

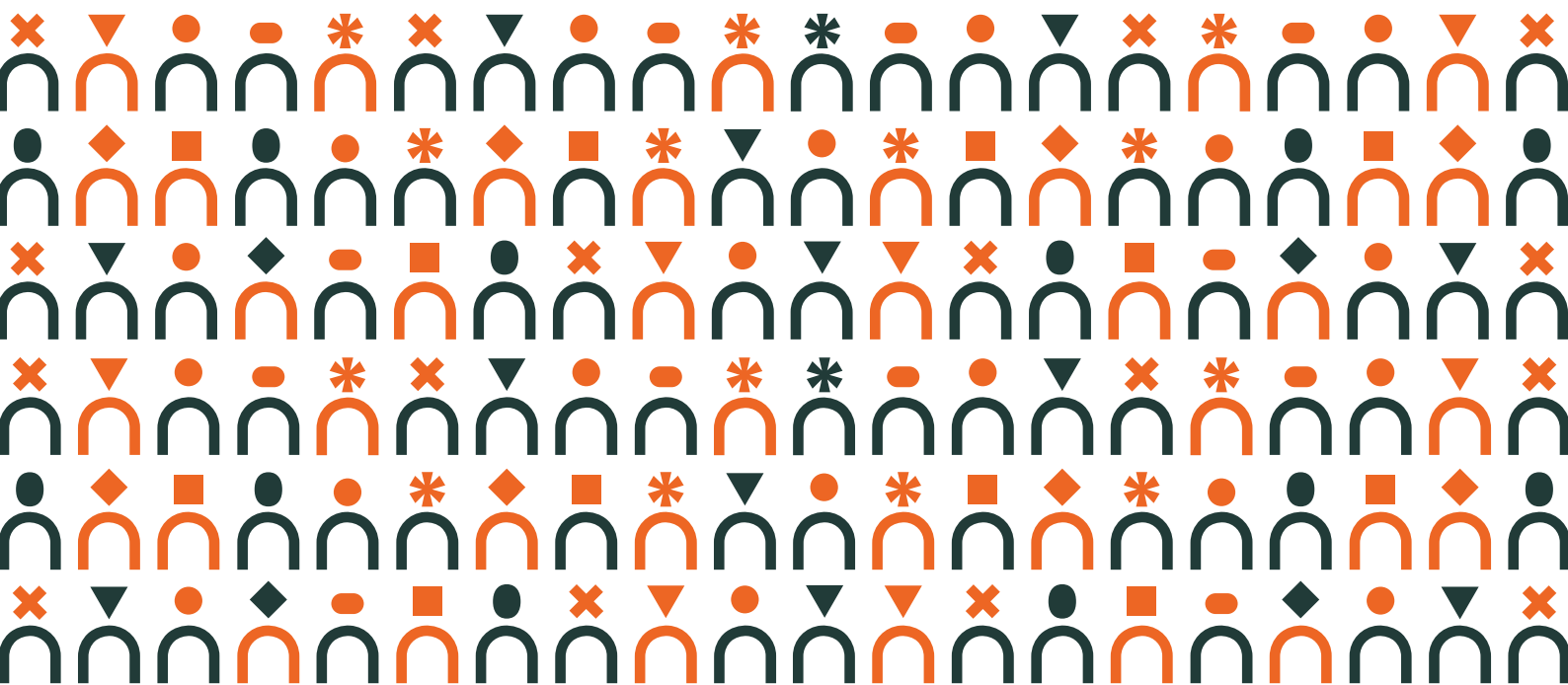


Co-funded by
the European Union

inspire **PA**

Report

Mapping of Social Innovation Practices in the PA



casa
natural

intellera
Part of Accenture Group



ASHOKA
EVERYONE A CHANGEMAKER™



AMR
ROMANIAN MUNICIPALITIES ASSOCIATION
Founded in 1990



DIMITRA
educational organization

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the mapping of social innovation practices in the public administration carried out as part of the **INSPIRE PA** project.

This mapping research was made possible through the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, and we are thankful for the guidance and coordination provided by Ashoka Italy and the contribution of all the INSPIRE PA project partners.

Special thanks go to the local stakeholders, community innovators and municipal representatives from Italy, Greece, and Romania, who shared valuable insights, case studies, and experiences that enriched the mapping process and helped highlight diverse approaches to participatory and inclusive public administration.

Co-funded by 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.

The European Union cannot be held responsible for them.

We are especially grateful to the innovation leaders we interviewed, whose perspectives and experiences were instrumental in shaping our understanding of social innovation practices in the public administration:

- **Annibale D'Elia** - Municipal Director, formerly responsible for the “Bollenti Spiriti” program
- **Roberto Covolo** - Municipality of Bari, Mayor's Staff Referent for Urban Economy and New Entrepreneurial Initiatives, and coordinator of the project “Un negozio non è solo un negozio
- **Vilma Angela Garino** - Director Organisational Development and Human Resources and Departmental Institutional Support at the University of Turin
- **Beatrice Aimi** - Parma Councillor for Youth Policy
- **Giulia Morello** - President of “Dire Fare Cambiare” Association
- **Matteo Ricordi** - Professional educator and reference person for the Municipality of Novara's social innovation projects
- **Mattia Anzaldi** - President of the Association “Nòva”
- **Benedetta Baraggioli** - Head of Cultural and Strategic Projects of the Municipality of Novara
- **Noemi Morrone** - Public School Teacher at IC Rinnovata Pizzigoni in Milan, Certified EU project designer, and Coordinator for Educational Offer Evaluation
- **Michele D'Alena** - Deputy mayor in San Lazzaro di Savena (BO), Innovation and Collaboration Manager, Strategic Innovation Advisor, Writer, Political Activist
- **Alexandros Tsatsos** - Chairman of the Municipal Youth Council of Larissa, Economist and Business Consultant
- **Andromachi Bouna** - Coordinator of the Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls in Pentalofos, Social Anthropologist with a PhD in the Sociology of Education and Gender from the University of Ioannina
- **Lidia Onofrei** - National Coordinator of the community nurses activity in the Health Ministry
- **Victoria Anghel** - Communication and Public Relations Specialist Comunicare și Relații Publice, OIR PECU - Regiunea București-Ilfov
- **Alexandra Cârcu** - Project Manager of MICROFUTRE, OIR PECU - Regiunea București-Ilfov
- Representative of **OIRBI PECU**
- **Lucian Vereșciaghin** - Public Manager City Hall of Bucharest, District 6
- **Oana Buzatu** - Innovation Strategy Officer Cluj-Napoca StartupCity
- **Alexandra Rigler** - Director, Center of Projects Timișoara

This mapping would not have been possible without the collaborative spirit and commitment of all those involved.

INDEX

Executive Summary

2. Introduction

2.1 Objective

2.2 Methodology

2.3 Overview of collected practices

**3. Key Trends in Social Innovation
in the Public Administration**

3.1 Target Populations

3.2 Social needs addressed

3.3 Types of Innovation

4. Enabling factors for implementation

4.1 Leadership and Institutional Ownership

Leadership Styles and Motivations

Skills and Backgrounds

Self-Perception and Entrepreneurial Mindset

4.2 Stakeholder Engagement

4.3 Funding mechanisms

5. Gaps and barriers

5.1 Policy and Institutional Challenges

5.2 Sustainability and Scalability

5.3 Participation and Co-Creation Gaps

6. Impact and Systemic Change

6.1 Tangible and Intangible Value

6.2 Evidence of Systemic Shifts

7. Conclusions and Recommendations



Deep Dive

**Bollenti Spiriti – Empowering Youth through Regional
Innovation in Puglia**

**gov.gr – Transforming Public Services through Digital
Innovation**

**FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth – Building a Civic Innovation
Ecosystem for Youth**

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a comprehensive mapping of social innovation practices led by public administrations across Italy, Greece, and Romania. Conducted as part of the **Erasmus+ project INSPIRE PA – INtroducing Social Practices to Improve the REsilience of Public Administration**, the study identifies and analyzes **30 innovative initiatives** that demonstrate how public institutions are reimagining their roles to address complex social challenges through inclusive, participatory, and systemic approaches.

The mapping reveals that social innovation in the public sector is no longer confined to isolated pilot projects. Instead, it is increasingly embedded in governance structures, driven by local and regional authorities, and supported by cross-sectoral collaboration. From digital transformation and participatory budgeting to youth empowerment and climate resilience, the practices documented in this report reflect a growing commitment to public value creation that goes beyond efficiency and service delivery.

The report also identifies critical enabling factors such as visionary leadership, institutional ownership, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and access to diversified funding—particularly from European Union programs. However, it also highlights persistent barriers, including legal rigidity, fragmented governance, short-term funding cycles, and gaps in co-creation and participatory design.

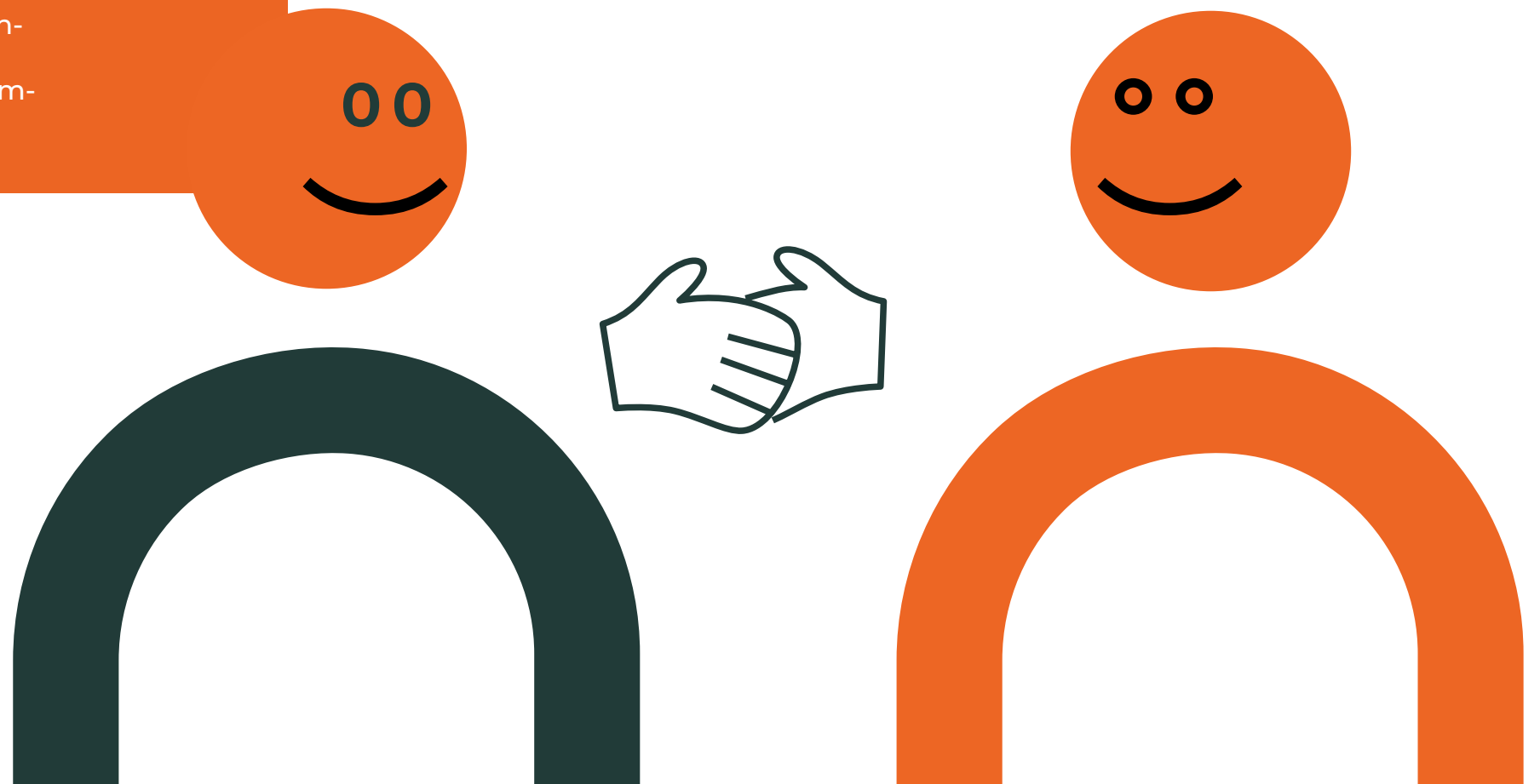
Despite these challenges, several initiatives demonstrate early signs of systemic change. These include shifts in how resources are allocated, how roles and relationships are structured, and how public institutions engage with citizens. Notable examples include the Youth Check in Parma (Italy), the FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania), and the Digital Citizen Services Platform “gov.gr” (Greece). The report concludes with actionable recommendations to support the institutionalization, scaling, and sustainability of social innovation in the public sector.

