide social innovators with a valuable platform for visibility and recognition

but also offer tangible incentives to support the sustainability of their projects. In addition to the public recognition received, monetary prizes are often awarded to winning initiatives. These financial rewards serve as a significant boost, enabling social entrepreneurs to further develop and scale their projects, thus ensuring their long-term viability and impact.

Furthermore, competitions and awards foster a sense of healthy competition and collaboration within the social innovation ecosystem. By showcasing a diverse range of innovative solutions and honouring exceptional achievements, these initiatives create a vibrant community of social innovators who can learn from one another, share best practices, and collaborate on future initiatives.

Overall, competitions and awards provide a powerful dissemination strategy by celebrating and promoting social innovation, amplifying its reach, and incentivizing social entrepreneurs to continue their vital work in addressing societal challenges. Through these initiatives, innovative ideas and projects can gain wider recognition, inspire others, and contribute to the collective efforts of creating positive social change.



6 Main findings and recommendations

6.1 About the definition of social innovation in the field of disability

The definition of social innovation **is still under construction**, looking for consensus among academia and scientific literature. Meanwhile, this concept is growing in importance among academics, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers from different fields, including the field of disability. With the aim to understand the meaning of social innovation in the framework of support services for people with disabilities on a cross-European basis, this study has proposed a definition of social innovation in the disability field. This definition is based on: 1. A literature review of social innovation and the analysis of the current needs, demands, and aspirations of people with disabilities reflected on the CRPD and other key documents related to the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities; and 2. Feedback from experts in the field of disabilities.

- »» **Proposed definition:** “Social innovation in the disability field refers to the generation, development, and implementation of groundbreaking ideas and practices in a specific context that respond to people with disabilities’ needs and wishes. These practices must be person-centred solutions that enable people with disabilities to fully enjoy all their human rights, respect their voice, choice and control, promote their independent living within the community, and ensure their participation in every area of life including public affairs. In addition, people with disabilities have to play an active role, not only in the design of these new practices and solutions but also in their implementation, validation, and other stages, creating new partnerships and collaborations, while transforming social relations and empowering people with disability’s capacity to act.”
- »» During the interviews, experts expressed the need for **further research** to gather more opinions on

the proposed definition within the disability community. Participatory research to review the proposed definition would help to legitimize and enrich this concept.

- »» Experts shared their **concerns about the broadening of the definition of social innovation** to such an extent that **anything could potentially be labelled as such**. In addition, they expressed their feeling that needed changes are being made at an unacceptably slow pace, falling short of meeting their demands and needs. They ask for more changes and now, what represents a great challenge for social innovators in the field of service provision for people with disabilities.

6.2 About the promotion and support of social innovation: main drivers

- »» The European Union has implemented several programs and initiatives to support social innovation projects which find solutions to different social challenges including inclusion of people with disabilities at all levels: employment, education, etc. The ESF+ and its ESF Social Innovation+ are part of the strategy followed by the European Union to promote and support social innovation and social enterprises.
- »» The promotion of social innovation in the field of service provision for people with disabilities is an urgent matter and the identification of the main drivers to support this endeavour is key.
- »» This study has identified the main drivers of social innovation in the disability field that should be implemented by the public sector according to the opinions of social innovators and experts and the literature review. These drivers are divided in 5 categories: **funding, regulatory and fiscal framework, people with disabilities’ participation boosters, networking and cooperation and dissemination and awareness**.