These include embedding innovation roles within public administrations, deepening participatory frameworks, reforming legal and funding mechanisms, and fostering ecosystem-based approaches.

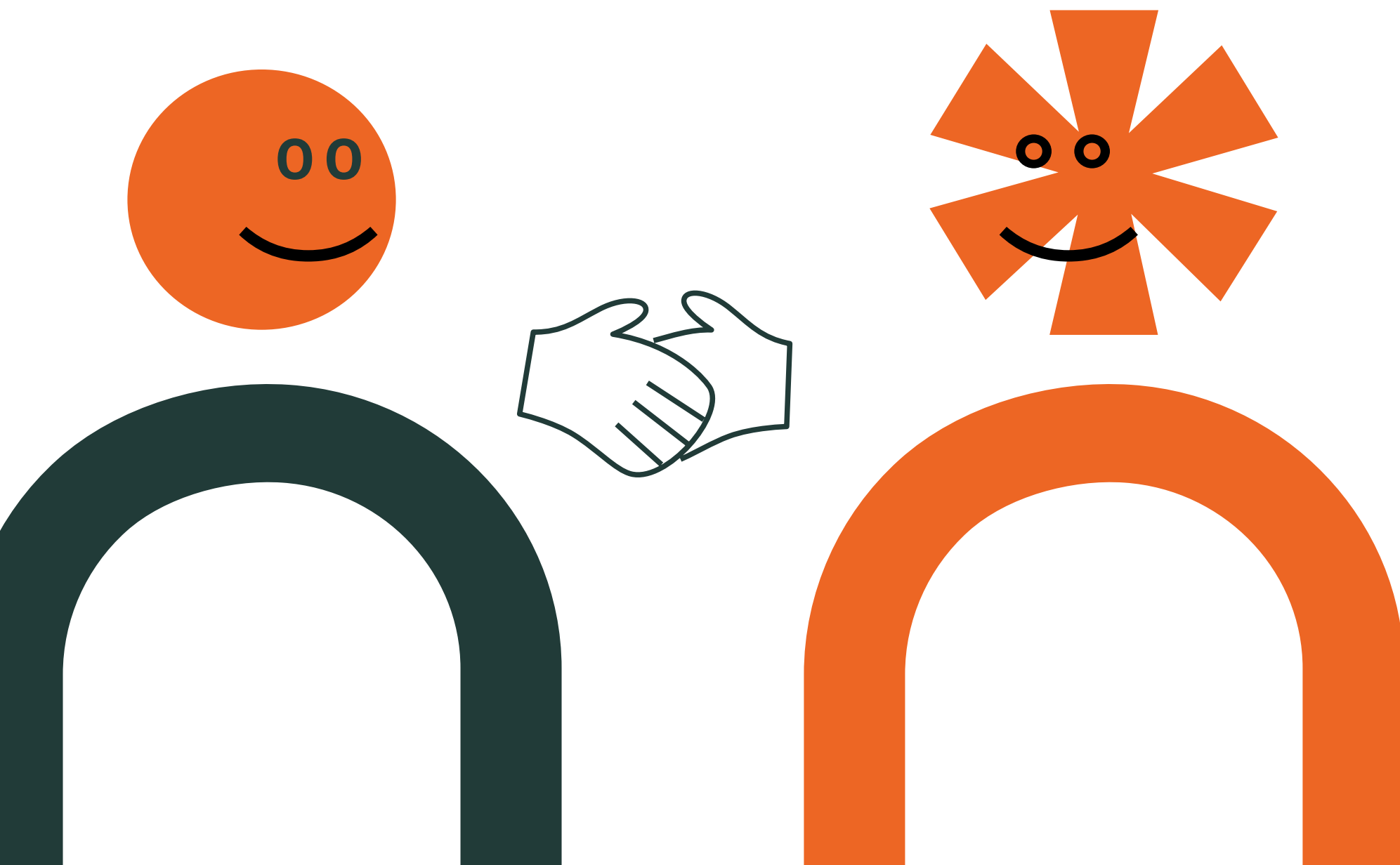
By documenting and analyzing these practices, this report aims to inspire and inform a new generation of public leaders committed to building more inclusive, adaptive, and democratic institutions.

Key trends include:

- A shift toward decentralized, locally driven innovation, with municipalities acting as laboratories for new governance models.
- The rise of participatory governance, with citizens—especially youth—engaged as co-creators of public policy and services.
- The integration of technological, organizational, and service-based innovations to improve accessibility, responsiveness, and inclusion.
- A strong focus on vulnerable populations, including youth, Roma communities, refugees, and people with disabilities.



2 Introduction



2. Introduction

2.1 Objective

The primary objective of the mapping was to develop a participatory and dynamic overview of social innovation practices led by public administrations in Italy, Greece, and Romania. This initiative aimed to identify key trends, enabling factors, gaps, and barriers that influence the successful implementation of such practices. Conducted as part of the broader Erasmus+ project INSPIRE PA – Introducing Social Practices to Improve the REsilience of Public Administration, the mapping serves both diagnostic and mobilizing purposes.

Specifically, the mapping sought to:

- Identify and document case studies of public administrations actively adopting and experimenting with social innovation in their local contexts.
- Recognize and valorize emerging models of public innovation that prioritize democratic quality, social impact, and inclusiveness—moving beyond traditional paradigms focused solely on efficiency or digitalization.
- Foster a shared language and conceptual framework that enables institutions and civil society to see themselves as part of a broader movement for public sector transformation.
- Build a collective, living repository of case studies, tools, and actors working at the intersection of social innovation and public administration.

Beyond capturing what currently exists, the mapping is intended to support learning, connection, and action among those committed to transforming public institutions from within. The insights generated will directly inform the design and testing of a **new certified training curriculum for “Social Innovation Managers”** - a new public role proposed by the INSPIRE PA program. This curriculum aims to equip public administrations with the skills and mindset needed to become facilitators and implementers of social innovation—enhancing their capacity to co-design solutions that respond to complex social needs and renew their collaboration with civil society and the private sector through a systemic, ecosystem-based approach.

2.2 Methodology

The mapping of public administration-led social innovation practices was carried out through a **mixed-method approach that combined desk research and qualitative interviews**.

Project partners in each participating country led the desk research, systematically identifying and analyzing relevant initiatives. To complement this, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected innovation leaders from the mapped practices, offering a richer understanding of the leadership dynamics, motivations, and institutional contexts behind these innovations.

Led by Ashoka Italy, the research process unfolded in six key phases:

- **Defining and Validating Selection Criteria:** a clear set of criteria was established to identify and assess relevant social innovation initiatives. These criteria were refined and validated through collaborative consultations among project partners to ensure contextual relevance and methodological consistency.
- **Creating the Data Collection Template:** A standardized template was developed to guide the collection of information across different initiatives. This ensured comparability and coherence in the data gathered from diverse national contexts.
- **Data Collection:** Secondary sources—including policy documents, case studies, and institutional reports—were systematically reviewed by each project partner to identify, map the characteristics, outcomes, and challenges

of each initiative.

- **Interviewing Key Stakeholders:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with public officials, community leaders, and other key actors involved in some of the selected initiatives. These conversations provided in-depth insights into leadership styles, institutional cultures, and the lived experiences of innovation in practice.
- **Data Analysis:** The collected data were analyzed to identify recurring patterns, trends, and correlations. This phase aimed to uncover the enabling factors and barriers that influence the success and sustainability of social innovation in the public sector.
- **Drafting the Final Report:** The findings from both the desk research and interviews were synthesized into a comprehensive report. This final output highlights key trends, leadership models, and recommendations, offering a nuanced understanding of how social innovation is initiated, led, and sustained within public administrations.

2.3 Overview of collected practices

The mapping exercise collected diverse examples of social innovation in the PA across multiple European contexts, with a strong focus on Romania, Italy, and Greece reflecting the partners' regional reach and project scope.

A total of **30 practices** were mapped respectively 8 from Italy, 10 from Greece, and 12 from Romania. For the purpose of the research, the project team conducted 13 interviews with key stakeholders.

In terms of **geographic scope**, the initiatives can be categorized as:

- **Local** (e.g., City Hall of Cluj-Napoca, Sector 2 of Bucharest, Municipality of Parma)
- **Regional** (e.g., Regione Puglia in Italy)
- **International or Cross-Country** (e.g., EU-funded Horizon projects involving multiple partners)

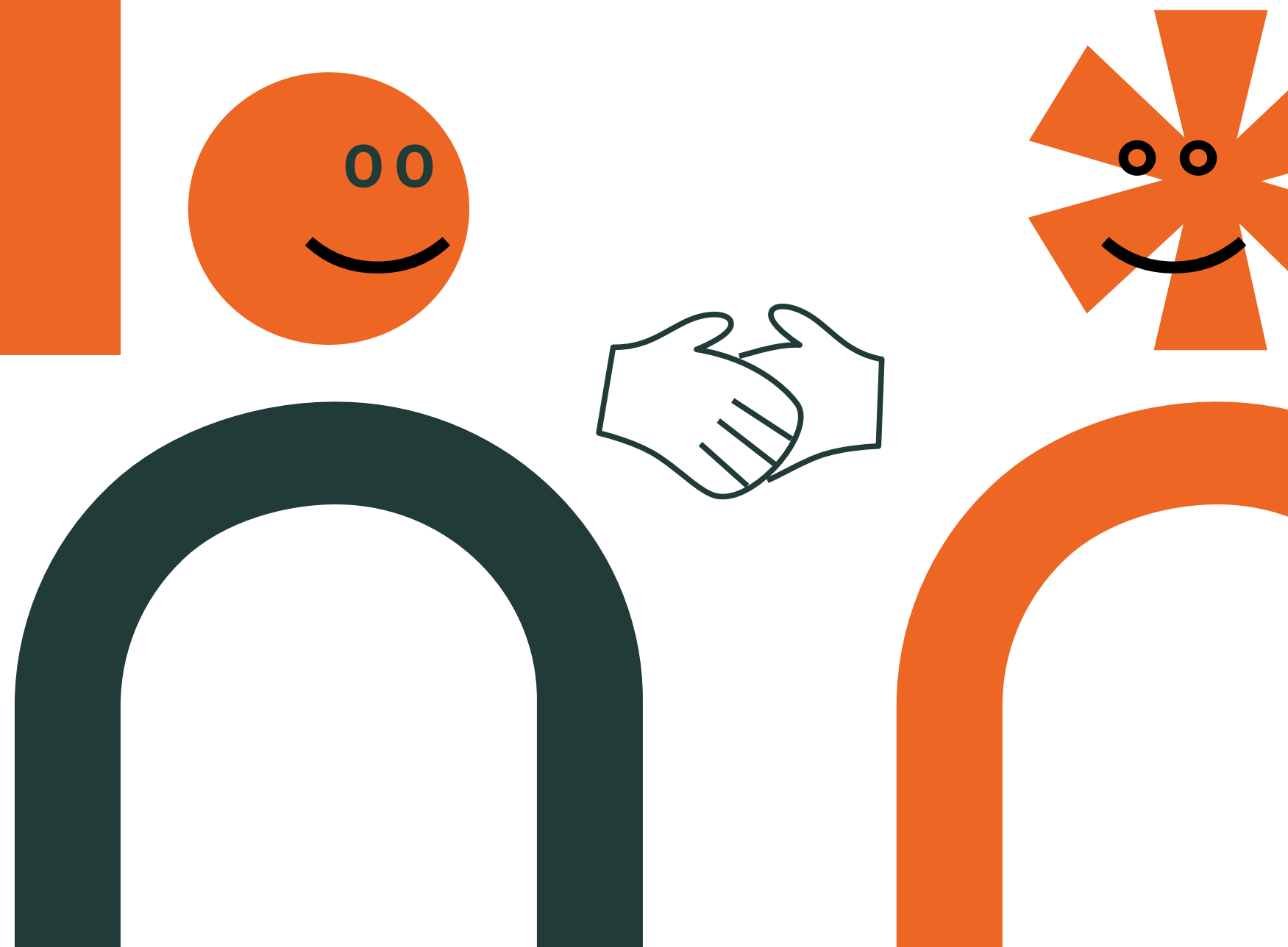
This distribution highlights that social innovation in public administration is **occurring at multiple governance levels**, with municipalities often taking a leading role in experimenting with new models of service delivery and civic engagement. At the same time, regional governments and ministries are also shown to be key actors when it comes to institutionalizing and scaling innovations.

Below is a summary of the 30 social innovation practices identified through the mapping exercise conducted in Italy, Greece, and Romania. The summaries offer a snapshot of each initiative's core objectives, methods, and impact. Together, they illustrate the breadth and depth of social innovation practices across different governance levels and national contexts, contributing to a broader understanding of how public administrations can act as enablers of social innovation.

- **Bollenti Spiriti** (Italy): A youth empowerment program in Puglia that revolutionized public policy by directly funding young people to lead social, cultural, and educational initiatives.
- **SET-PED – Synergizing Buildings Renovation and Regenerative Urban Furniture to Co-create PED Ecosystem** (Romania): A Horizon project that promotes circular economy by transforming urban waste into smart furniture through cross-country collaboration and co-creation.
- **FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth** (Romania): Romania's largest free incubator for young innovators, offering funding, mentorship, and training to help youth build impactful startups.
- **DivAirCity Project** (Romania): A Horizon 2020 project that uses nature-based solutions and citizen science to improve air quality and promote diversity and inclusion in urban areas.
- **Providing Case Management for Rare Diseases through Community Health Nurses** (Romania): A pioneering initiative training community health nurses to manage rare disease cases, integrating health and social services.
- **M100 National Hub** (Romania): A national platform supporting Romanian cities in achieving climate neutrality through mutual learning, technical assistance, and EU-aligned strategies.
- **Satu Mare County for the Social Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups** (Romania): A multi-project initiative targeting Roma and vulnerable groups through education, health, employment, and empowerment programs.
- **Alba Iulia City Branding** (Romania): The first Romanian city to develop a professional branding strategy, transforming its identity and boosting tourism and investment.
- **Baia Mare Socio-Medical Services** (Romania): A digital platform that simplifies access to social assistance services, improving efficiency and inclusion for vulnerable citizens.
- **GIPA – Interdepartmental Group on Food Policies of the City of Turin** (Italy): An interdepartmental group coordinating sustainable food policies in Turin, promoting circular economy, biodiversity, and social inclusion.
- **Participatory Budgeting in Timișoara** (Romania): Romania's most successful participatory budgeting model, enabling citizens to propose and vote on local development projects.
- **Un negozio non è solo un negozio - A Shop is Not Just a Shop** (Italy): A Bari initiative that funds small businesses in exchange for community services, blending economic support with urban regeneration.
- **Local Food Bank – Bucharest District 6** (Romania): A public-private partnership reducing food waste and supporting vulnerable groups through food redistribution and education.
- **Digital Citizen Services Platform** (Greece): Greece's national digital platform consolidating over 1,500 public services, streamlining bureaucracy and enhancing citizen access.
- **Social Innovation Piraeus** (Greece): A municipal network integrating social services and digital tools to support vulnerable populations and improve social cohesion.
- **+Athens - SynAthina** (Greece): A participatory platform enabling citizen groups to co-create urban solutions, fostering civic engagement and inclusive governance.
- **Trikala Smart City** (Greece): A pioneering smart city initiative integrating digital governance, mobility, and health services to improve urban life and citizen participation.
- **Municipal Youth Council of Larissa** (Greece): A municipal initiative re-en-

- gaging youth in civic life through structured participation in local governance and policy-making.
- **Energy Community of Kozani** (Greece): Greece's first municipal energy community using solar power to reduce energy poverty and promote a just transition from coal.
 - **Larissa Learning City** (Greece): A UNESCO-awarded initiative embedding lifelong learning into urban development to foster inclusion, resilience, and civic participation.
 - **Community Centers - National Network** (Greece): A national network of municipal hubs offering integrated social services to vulnerable groups, improving access and coordination.
 - **Spazio Nòva - Ex Caserma Passalacqua** (Italy): A community-led urban regeneration project transforming an abandoned military site into a vibrant hub for youth and social innovation.
 - **Collaboration Pacts Bologna** (Italy): A collaborative governance model where the municipality, civic networks, and the non-profit sector co-manage urban commons through flexible, co-designed agreements called Collaboration Pacts, promoting shared responsibility and community-driven regeneration.
 - **Culture Against Racism – Donne che Cambiano il Mondo** (Italy): A cultural initiative using storytelling and art to combat racism and empower marginalized voices through education and creative expression.
 - **Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls in Pentalofos** (Greece): A municipal shelter providing holistic care and integration support for unaccompanied refugee girls.
 - **Myrmidones Social Cooperative of Larissa** (Greece): A cooperative offering employment and social reintegration for people with mental health challenges through community-based services.
 - **Multi-annual funding of cultural projects by the Center for Projects Timișoara** (Romania): A public body coordinating the European Capital of Culture program and reforming cultural funding through transparency and multi-annual grants.
 - **Youth Check Parma** (Italy): A participatory tool enabling young people to assess the generational impact of public policies, fostering intergenerational justice and civic engagement.
 - **MICROFUTURE - Future proof micro-finance for social inclusion** (Romania): An interregional project improving public policy for microfinance to support social enterprises and inclusive economic development.
 - **Cantieri di Innovazione** (Italy): An initiative of the University of Turin that engaged staff and experts in participatory workshops to co-design institutional responses to digital, social, and environmental challenges.

3 Key Trends in Social Innovation in the Public Administration



3. Key Trends in Social Innovation in the Public Administration

The mapping of social innovation practices across various European public administrations reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape where innovation is increasingly embedded in governance structures. Several key trends emerge:

- **Decentralization and Local Empowerment:** Many initiatives originate at the municipal or regional level, reflecting a shift toward localized governance and community-driven solutions (e.g., Bologna's Collaboration Pacts, Timișoara's Project Center).
- **Cross-sectoral Collaboration:** Public administrations are increasingly partnering with NGOs, academia, private enterprises, and citizens to co-create solutions (e.g., FIX Cluj, DivAirCity, MICROFUTURE).
- **Participatory Governance:** There is a growing emphasis on participatory models that involve citizens in decision-making, from youth councils (Larissa) to participatory budgeting (Timișoara).
- **Digital Transformation:** Technological innovation is central to many practices, from Greece's gov.gr platform to Baia Mare's digital access to social services.
- **Sustainability and Climate Action:** Several initiatives align with the European Green Deal, focusing on climate neutrality, circular economy, and

sustainable urban development (e.g., M100, Kozani Energy Community).

- **Focus on Vulnerable Groups:** Many practices are designed to address the needs of marginalized populations, including youth, Roma communities, refugees, and people with disabilities (e.g., Satu Mare County's inclusion programs for Roma communities; the Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls in Pentalofos; Romania's case management for rare diseases via community nurses; Bucharest's DivAirCity project promoting inclusive urban greening; and the Local Food Bank in District 6, Bucharest supporting low-income and Roma families).

3.1 Target Populations

The mapped practices span a wide range of public sectors and demographic groups. However, several population clusters emerge as recurring direct or primary beneficiaries of social innovation initiatives:

- **Youth (ages 14–35):** Many initiatives are explicitly designed to engage young people in education, employment, entrepreneurship, and civic participation. Examples include:
 - **Bollenti Spiriti (Italy):** A regional program in Puglia that empowered youth through direct funding, training, and the revitalization of public spaces.
 - **FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania):** A municipal incubator supporting youth-led civic and entrepreneurial projects through mentoring, funding, and co-creation.
 - **Youth Check Parma (Italy):** A participatory tool in Parma enabling young people to assess the generational impact of public policies and influence decision-making.
 - **Municipal Youth Council of Larissa (Greece):** A civic learning space where high school students co-develop local agendas and collaborate with elected officials.
 - **Larissa Learning City (Greece):** A UNESCO-awarded initiative promoting lifelong learning and civic engagement, especially among youth and marginalized groups.
- **Vulnerable populations:** Several practices target individuals facing health, economic, or social vulnerabilities. These include:
 - **Providing Case Management for Rare Diseases through Community Health Nurses (Romania):** Pro-

viding case management through community health nurses for patients with rare conditions.