6.2.1 Funding

- »» Funding was recognised as a key enabler of social innovation in the disability field, and the **user-centred funding models** was remarked as the approach that respond to the core principles of the CRPD and the European Pillar of Social Rights. As this funding approach enables people with disabilities to exercise their right to legal capacity and empowers them to make autonomous decisions and lead their lives, it **promotes innovation in services** for people with disabilities and **transform traditional structures** focused on clinical aspects to other kind of services, more diverse and innovative.
- »» It is essential to address the existing challenges and expedite the transition towards user-centred funding models to fully unlock their potential for driving social innovation.
- »» Despite the growing recognition of user-centred funding models, their implementation remains limited to only a few countries. Nevertheless, there is a notable trend of other countries initiating pilot projects to assess the effectiveness of these models. However, this progress is too slow in comparison with the expectations of the disability community and other stakeholders.
- »» Interviewees stressed the importance of a robust allocation of resources to effectively assess and validate the viability of Personal Budgets as a means of enhancing support and services.

6.2.2 Regulatory and fiscal framework

- »» European countries have been working on **translating the commitments adopted through the CRPD** into meaningful changes in their legal framework, not only **to secure the rights of people with disabilities** but also **to drive societal transformations and social innovation** that foster inclusivity and equality.
- »» The process of **legal framework transformation** holds crucial significance, not only because of its scope of influence that encompasses all activities, relations, and sector, but also because it **possesses the dual capacity to either facilitate or impede social innovation**.

- »» Supporting the **creation of social enterprises** through an **appropriate legal and policy framework** facilitates and enables the generation of social innovation. The establishment of a **specific legal definition** that frame social enterprises is a **pre-requisite for designing adequate policies** and management tools to promote social enterprises.
- »» Many countries face significant challenges and shortcomings in the implementation of appropriate policies and the establishment of a comprehensive ecosystem to support social enterprises including: lack of legitimisation of social enterprises (legal forms), lack of stability in current policy framework (constant changes and cuts in public spending), lack of support for scale up and consolidation (tax breaks), lack of capability building and access to customized financial resources that respond to their specific needs.

6.2.3 People with disabilities' participation boosters

- »» Any tool or instrument that enhances the **empowerment and active participation of people with disabilities** becomes a pivotal driver for social innovation in the disability field, **promoting a bottom-up approach** to projects and ideas.
- »» **Inclusion in the community is the basis of participation**, as it requires the removal of barriers and social structures which impede participation (Jones, 2010, p. 1). For this reason, participation hinges on the extent to which individuals with disabilities are integrated into society.
- »» Three factors have been highlighted by interviewees as pivotal **pillars of inclusion**, as they decisively shape the landscape within which participation becomes feasible: (i) **effective accessibility**, (ii) **inclusive education** and (iii) **inclusive employment**.
- »» The public sector's obligation to establish a foundation encompassing **inclusion pivotal elements is a prerequisite needed by other practices that promote the participation of people with disabilities**. And although there have been important advances in some European countries, mostly in accessibility, it still constitutes an ongoing endeavour for many other European nations.

- » Interviewees highlighted three practices that, if applied by the public sector, could act as drivers for social innovation in the disability field: Participatory research and teaching, Co-production and Peer support.

Participatory research and teaching

- » **Participatory research** is one type of inclusive research where people with disabilities and non-affected researchers work together as equals in the design and development of the research process, learning from one another (Marton & Könczei, 2009). This practice empowers people with disabilities, giving them a space and an opportunity to make a positive impact in their community, for example participating in the creation of new products and services.
- » **Participatory teaching** practice proposes to involve persons with disabilities in the **creation of education knowledge content that is about or affects their lives**, assuming the roles of “participatory co-instructors”. Participatory co-instructors draw upon their lived experiences of disability, constituting an innovative and essential practice to adapt the curricula through the participation of people with disabilities working alongside university professors.
- » The public sector has an enormous responsibility in the promotion and support of participatory research and teaching within the public education system. By actively endorsing these practices, wherein persons with disabilities actively contribute to the creation of knowledge through hands-on experiences, the public sector enables social innovation.

Co-production

- » **Co-production** is considered a crucial practice to promote social innovation in the provision of services provided by the public sector to people with disabilities **ensuring that the solutions are truly person-centred** and tailored to meet the unique requirements of individuals with disabilities.
- » Co-production serves as a valuable mechanism to facilitate a **bottom-up approach**, empowering people with disabilities and **amplifying their voices and demands within the decision-making process**.