- **Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls in Pentalofos (Greece):** Offering holistic support for refugee minors, including education, psychosocial care, and legal aid.
- **Myrmidones Social Cooperative (Greece):** Supporting people with mental health challenges through employment and social reintegration.
- **Satu Mare Social Inclusion Projects (Romania):** Targeting Roma communities with integrated services in education, health, and employment.
- **Local Food Bank of Bucharest Sector 6 (Romania):** Combating food insecurity and waste while supporting low-income families, children, and the elderly.
- **General citizenry:** Some initiatives adopt a universalistic approach, aiming to improve quality of life for all residents. For instance:
 - **DivAirCity (Romania):** Combines environmental justice and citizen participation to improve air quality in Bucharest.
 - **SET-PED (Romania):** Integrates smart urban furniture solutions with sustainability and community co-design.
 - **gov.gr - Digital Citizen Services Platform (Greece):** A national digital platform providing over 1,500 public services online, improving accessibility for all citizens.
 - **Spazio Nòva – Ex Caserma Pas-salacqua (Italy):** This project transforms an abandoned military site into a multifunctional community hub for youth, artists, and local



residents.

- **Collaboration Pacts of Bologna (Italy):** Enable citizens to co-manage public spaces and services through formal agreements with the municipality.

This diversity reflects a systemic and inclusive approach to social innovation, often involving layered levels of beneficiaries.

Deep Dive

Bollenti Spiriti – Empowering Youth through Regional Innovation in Puglia

Bollenti Spiriti is a landmark regional initiative that redefined youth policy in Italy by shifting from a welfare-based approach to one centered on empowerment and civic protagonism. Launched by the Puglia Region, the program directly funded young people to design and implement social, cultural, and educational projects. It also revitalized abandoned public spaces into creative hubs and supported advanced education through scholarships.

The initiative addressed critical social needs such as youth unemployment, brain drain, and civic disengagement. It introduced organizational and service-based innovations, including simplified funding mechanisms and participatory governance models. The program's success was enabled by strong regional leadership, institutional ownership, and a commitment to transparency and inclusion.

Civil society—particularly youth groups and informal collectives—played a central role in implementation, though private sector involvement was limited. Funding came primarily from the National Youth Policy Fund and regional budgets.

Despite its success, Bollenti Spiriti faced challenges in scalability and long-term sustainability, particularly due to political turnover and the absence of a national framework for replication. Nonetheless, it had a transformative impact: over 2,500 youth-led projects were funded, dozens of public spaces were regenerated, and a new narrative emerged around youth as agents of change. The initiative influenced national discourse on youth policy and remains a benchmark for participatory public innovation.



3.2 Social needs addressed

The practices respond to a broad spectrum of societal challenges. Four main thematic clusters of social needs emerge:

- **Employment and Economic Participation:** Many initiatives support entrepreneurship, re-skilling, and access to finance, especially for youth and marginalized groups.
 - **FIX Cluj** (Romania): Offers grants and mentoring for youth-led startups.
 - **MICROFUTURE** (EU-wide): Improves public policy frameworks for microfinance, supporting social enterprises and excluded groups.
 - **Myrmidones Cooperative** (Greece): Provides supported employment for people with mental health conditions.
 - **Un negozio non è solo un negozio - A Shop is Not Just a Shop** (Italy): Supports small businesses in Bari with funding and training in exchange for community contributions.
- **Health and Well-being:** Several practices improve access to healthcare and psychosocial support, particularly for vulnerable populations.
 - **Providing Case Management for Rare Diseases through Community Health Nurses** (Romania): Pioneers case management through trained community nurses.
 - **Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls** (Greece): Provides trauma-informed care and integration services.
 - **Baia Mare Digital Platform** (Romania): Simplifies access to social assistance through digital tools.
 - **Myrmidones Cooperative** (Greece): Combines mental health recovery with social enterprise.
- **Civic Engagement and Participation:** Innovations promote participatory governance, co-creation, and community empowerment.
 - **Bollenti Spiriti** (Italy): Enabled youth to co-design and implement public initiatives.
 - **Youth Check Parma** (Italy): Institutionalizes youth participation in policymaking.
 - **Collaboration Pacts of Bologna** (Italy): Foster co-management of public goods between citizens and municipalities.
 - **+Athens - SynAthina** (Greece): A platform for grassroots civic groups to collaborate with the Municipality of Athens.
 - **Participatory Budgeting in Timișoara** (Romania): Empowers citizens to propose and vote on local investment projects.
 - **Cantieri di Innovazione** (Italy): A university-led initiative in Turin that engaged the academic community in co-designing institutional responses to societal megatrends through participatory workshops and collaborative work tracks.
- **Sustainability and Urban Regeneration:** Addressing environmental challenges and revitalizing public infrastructure through inclusive design.
 - **SET-PED** (Romania): Combines turning waste into smart urban furniture with community co-design.
 - **Spazio Nòva** (Italy): Revitalizes an abandoned military site into a cultural and social hub.
 - **Energy Community of Kozani** (Greece): A municipal-led renewable energy cooperative reducing energy poverty.
 - **DivAirCity** (Romania): Uses citizen

science and digital tools to monitor and improve air quality.

A unifying theme across these practices is the **intersectionality of social needs**—solutions often address both service delivery gaps and governance failures.

3.3 Types of Innovation

The dataset reveals a rich typology of innovation, often blending multiple dimensions:

- **Organizational Innovation:** New forms of inter-institutional collaboration and hybrid governance models.
 - **MICROFUTURE** (Romania): Interregional cooperation to reform microfinance policy.
 - **Project Center Timișoara** (Romania): A new public entity coordinating multi-annual cultural funding and decentralizing governance.
 - **Social Innovation Piraeus** (Greece): A municipal network coordinating social inclusion services across sectors.
 - **M100 National Hub** (Romania): A national platform supporting cities' transition to climate neutrality.
 - **Cantieri di Innovazione** (Italy): A university-driven initiative that introduced collaborative governance models to align the university's strategic direction with emerging societal challenges, while also enhancing institutional responsiveness and cross-sector collaboration.
- **Service Innovation:** Novel or redesigned services that improve accessibility, personalization, and efficiency.
 - **gov.gr - Digital Citizen Services Platform** (Greece): A one-stop digital platform for public services.
 - **Baia Mare Socio-Medical Services Digital Platform** (Romania): Digitizes access to socio-medical services.
 - **Community Centers National Network** (Greece): Local one-stop shops for social services, health, and employment support.
 - **Local Food Bank of Sector 6** (Ro-



- mania): Combines food redistribution with social support programs.
- **Technological Innovation:** Use of digital platforms, AI, or sensors to enhance service delivery or participation.
 - **DivAirCity** (Romania): Uses citizen science and digital tools to monitor air quality and co-create green urban solutions with citizens.
 - **Trikala Smart City** (Greece): The first smart city in Greece with integrated digital governance and mobility solutions. Implements e-parking, telemedicine, smart lighting, and autonomous transport.
 - **Baia Mare Socio-Medical Services Digital Platform** (Romania): Digitization of social assistance services, enabling online applications and reducing bureaucracy.
- **Relational and Cultural Innovation:** New modes of engagement and shifts in power dynamics between institutions and communities.
 - **Youth Check Parma** (Italy): Empowers youth to influence public policy.
 - **Collaboration Pacts of Bologna** (Italy): Enable co-management of public spaces by citizens.
 - **Culture Against Racism - Donne che Cambiano il Mondo** (Italy): Uses storytelling and art to challenge discrimination and empower marginalized voices.
 - **Municipal Youth Council of Larissa** (Greece): Builds civic capacity and democratic engagement among students.

Overall, the practices demonstrate that public sector **social innovation is multi-dimensional**, rarely confined to a single axis. They often involve simultaneous shifts in tools, relationships, and governance logic—pointing to a systemic rather than purely technical view of innovation.

Overall, the practices demonstrate that public sector **social innovation is multi-dimensional**, rarely confined to a single axis. They often involve simultaneous shifts in tools, relationships, and governance logic—pointing to a systemic rather than purely technical view of innovation.

Deep Dive

gov.gr – Transforming Public Services through Digital Innovation

gov.gr is Greece's flagship digital transformation initiative, launched in 2020 by the Ministry of Digital Governance. It consolidated over 1,500 public services into a single digital portal, enabling citizens to access everything from tax filings and health records to civil documentation online. The platform was rapidly scaled during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring uninterrupted access to essential services.

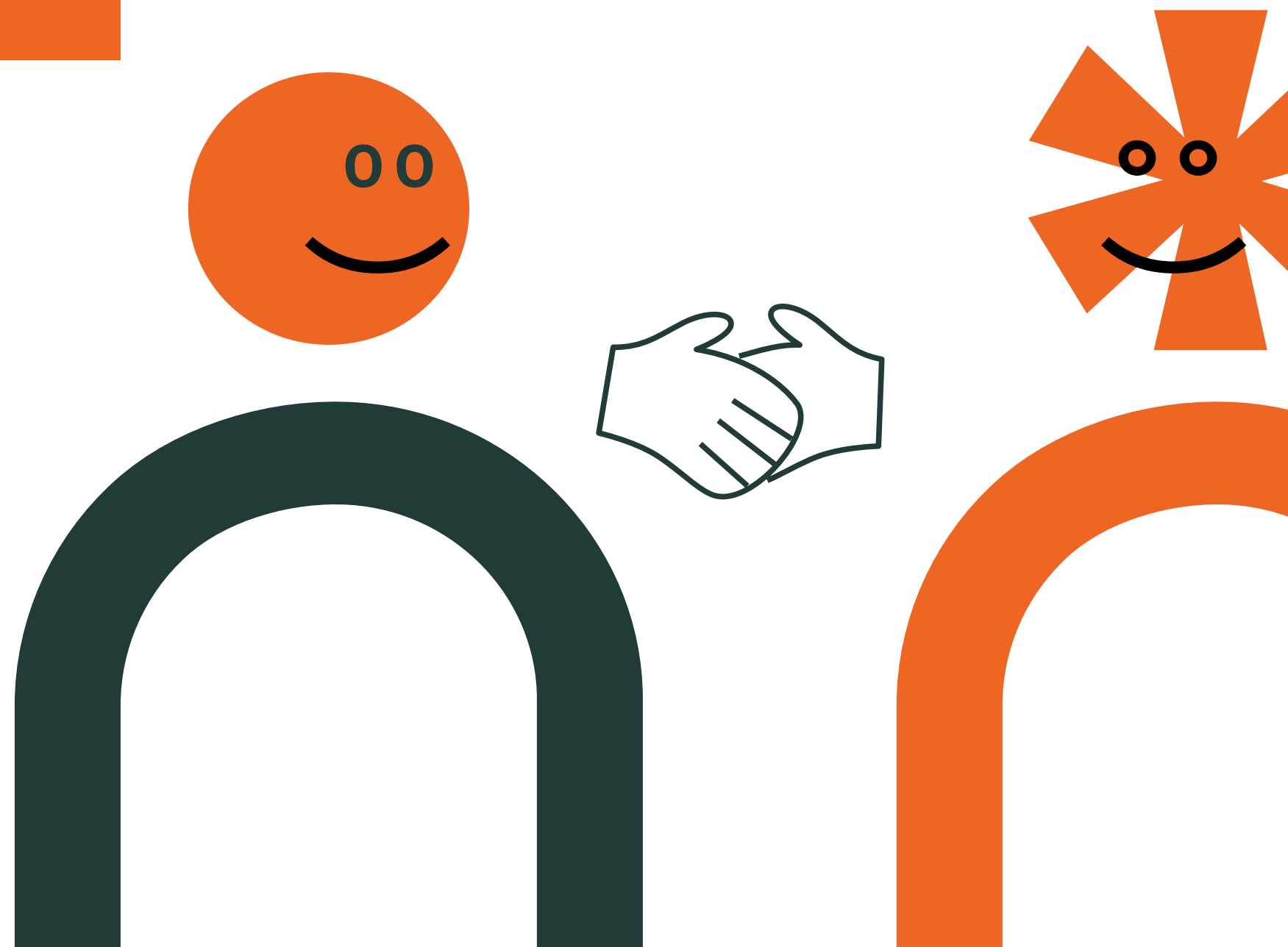
The innovation is both technological and organizational. It addressed long-standing issues of bureaucratic inefficiency, fragmented service delivery, and limited accessibility—especially for rural, elderly, and disabled populations. Key enabling factors included strong political leadership, alignment with EU digitalization goals, and crisis-driven urgency.

While the platform was developed with private sector support, civil society engagement in its design was limited. Funding came from national and EU digital transformation programs.

gov.gr has had a profound impact: it significantly reduced administrative burdens, increased citizen satisfaction, and enhanced trust in public institutions. It also institutionalized digital governance, setting a precedent for future reforms. However, challenges remain in addressing the digital divide and ensuring inclusive access for all.



4 Enabling factors for implementation



4. Enabling factors for implementation

4.1 Leadership and Institutional Ownership

A consistent pattern across the mapped practices is the central role of strong public leadership. Many of the innovations are not grassroots initiatives later adopted by institutions but rather originate within public administrations themselves. These are often embedded in broader policy strategies, which enhances their sustainability and systemic impact.

- **Local Governments** are frequently the initiators and stewards of innovation. In Romania, the municipalities of Cluj-Napoca (FIX Cluj project) and Bucharest Sector 2 (DivAirCity project) have led ambitious projects that combine youth empowerment, environmental justice, and participatory governance. In Italy, the Municipality of Parma institutionalized the Youth Check, embedding it into the city's strategic planning and making it a permanent tool for generational impact assessment.
- **Regional Authorities** also play a pivotal role. Regione Puglia's Bollenti Spiriti is a prime example of long-term policy leadership focused on youth engagement, entrepreneurship, and civic participation. The program was not only innovative in its design but also sustained over time through consistent political support.
- **National Ministries** have demonstrated leadership in system-level interventions. In Romania, the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labor jointly led the development of the initiative Providing Case Management for Rare Diseases through Community Health Nurses, pioneering a model of case management through community

health nurses. These examples show that ministries can be powerful drivers of systemic change when aligned with innovation values.

This pattern suggests that leadership is most effective when it is institutionally embedded and aligned with a long-term vision, rather than being tied to short-term pilot projects.

Leadership Styles and Motivations

To gain a deeper understanding of how leadership drives public sector innovation, in-depth interviews were conducted with a selected group of innovators whose practices had been previously mapped. These conversations explored their leadership styles, motivations for initiating change, professional backgrounds, self-perceptions, and entrepreneurial mindsets, offering rich qualitative insights beyond the surface of the mapped data.

Across these interviews, a **shared leadership ethos emerges**—one that is participatory, proactive, and grounded in a deep sense of public responsibility. Leaders often describe their approach as distributed or collaborative, while also acknowledging the need for decisiveness and direction, especially when navigating institutional inertia. Many emphasize the **importance of building trust, aligning values, and fostering a sense of shared purpose** among teams and stakeholders.

Motivations for initiating innovation are consistently rooted in a **desire to address systemic gaps and unmet social needs**. Whether the goal is to improve youth participation, promote gender equity, expand access to microfinance, or introduce evidence-based policymaking, these leaders are driven by a strong ethical commitment to inclusion, justice, and the belief that public institutions can be powerful agents of change. In several cases, the innovation was sparked by a recognition that existing tools were insufficient—too fragmented, too reactive, or too disconnected from the realities of citizens' lives.

Skills and Backgrounds

The professional trajectories of these leaders are diverse, spanning education, neuroscience, public administration, economics, social policy, and civic activism. Despite this variety, several common skill sets stand out:

- **Interdisciplinary expertise:** Many combine technical knowledge with pedagogical, managerial, or policy-oriented training, enabling them to bridge sectors and translate complex ideas into actionable strategies.
- **Evidence-based thinking:** A strong emphasis is placed on data-driven decision-making, particularly in contexts where innovation is used to guide political or institutional choices.
- **Strategic communication:** Leaders consistently highlight the importance of storytelling, emotional intelligence, and the ability to convey the value of innovation to both internal teams and external stakeholders.
- **Systemic vision:** Rather than focusing on isolated interventions, these leaders aim to embed innovation within broader institutional frameworks, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

These skills are often developed through a combination of formal education, professional experience, and continuous learning—particularly through participation in European networks and interregional exchanges.

Self-Perception and Entrepreneurial Mindset

The individuals interviewed overwhelmingly **identify as changemakers**. They describe themselves as restless, forward-thinking, and deeply committed to transforming the systems they work within. Innovation, for them, is not a one-off project but a continuous process of questioning, adapting, and improving. Many have a track record of introducing new ideas in previous roles—whether in education, civil society, or public administration—and see their current work as part of a broader personal and professional mission.

Their entrepreneurial mindset is reflected in their **resilience, adaptability, and capacity to navigate uncertainty**. Challenges—such as bureaucratic resistance, lack of legal frameworks, or skepticism from peers—are met with persistence and creativity. Rather than being discouraged by setbacks, these leaders often describe them as sources of motivation, prompting them to refine their strategies, build new alliances, or shift institutional narratives.

This mindset aligns with the broader shift from New Public Management to New Public Governance, where leadership is no longer about control and efficiency alone, but about enabling collaboration, fostering trust, and creating public value through inclusive processes. It also reflects the **evolving role of public servants as facilitators, connectors, and co-creators**—individuals who can weave together diverse resources, perspectives, and actors to address complex societal challenges.

4.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Multi-stakeholder collaboration is a defining feature of successful social innovation practices. Civil society organizations, academic institutions, and private sector actors often co-designed, implemented, or supported initiatives, bringing in expertise, legitimacy, and community trust.

Most mapped practices are characterized by multi-actor ecosystems, where diverse stakeholders contribute at different levels of engagement. Public institutions increasingly act not as sole providers but as conveners and coordinators of broader innovation networks.

- **Civil Society** plays a crucial role in co-designing and implementing services, especially those targeting vulnerable populations. For example, in the Myrmidones Social Cooperative (Greece), NGOs and family associations co-manage employment and support services for people with mental health conditions. In Baia Mare (Romania), civil society organizations supported the rollout of a digital platform for accessing social assistance.
- **Private Sector** actors are often involved in technical or infrastructural innovations. In Horizon-funded projects like DivAirCity and SET-PED, companies contributed expertise in digital platforms, environmental sensors, and urban design. In A Shop is Not Just a Shop (Italy), local businesses received funding in exchange for community contributions, blending commercial and civic goals.
- **Academia** contributes strategic and intellectual capital, particularly in projects involving evaluation, design thinking, or long-term visioning. In DivAirCity, universities led citizen science

initiatives and air quality modeling. In Youth Check Parma, LUISS University co-developed the methodology for assessing the generational impact of municipal policies. In Cantieri di Innovazione (Italy), the University of Turin collaborated with Talents Venture to co-design participatory workshops that engaged the academic community in rethinking institutional responses to societal megatrends.

This constellation of stakeholders contributes to the open innovation character of public sector social innovation, with public institutions no longer acting alone, but as **conveners and coordinators** of broader ecosystems.

4.3 Funding mechanisms

A major enabling factor across nearly all practices is access to diversified funding, especially European Union support. Four main financial models emerge:

- **Public Funding** (Local/Regional/National): This is common for institutionally embedded policies. For example:
 - Bollenti Spiriti and Youth Check Parma in Italy were funded through regional and municipal budgets.
 - The Municipal Youth Council of Larissa and the Community Centers National Network in Greece are also supported by national and local public funds.

However, such funding is often constrained by short political cycles or austerity measures, requiring complementary resources to ensure continuity.

- **European Funds:** EU programs such as Horizon Europe, Interreg, and the European Social Fund play a decisive role in enabling experimentation and transnational learning. Examples include:
 - MICROFUTURE (Romania): Funded by Interreg Europe to improve microfinance policy.
 - DivAirCity and SET-PED (Romania): Horizon-funded projects integrating environmental justice and urban regeneration.
 - M100 National Hub (Romania): Supports cities in achieving climate neutrality through EU technical assistance.

These funds provide legitimacy, visibility, and capacity for innovation—but also raise concerns about sustainability once the funding ends.

- **Mixed Models:** Some initiatives blend public resources with private contributions, philanthropic investment, or in-kind support. For instance:
 - The Local Food Bank of District 6 Bucharest (Romania) combines municipal funding with private logistics support from companies like Glovo.
 - Spazio Nòva (Italy) leverages public-private partnerships to regenerate abandoned urban spaces into community hubs.
 - Un negozio non è solo un negozio - A Shop is Not Just a Shop (Italy) requires funded businesses to return value to the community through social initiatives.

These hybrid models are particularly common in service innovation and digital infrastructure projects, reflecting a shift toward collaborative public value creation.