Peer support

- » The **integration of peer support within the public sector’s services** for individuals with disabilities is an innovative approach that has demonstrated its effectiveness playing a valuable role in **assisting beneficiaries with navigating complex administrative tasks**, including the management of funds associated with personal budgets.
- » **Peer support builds a space** where beneficiaries can **share their needs, problems, and suggestions to improve the service**, to a peer who can channel those suggestions to the service providers, **fostering innovation**.

6.2.4 Networking and cooperation

- » It is crucial for the public sector to take an active role in promoting the creation of **dedicated platforms and spaces to facilitate and encourage collaboration** among stakeholders to foster social innovation. In addition, it is **essential to foster internal collaboration within the public sector** itself.
- » Social innovation in the disability field entails the meaningful engagement and active involvement of people with disabilities in the process of innovation and the implementation of new solutions. However, the **connection of people with disabilities with the rest of actors** is an important **challenge** that can obstruct social innovation. Addressing this challenge involves creating inclusive environments that foster equal opportunities for meaningful engagement, promoting accessible communication channels, and raising awareness about the valuable contributions that individuals with disabilities can make.
- » To facilitate collaboration among all stakeholders involved in the social economy, it is imperative to establish platforms and spaces specifically designed to bring together these different stakeholders.

6.2.5 Dissemination and awareness

- » **Dissemination** plays a **vital role in overcoming resistance to change** by **raising awareness, challenging misconceptions, and providing accurate**

information about the potential benefits and positive outcomes innovative practices proposed by social innovators in the disability field.

- »» The public sector bears a strategic responsibility in fostering the dissemination of information and promoting new and innovative services. By taking on this strategic responsibility, the public sector can actively address resistance to change and combat prejudice, thereby fostering a more supportive environment for social innovation.
- »» The public sector can facilitate the spread of knowledge, encourage the adoption of innovative solu-

tions, best practices, and successful case studies and experiences to contribute to the broader societal transformation towards a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities.

- »» The organization of competitions and awards is a particularly effective strategy for dissemination that the public sector can implement. By highlighting outstanding initiatives, competitions and awards play a crucial role in disseminating innovative ideas and inspiring others to engage in similar endeavours.



Annex 1: Methodology

This study aimed to achieve two primary objectives: to propose a comprehensive definition of social innovation in the disability field and to identify key drivers and enablers that the public sector should embrace to actively promote and facilitate social innovation in this domain. The methodology employed for both objectives involved a combination of desk research and field research, as illustrated in Figure 8.

The initial step in each topic analysis was a thorough literature review, which served as the foundation for establishing a theoretical framework (see the “References” section for a complete list of the sources consulted). It is worth noting that one of the challenges encountered during this study was the absence of a specific theoretical framework dedicated to this subject matter. To address this, the study integrated the frameworks of social innovation and disability, merging them to establish a solid basis for exploration. Desk research also played a crucial role in identifying relevant social innovation practices that were subsequently contacted during the field research stage.

The field research primarily focused on conducting interviews with experts and social innovators (see table 3). Experts were consulted to review and refine the proposed definition of social innovation in the disability field, while also providing insights on the drivers and enablers of social innovation. Social innovators, on the other hand, were asked to share their experiences and identify the drivers and enablers they found influential in the realm of social innovation within the disability field.

The information gathered through these interviews was then thoroughly analysed, drawing upon both the insights from the field research and the supporting information obtained through the literature review. This comprehensive analysis allowed for the extraction of valuable conclusions, which are presented in this study. By employing a multidimensional approach that combined theoretical foundations, insights from experts, and experiences of social innovators, this study provides a holistic understanding of social innovation in the disability field and offers practical recommendations for the public sector to foster its growth and impact.