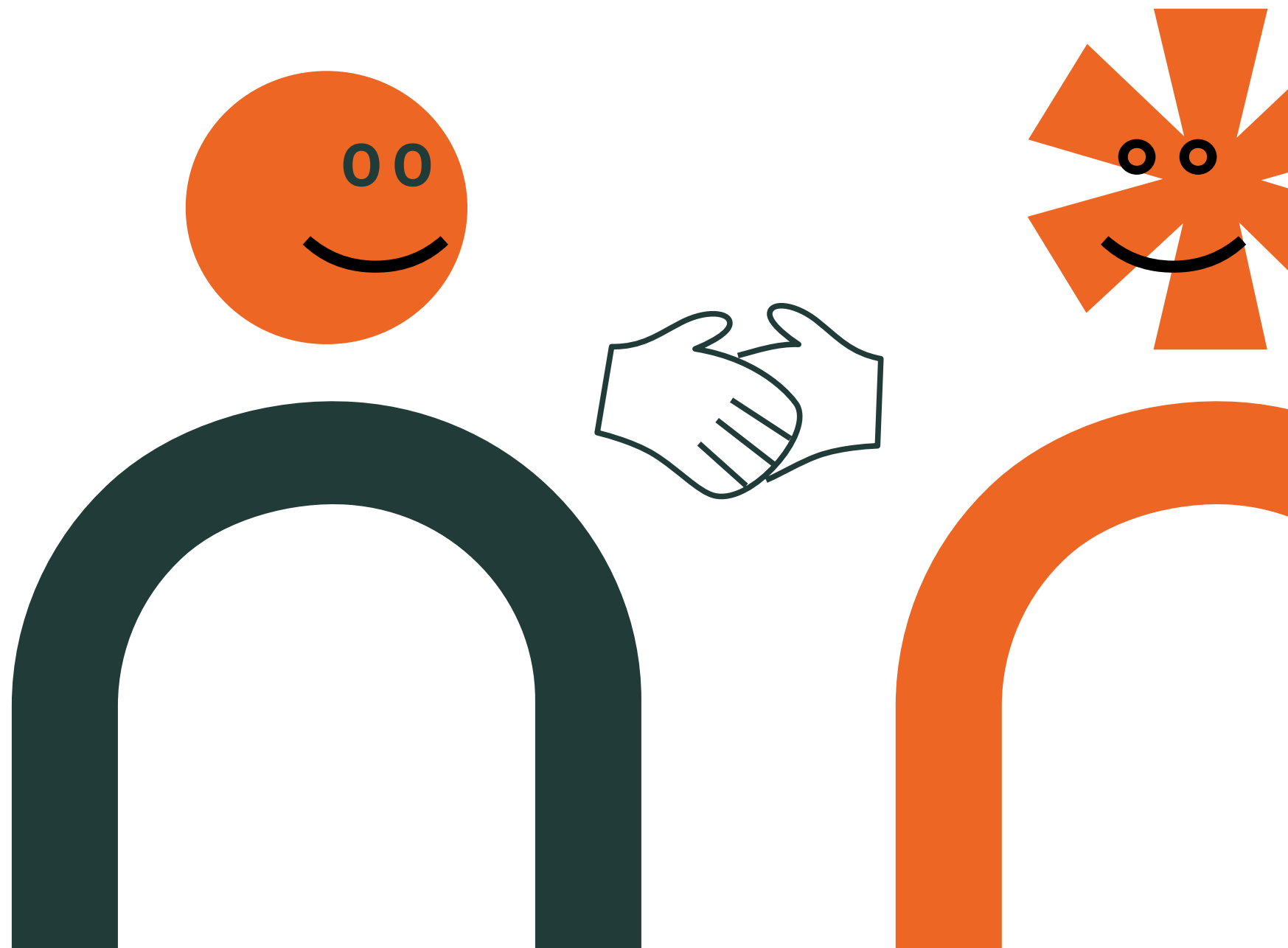
Self-sustaining Models: A smaller but significant group of practices operate with a long-term goal of financial self-sufficiency. These models often begin with public or philanthropic seed funding but evolve into revenue-generating entities:

- **Myrmidones Social Cooperative (Greece):** Generates income through service provision while supporting people with mental health conditions.
 - FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania): Although initially grant-funded, it encourages youth-led startups to become financially independent.
 - Alba Iulia City Branding (Romania): Attracted private investment and tourism revenue through a professional branding strategy, reducing reliance on public funds.

These models demonstrate potential for

long-term resilience, though they often require strong initial support and capacity-building to reach sustainability.

5 Gaps and barriers



5. Gaps and barriers

While the mapped practices demonstrate a growing capacity for innovation within public administrations, they also reveal **persistent structural and operational challenges**.

These barriers often limit the depth, reach, and sustainability of social innovation efforts. This chapter identifies three key areas where gaps are most evident: policy and institutional constraints, sustainability and scalability limitations, and shortcomings in participation and co-creation. Understanding these challenges is essential for designing more resilient, inclusive, and impactful public sector innovations

5.1 Policy and Institutional Challenges

Across the mapped practices, several recurring structural and policy-level barriers emerged that transcend individual projects or national contexts. These macro-challenges often limit the ability of public sector innovations to scale, sustain, or institutionalize their impact.

- **Legal and regulatory rigidity:** A common barrier across countries is the misalignment between innovative practices and outdated legal frameworks. In both Romania and Italy, legal constraints initially prevented the implementation of multi-annual funding mechanisms for cultural or social projects. For example, the Project Center Timișoara had to advocate for changes to national legislation (OG 51/1998) to enable long-term cultural funding. Similarly, other municipalities reported difficulties in adapting procurement or grant-making rules to support co-creation or hybrid governance models.

- **Fragmented governance and siloed administration:** Many initiatives—particularly those addressing complex social needs—struggled with fragmented institutional responsibilities. In Greece (Social Innovation Piraeus) and Romania (MICROFUTURE, DivAirCity), projects had to overcome coordination gaps between departments or levels of government. This fragmentation often led to duplicated efforts, slow implementation, or inconsistent service delivery, especially in areas like health, social inclusion, and urban regeneration.
- **Political discontinuity and lack of institutional memory:** Several practices highlighted the vulnerability of innovation to political turnover. In Italy, the long-term success of Bollenti Spiriti was tied to consistent regional leadership, while similar programs in other regions failed to survive changes in administration. In Romania and Greece,

local initiatives often lacked mechanisms to ensure continuity beyond electoral cycles, making them dependent on individual champions rather than institutional commitment.

- **Slow adaptation of national frameworks to local innovation:** A cross-cutting issue in countries like Romania, Italy, and Greece is the lag between local experimentation and national policy adaptation. For instance, while Youth Check Parma and FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth demonstrated strong local leadership, there was no national framework to support replication or scale-up. Similarly, the Energy Community of Kozani faced delays due to national-level regulatory bottlenecks, despite strong local readiness and EU funding.

These macro-level challenges suggest that while local governments are increasingly acting as laboratories of innovation, their efforts are often **constrained by systemic inertia** at higher levels of governance. Addressing these barriers requires not only local experimentation but also national policy reform, inter-institutional coordination, and long-term political commitment.

5.2 Sustainability and Scalability

While many public sector innovations demonstrate strong local impact, a recurring challenge across the mapped practices is their limited ability to sustain operations over time or scale beyond their original context. These limitations are often rooted in structural issues such as short-term funding cycles, lack of institutional anchoring, and insufficient policy frameworks to support replication.

Macro-Level Challenges:

- **Short-term project funding cycles:** A widespread issue across countries is the reliance on time-bound project funding, particularly from EU programs like Horizon Europe and Interreg. Initiatives such as DivAir-City and SET-PED (Romania) have enabled cities to pilot innovative approaches to air quality and urban regeneration. However, both face uncertainty regarding long-term continuation, as they lack mechanisms for institutional integration once EU funding ends. This pattern is echoed in MICROFUTURE, a cross-country initiative focused on microfinance policy, which has produced valuable tools and interregional learning but remains dependent on external funding for implementation.
- **Lack of institutional embedding:** Many practices operate as stand-alone projects rather than being integrated into the core functions of public administrations. For example, the Local Food Bank of District 6 Bucharest (Romania) has delivered significant social impact by reducing food waste and supporting vulnerable populations. Yet, it remains outside the formal welfare system and relies on a mix of public grants and private donations.

Without formal adoption into municipal policy frameworks, its long-term viability is at risk.

- **Limited national frameworks for replication:** Several successful local innovations have not been scaled due to the absence of supportive national policies. The Youth Check in Parma (Italy) is a pioneering tool for assessing the generational impact of public policies. Despite its success, there is no national mechanism to encourage or support its replication in other municipalities. Similarly, FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania), a youth innovation incubator, has not been replicated elsewhere due to the lack of a national strategy for youth civic entrepreneurship.
- **Context-specific models with limited transferability:** Some initiatives are deeply rooted in local conditions, making them difficult to replicate. For example, Spazio Nòva in Novara (Italy) transformed an abandoned military barracks into a multifunctional cultural and youth hub. While the model is highly successful locally, it depends on access to public real estate, strong municipal leadership, and a dense network of civic actors—factors that are not easily reproduced in other cities.
- **Scaling barriers in rural or underserved areas:** Projects in rural or peripheral regions often face additional challenges in scaling due to limited infrastructure, staffing, or visibility. The Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls in Pentalofos (Greece) provides high-quality care in a remote setting, but its geographic isolation and resource constraints make it difficult to replicate or expand. This highlights a broader issue: rural innovation often

lacks the policy attention and investment needed for scale.

- **Lack of long-term ownership and continuity:** Even when projects are initiated by public institutions, they may not survive leadership changes or shifting political priorities. In several cases, such as Participatory Budgeting in Timișoara (Romania) and Social Innovation Piraeus (Greece), the continuity of innovation depends heavily on committed individuals or teams. Without mechanisms to institutionalize these roles, innovations remain vulnerable to disruption.

Unique Cases

These practices mapped stand out for their distinctive approaches to sustainability or their ability to overcome common barriers:

- **Alba Iulia City Branding (Romania):** This initiative is a rare example of a local innovation that transitioned from a project to a long-term strategic asset. By integrating branding into tourism, investment, and smart city strategies, the city attracted private investment and increased visibility. It became the first Romanian city with a professional branding strategy and leveraged this identity to attract global tech companies and cultural tourism. This case demonstrates how innovation can become self-sustaining when aligned with broader economic development goals and supported by cross-sector partnerships.
- **gov.gr (Greece):** Greece's national digital services platform consolidated over 1,500 public services into a single portal. Unlike many digital pilots, gov.gr was rapidly institutionalized and scaled nationwide, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is now a core part of the country's digital governance infrastructure. This is a rare case of

national-level digital innovation that achieved both scale and sustainability through strong political backing and cross-ministerial coordination.

- **Myrmidones Social Cooperative (Greece):** This cooperative supports people with mental health conditions through employment and social reintegration. It operates under a legal framework that allows it to generate income through service provision, making it less dependent on external funding. This case illustrates a self-sustaining model rooted in social entrepreneurship, with a clear pathway to financial autonomy and long-term impact.

5.3 Participation and Co-Creation Gaps

While participation is widely acknowledged as a pillar of public sector innovation, the actual depth and quality of engagement across the mapped practices varies significantly. Using the **“5 Levels of Engagement”** framework by CoCreative—from Level 1 (Inform) to Level 5 (Co-Create)—we can better understand where most initiatives fall short and where deeper collaboration is beginning to emerge. The analysis reveals that while many practices reach Levels 1 to 2, few consistently operate at Levels 4 or 5, where shared vision, decision-making, and ownership are fully realized.

Level 1: Inform – “I was updated on a decision.”

Many initiatives remain at the level of one-way communication, where citizens are informed about decisions after they are made. While this level is appropriate in certain contexts (e.g., urgent public health updates), it is insufficient for building trust or ownership in innovation processes.

- In the case of gov.gr (Greece), the national digital platform significantly improved access to public services. However, its development was largely top-down, with limited user involvement in design or testing. Citizens were informed of new services but had little influence over their structure or priorities.
- Similarly, in Baia Mare (Romania), the rollout of a digital platform for social assistance was not accompanied by participatory design processes. The result was a technically functional tool that lacked responsiveness to user needs.

Level 2: Consult – “I shared my experience with the problem.”

Some practices go further by gathering input from stakeholders, often through surveys, interviews, or public meetings. However, these consultations rarely influence final decisions in a meaningful way.

- In the MICROFUTURE project, social enterprises and NGOs were consulted during the development of a microfinance guide. While their feedback was acknowledged, the final policy decisions remained in the hands of public authorities, limiting the influence of those closest to the issues.
- The Alba Iulia City Branding initiative involved citizens in early consultations to shape the city’s identity. However, there is little evidence of continued engagement or feedback loops, suggesting that participation was limited to the initial phase.

Level 3: Involve – “My input was included in the analysis.”

At this level, stakeholders contribute to shaping the problem definition and are involved in the design process, though they may not share decision-making power.

- Participatory Budgeting in Timișoara is a strong example of Level 3 engagement. Citizens propose and vote on projects, and the municipality has made efforts to include underrepresented communities. However, disparities in participation persist, particularly among marginalized groups who may lack the resources or confidence to engage fully.
- In DivAirCity (Romania), citizens were involved in co-designing air quality interventions through workshops and citizen science activities. While the

project moved beyond consultation, decision-making remained largely with institutional actors.

Level 4: Collaborate – “All our needs and interests are shaping the solutions.”

Few practices reach this level, where public institutions and stakeholders work together to design and implement solutions based on shared interests and mutual respect.

- FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania) stands out as a strong example of collaboration. The incubator was co-designed by the municipality, NGOs, universities, and private companies. Youth participants were not only beneficiaries but also co-creators of the program’s structure and content.
- In Social Innovation Piraeus (Greece), the municipality worked closely with civil society and academic partners to coordinate services for vulnerable populations. The initiative created a shared platform for problem-solving, though challenges in sustaining collaboration remain.

Level 5: Co-Create – “We did it all together, including deciding the vision and goals.”

Very few practices operate at this level, where stakeholders share a common vision, co-own the strategy, and jointly implement solutions. Co-creation requires deep trust, long-term commitment, and the ability to work across institutional and cultural boundaries.

- The Project Center Timișoara (Romania) approached Level 5 engagement during the European Capital of Culture program. Through open calls, curatorial boards, and community consultations, the Center enabled hundreds of organizations and individuals to shape the city’s cultural agenda. The process influenced national legislation and cre-

ated a new model for cultural governance.

- Larissa Learning City (Greece), recognized by UNESCO, also reflects elements of Level 5 engagement. The initiative brings together schools, universities, NGOs, and citizens to co-create a life-long learning ecosystem. Its success lies in the shared vision and distributed leadership across sectors.

Choosing the right level of engagement

One of the most important insights from the “5 Levels of Engagement” framework is that not all stakeholders need to be engaged at the same level—and not all challenges require the same depth of collaboration. What matters most is **being intentional and transparent** about the level of engagement chosen for each stakeholder and each phase of the innovation process.

In many of the mapped practices, a mismatch between the stated goals of participation and the actual level of engagement led to frustration, missed opportunities, or even distrust. For example, when citizens are invited to share their views (Level 2: Consult) but are led to believe they are co-creating solutions (Level 5), the result is often cynicism and disengagement. Conversely, when stakeholders are clearly informed about their role and see their input meaningfully reflected in outcomes, even lower levels of engagement can build trust and legitimacy.

Being aware of the five levels helps public institutions design more effective and respectful engagement strategies. It allows them to:

- Match the level of engagement to the complexity of the problem. Deep, systemic challenges often require Level 4 or 5 engagement to generate shared ownership and lasting solutions.
- Clarify expectations with stakeholders. This builds trust and avoids the perception of tokenism.
- Allocate resources and time appropriately. Higher levels of engagement require more investment but can yield more transformative outcomes.
- Build internal capacity. Civil servants need training, tools, and support to facilitate meaningful engagement, especially at Levels 3–5.

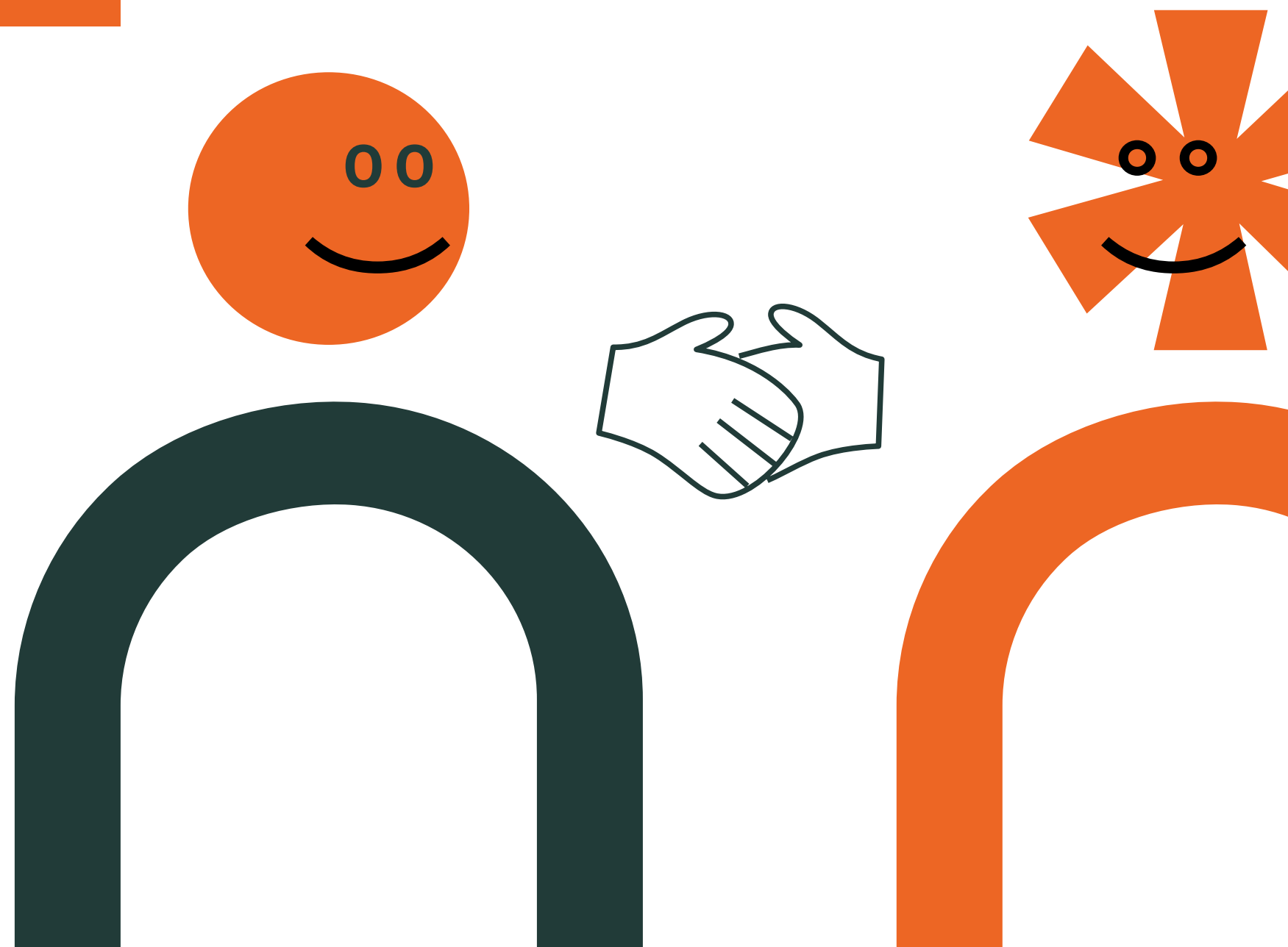
However, the dataset also reveals several persistent structural gaps that must be addressed to make co-creation a norm rather than an exception:

- Many initiatives still rely on tokenistic engagement, where stakeholders are informed or consulted but have no real influence on decisions.
- There is a lack of structured methodologies to support sustained collaboration, with many projects relying on ad-hoc or one-off engagement activities.
- Marginalized voices are often under-represented, even in socially targeted programs, due to barriers such as language, access, or trust.
- Capacity constraints within public administrations—such as limited time, training, or incentives—make it difficult to manage participatory processes effectively.

Ultimately, the most transformative innovations in the dataset—such as FIX Cluj, the Project Center Timișoara, and Larissa

Learning City—demonstrate that when co-creation is embedded as a professional and political norm, public innovation becomes more resilient, equitable, and impactful

6 Impact and Systemic Change



6. Impact and Systemic Change

Public sector social innovation is not only about improving services—it is about reimagining how systems function to produce more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable outcomes. While many of the initiatives mapped are still in the early stages, they offer compelling evidence of how targeted interventions can generate ripple effects across institutions, communities, and policy ecosystems. By shifting how resources are allocated, how roles are defined, how relationships are built, and how rules and mindsets evolve, these practices begin to address the root causes of complex societal challenges. This chapter explores the emerging impacts of these innovations, focusing on the tangible and intangible value they create, and the early signs of systemic transformation they are beginning to catalyze.

6.1 Tangible and Intangible Value

Many practices have already produced measurable outcomes, particularly in terms of improved services, infrastructure, and user experiences. These tangible results often serve as entry points for deeper change.

- New services and infrastructures:
 - The gov.gr platform (Greece) consolidated over 1,500 public services into a single digital portal, reducing bureaucracy and increasing accessibility.
 - The Local Food Bank of District 6 Bucharest (Romania) redistributed over 75 tons of food in three months, directly addressing food insecurity and food waste.
 - Participatory Budgeting in Timișoara enabled over 11,000 ci-

tizens to vote on local projects, resulting in 19 funded initiatives in 2024 alone.

- Expanded access to rights and support:
 - Providing Case Management for Rare Diseases through Community Health Nurses (Romania) improved access to care for patients with rare conditions through community health nurses.
 - The Shelter for Unaccompanied Minor Girls in Pentalofos (Greece) provided holistic support to refugee minors, including education, psychosocial care, and legal aid.

- Enhanced user satisfaction and trust:
 - In several cases, qualitative feedback from citizens and stakeholders indicated improved responsiveness and trust in public institutions, particularly where co-design and transparency were prioritized.

Beyond these tangible effects, many initiatives generate significant intangible value that lays the foundation for long-term transformation:

- **Civic empowerment and social capital:**
 - FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania) builds a culture of civic entrepreneurship among youth, encouraging them to co-create solutions for their communities.
 - Youth Check in Parma (Italy) empowers young people to assess the generational impact of public policies, fostering a sense of agency and inclusion.
- **Cultural change within public administration:**
 - In initiatives like the Project Center Timișoara (Romania), civil servants began adopting more adaptive, collaborative, and user-oriented mindsets, shifting from control to facilitation.
 - Larissa Learning City (Greece) promotes a culture of lifelong learning and inclusion, strengthening community bonds and intergenerational dialogue.

These intangible outcomes are often less visible but are critical for enabling systemic change. They shift how people relate to institutions, to each other, and to the



6.2 Evidence of Systemic Shifts

While full systemic transformation is difficult to generate and measure, several practices in the dataset show early signs of altering the structures, roles, relationships, rules, and mindsets that define their operating environments.

- **Shifting Resources**

- The Energy Community of Kozani (Greece) restructured how energy is produced and distributed at the municipal level, using EU funds to build renewable infrastructure that reduces energy poverty and reinvests savings into public services.
- The Project Center Timișoara (Romania) successfully advocated for a change in national legislation (OG 51/1998), enabling multi-annual cultural funding—a structural shift that benefits the entire cultural ecosystem.