Table 3. List of interviewees

Name	Institution / Organization
Experts	
Ines Bulic	European Network of Independent Living - ENIL
Milan Šveřepa	Inclusion Europe
Fabiana Scarano	European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities
Thomas Bignal	European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities
Renaud Scheuer	European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities
Social innovators	
Michael Gstoettenbauer	LIFetool (Austria)
Brian Smyth	Social Farming Ireland (Ireland)
Claire Chemin	Les Genêts d'Or (France)
Csilla Cserti-Szauer	“Together we teach” ELTE University, Disability Studies and Social Innovation Lab (Hungary)
Lourdes Márquez de la Calleja	Fundación ONCE (Spain)

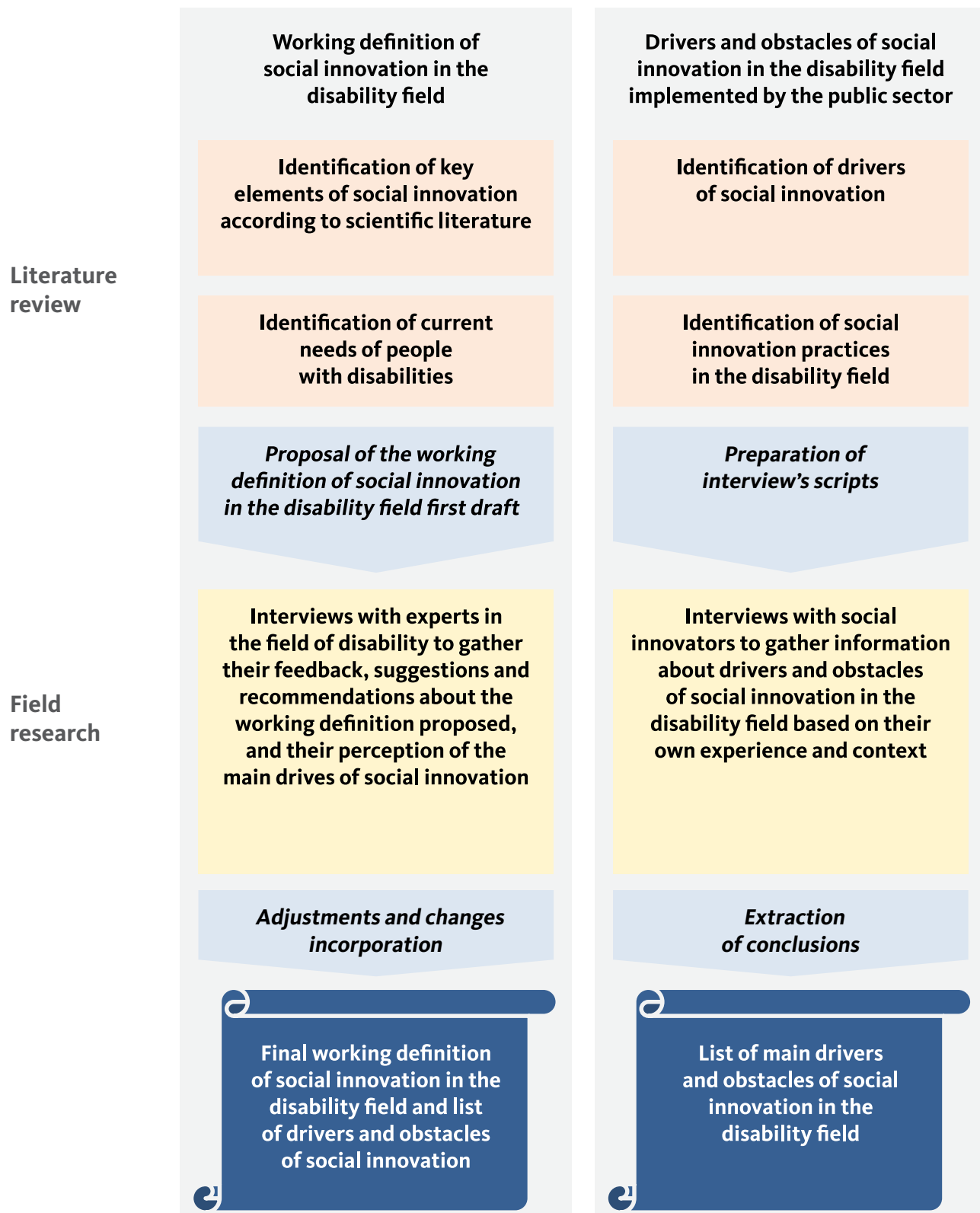


Figure 8. Methodology

Annex 2: Disability legal and policy framework

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant advancement in the recognition of the voices and demands of people with disabilities and their families, leading to fundamental changes in societal perceptions of individuals with disabilities, and consequently in a legal and policy framework to integrate the new paradigm.

A pivotal moment in this journey was the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, which started a revolution in the legal and policy landscape, not only in Europe but around the world. In this section, we provide a concise overview of the key legal and policy documents that have played a vital role in shaping this transformative movement in European countries.

Main Charters

- »» United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006): this international treaty, adopted in 2006, is aimed to protect and reinforce the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. It identifies areas where adaptations have to be made for persons with disabilities to effectively exercise their rights and areas where their rights have been violated, and where protection of rights must be reinforced (United Nations, n.d.). There are currently 164 signatories, including all EU members.
- »» Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012): enshrines the fundamental rights people enjoy in the EU. In its Article 26, it “recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community” (European Union, 2012)
- »» European Pillar of Social Rights: 20 principles set up to guide EU countries towards a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity for everybody (European Commission, n.d.-m)

Strategy

- »» **EU Disability Strategy (2021-2030):** “Union of equality: Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030” is a ten-year strategy adopted by the European Commission in 2021 to improve the lives of persons with disabilities not only in Europe but around the world. The goal of this Strategy is to progress towards ensuring that all persons with disabilities in Europe enjoy their human rights, have equal opportunities, equal access to participate in society and economy, are able to decide where, how and with whom they live, move freely in the EU regardless of their support needs, and no longer experience discrimination. (European Commission, n.d.-n)