- **Redefining Roles and Relationships**

- In Social Innovation Piraeus (Greece), the municipality moved from being a service provider to a convener of cross-sector collaboration, coordinating NGOs, universities, and public agencies to address social exclusion.
- Myrmidones Social Cooperative (Greece) redefined the role of people with mental health conditions—from passive recipients of care to active contributors in a social enterprise.
- MICROFUTURE (Romania) created interregional learning communities that connect public authorities, social enterprises, and financial institutions to co-develop inclusive microfinance policies.

- **Changing Rules and Norms**

- The Collaboration Pacts in Bolo-

gna (Italy) institutionalized citizen participation in the care and regeneration of urban commons, embedding co-management into municipal governance.

- Youth Check in Parma (Italy) introduced a new rule within the municipality: all policies must be assessed for their generational impact, structurally embedding youth perspectives in decision-making.
- **Shifting Mindsets**
 - FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth (Romania) and Youth Check Parma (Italy) are reshaping how young people see their role in public life—from passive observers to active co-creators of policy and community.
 - Culture Against Racism - Donne che Cambiano il Mondo (Italy) uses storytelling and art to challenge discriminatory narratives and promote inclusive identities, aiming to shift public attitudes over time.
 - In several initiatives, civil servants began to see themselves not just as implementers of policy but as facilitators of collective intelligence and community-led change.

Deep Dive

FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth – Building a Civic Innovation Ecosystem for Youth

FIX Cluj Incubator for Youth is Romania's largest free incubation program for young innovators, launched in Cluj-Napoca through a partnership between the City Hall, the Botnar Foundation, and a wide network of public, private, academic, and civil society actors. It empowers youth aged 16–26 to develop socially impactful startups through funding, mentorship, and civic learning.

The initiative responds to pressing social needs such as youth unemployment, civic disengagement, and the lack of inclusive innovation ecosystems. It combines service-based innovation (incubation and mentoring), organizational innovation (quadruple helix governance), and technological tools (digital platforms for learning and funding).

FIX Cluj's success is rooted in strong local leadership, a culture of experimentation, and sustained investment. It is inclusive by design, involving marginalized youth and adapting to their needs. Civil society and academia play central roles in mentoring and co-creation, while the private sector contributes expertise and funding.

Challenges include initial reluctance among youth to manage large grants and the absence of a national policy framework for replication. Nevertheless, the program has already incubated over 145 youth-led ideas and catalyzed a mindset shift within the local administration. FIX Cluj redefined youth policy in Cluj-Napoca and offers a replicable model for participatory, future-oriented governance.

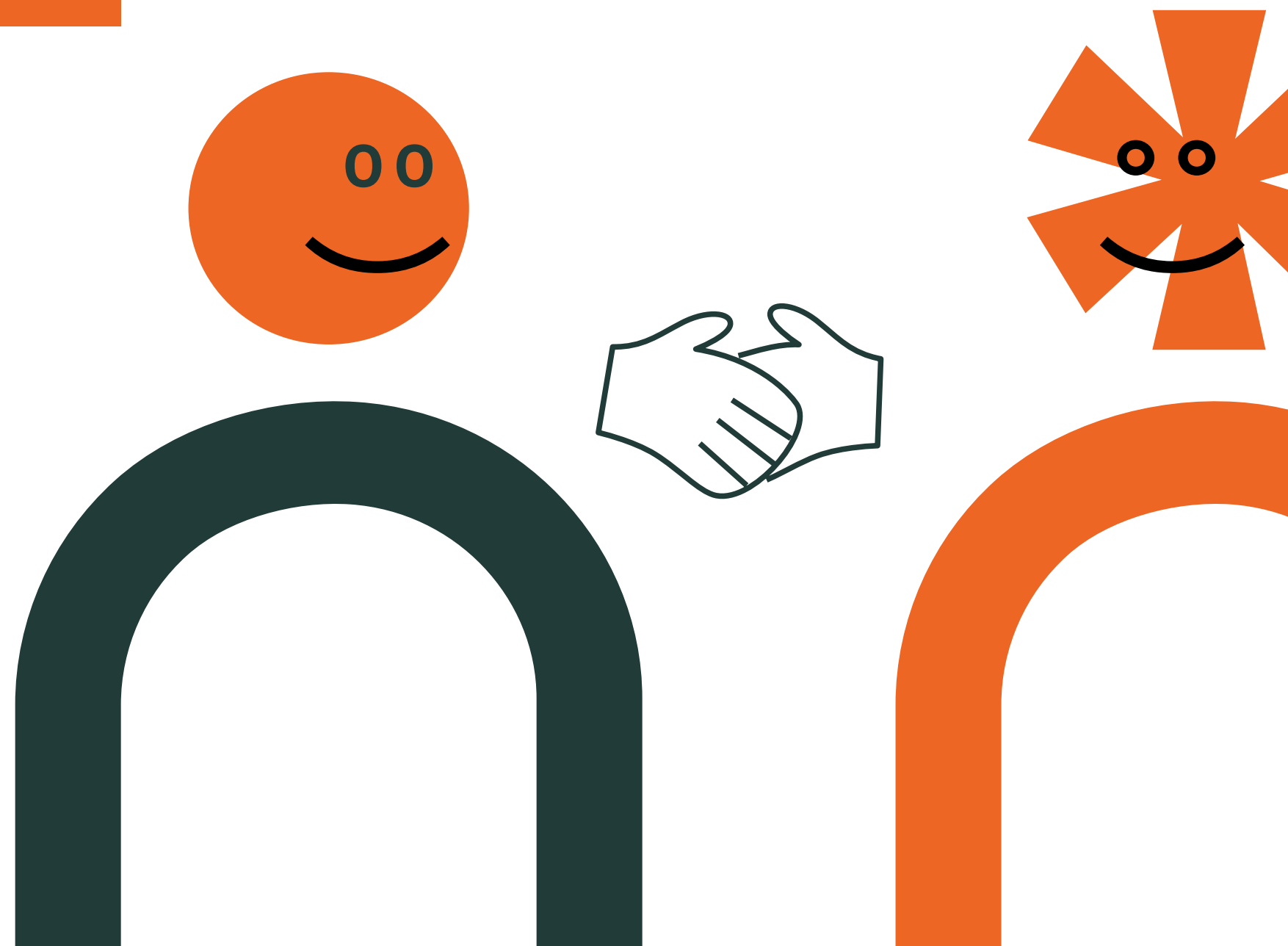


The practices analyzed show early but promising signs of systemic impact, particularly where innovation is not only technical but relational and political. Systemic change is most likely when innovations:

- Address root causes rather than symptoms (e.g., reframing care ecosystems instead of just digitizing services).
- Alter the rules, norms, or mental models that govern public service delivery.
- Result in new forms of value allocation, recognizing public, social, and democratic outcomes alongside efficiency.
- Are embedded institutionally and supported by long-term political and administrative commitment.
- Enable knowledge transfer and replication through open calls, shared platforms, and intergovernmental learning.

However, most systemic shifts remain localized or dependent on individual champions. To achieve durable transformation, these efforts must be consolidated institutionally, resourced over time, and connected to broader reform agendas. Systems change is not a one-time event but an iterative process—one that requires persistence, collaboration, and a willingness to rethink how public value is created and shared.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations



7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This mapping exercise, encompassing 30 practices of social innovation in public administration across Italy, Greece, and Romania, reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape of institutional experimentation. Public administrations are not merely adopting innovation—they are increasingly initiating and shaping it. From municipalities to national ministries, institutions are stepping into new roles as facilitators, conveners, and co-creators of public value.

The most impactful initiatives go beyond service delivery to reimagine governance itself. They shift how institutions relate to citizens, how decisions are made, and how public value is defined. Many of these innovations are rooted in a systemic vision—addressing not only immediate needs but also the structural and cultural conditions that shape them.

Youth and vulnerable populations are often central to these efforts, reflecting a growing commitment to equity, inclusion, and intergenerational justice. At the same time, many initiatives benefit the broader public, tackling challenges such as sustainability, mental health, and digital transformation.

Collaboration is a defining feature of successful innovation. Civil society, academia, and the private sector frequently play key roles in co-designing and implementing solutions. However, the depth of engagement varies widely. While some initiatives achieve deep co-creation, many remain at the level of consultation or information-sharing.

Systemic change is possible—but still rare. A few standout cases, such as the Youth Check in Parma and the Project Center in Timișoara, have influenced national legislation or institutionalized new governance models. Yet most innovations remain localized, dependent on individual champions, or vulnerable to political turnover.

To move from exception to norm, social innovation in the public sector must be structurally supported, institutionally embedded, and culturally embraced. This requires not only visionary leadership but also enabling frameworks, long-term investment, and a shift in how public institutions understand their role in society.

To support the scaling, sustainability, and institutionalization of social innovation in public administration, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Institutionalize Innovation Roles and Structures:**
 - Establish dedicated roles such as Social Innovation Managers and cross-functional innovation units within public bodies.
 - Embed innovation into strategic planning processes and ensure alignment with long-term policy goals.
 - Promote adaptive leadership and create safe spaces for experimentation and learning.
- **Deepen and Diversify Participation**
 - Move beyond consultation to structured co-creation frameworks that empower citizens, especially marginalized groups.
 - Invest in inclusive participation infrastructure—both digital and physical—to reduce barriers to engagement.
 - Use frameworks like the “5 Levels of Engagement” by CoCreative to clarify expectations and design appropriate collaboration strategies.
- **Anchor Innovation in Policy and Legal Frameworks**
 - Embed successful innovations into formal policy documents, legal instruments, and budget cycles.
 - Advocate for legal reforms that enable multi-annual funding, hybrid governance models, and flexible procurement.
 - Ensure continuity across political cycles through cross-party support and institutional memory mechanisms.
- **Stabilize and Diversify Funding Models**
 - Complement EU and project-based

funding with core public investment and hybrid models involving philanthropy and private sector contributions.

- Create dedicated innovation funds at local, regional, and national levels.
- Support financial sustainability through capacity-building for self-sustaining models such as cooperatives and social enterprises.
- **Foster Ecosystem-Based Approaches**
 - Support the development of local and regional innovation ecosystems that connect public institutions with civil society, academia, and business.
 - Facilitate long-term partnerships through shared governance structures and joint funding mechanisms.
 - Encourage inter-municipal and cross-border collaboration to accelerate learning and replication.
- **Strengthen Monitoring, Evaluation, and Storytelling**
 - Develop evaluation frameworks that capture both tangible outcomes and intangible impacts such as trust, empowerment, and cultural change.
 - Use evaluation as a tool for learning and continuous improvement, not just accountability.
 - Share stories of change to build a shared narrative and inspire broader institutional transformation.
 -

By implementing these recommendations, public administrations can move from isolated innovation efforts to systemic transformation—building institutions that are not only more efficient, but also more inclusive, adaptive, and democratic.

Contacts

MAIL: info@inspirepa.eu

LINKEDIN: [InspiringPA](#)

WEBSITE: www.inspirepa.eu