- »» **European care strategy (2022):** this strategy seeks to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and improve the situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them, professionally or informally. (European Commission, n.d.-a).

Regulations and standards

- »» **European Accessibility Act (2019):** its goal is to improve the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services. This directive covers products and services that have been identified as being most important for persons with disabilities while being most likely to have diverging accessibility requirements across EU countries (European Commission, n.d.-f).
- »» **Rights for travellers with disabilities or reduced mobility:** specific EU regulations on the Rights of Passengers with Reduced mobility in main modes of transport, including the EU Regulation on rail passenger rights, EU Regulation on bus and coach passenger rights, EU Regulation

on the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air, and EU Regulation on passenger rights when travelling by sea or inland waterway (European Commission, n.d.-e)

- »» **Web Accessibility Directive (2016):** directive that aims to improve the accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies in particular to persons with disabilities. (Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the Accessibility of the Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies, 2016)
- »» **EU wide accessibility standards:** European standards put in place to support the implementation of accessibility in the built environment and ICT, and the adoption of ‘Design for All’ approach in organisations. (*Accessibility Standardisation - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission*, n.d.)

Funding

- »» **Funding and Support Programs:** EU funding programs supporting initiatives and projects that promote inclusion, employment, and social integration of vulnerable groups including persons with disabilities such as European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) (See in legal and policy framework for social innovation).

Other

- »» **Disability card:** voluntary system of mutual recognition of disability status and some associated benefits (European Commission, n.d.-c)
- »» **Parking card:** card that gives access to a number of parking rights and facilities in EU countries. (European Commission, n.d.-d)



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EASPD is the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities. We are a European not-for-profit organisation representing over 20,000 social services and disability organisations across Europe. The main objective of **EASPD** is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.



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Co-funded by
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