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D2.3

Skills gap validation report: Report highlighting the results of focus groups and online survey

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INSPIRE PA – INtroducing Social Practices to Improve the
REsilience of Public Administration

PROJECT CODE: 2024-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000251313



ASHOKA



DIMITRA
educational organization



DELIVERABLE DESCRIPTION

Deliverable

D2.3 Skills gap validation report: Report highlighting the results of focus groups and online survey.

Work package

WP2 - Certified Training Curriculum for Social Innovation Officer: task overview

Project start date

11/11/2024

Project end dated

10/11/2026

Concerned deliverable leader

AMR

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1. Executive summary

The Skills Gap Validation Study conducted within the **INSPIRE PA project** examines the capacity of public administrations in Italy, Greece and Romania to engage in social innovation and evaluates the competencies, institutional conditions and training needs that should inform the development of the Social Innovation Officer curriculum. The study is part of a broader European initiative funded through Erasmus Plus, which aims to strengthen public governance by promoting participatory, collaborative and impact-driven approaches. The Association of Romanian Municipalities (AMR) coordinated the research, integrating qualitative insights from national focus groups with quantitative evidence from a European online survey with 226 respondents.

Findings show that social innovation is generally understood as a process that redefines public value through collaboration with citizens and stakeholders, encourages co-creation and enhances the responsiveness of institutions to emerging social needs, although the concept is not yet fully embedded in administrative practice. Public officials in all three countries recognise the strategic relevance of social innovation, yet they face structural obstacles such as bureaucratic rigidity and insufficient interdepartmental collaboration, cultural barriers related to risk aversion and compliance-driven behaviour, leadership-related challenges linked to political discontinuity and limited managerial support, and resource constraints that impede experimentation and learning.

Across countries, participants converge in describing the **Social Innovation Officer** as a transversal role that connects departments, facilitates participatory processes, supports the identification of community needs, contributes to strategic planning, integrates legal and social perspectives and monitors the social impact of policies. The role is perceived as a catalyst for institutional change and as a bridge between citizens and administration, requiring a blend of analytical, strategic, relational, managerial and adaptive competencies. The survey confirms significant skill gaps in transformational leadership, strategic planning, critical thinking, intersectoral collaboration, stakeholder engagement, digital literacy,

change management, communication and empathy, financial literacy and social impact assessment.

Training needs point consistently toward practice-oriented, flexible and hybrid learning experiences, supported by case studies, simulations, peer-learning and mentoring. Respondents emphasise the importance of institutional recognition for the SIO role and the need for supportive organisational environments that incentivise innovation, encourage collaboration and legitimise new professional profiles. The study concludes that strengthening social innovation capacity is essential for the modernisation of European public administrations and that the Social Innovation Officer curriculum represents a strategic response to current challenges by providing a structured and credible pathway for developing the competencies required for adaptive, participatory and citizen-focused governance.

2. Project background and rationale

The INSPIRE PA project was developed in response to the growing need for European public administrations to strengthen their capacity to address complex social challenges through innovative, inclusive and participatory approaches. Public sector institutions across Europe are required to adapt to rapid transformations driven by digitalisation, demographic shifts, climate pressures and increasing expectations from citizens, yet many administrations continue to rely on traditional organisational models that limit their ability to engage with communities, collaborate across sectors and experiment with new solutions. Within this context, social innovation emerges as a strategic pathway for modernising governance and enhancing the responsiveness, resilience and legitimacy of public institutions.

INSPIRE PA aims to create the conditions for integrating social innovation into public administration systems by developing a certified **curriculum for a new professional role, the Social Innovation Officer**, a function designed to support collaboration, participatory policymaking and the design of socially impactful interventions. The project involves partners from Romania, Italy and Greece and

promotes comparative learning by examining how different administrative cultures perceive and operationalise social innovation. Its overarching mission is to contribute to the professionalisation of innovation within the public sector and to support administrations in transitioning toward models of governance centred on community engagement, evidence-based decision-making and continuous learning.

The Association of Romanian Municipalities plays a central role by coordinating the skills gap study, which serves as the empirical foundation for the development of the Social Innovation Officer curriculum. The study seeks to clarify how public officials understand social innovation, what obstacles they encounter in implementing innovative practices, which competencies are insufficiently developed and what types of training are most relevant to their professional reality. Through this approach, **INSPIRE PA ensures that the curriculum does not operate at a theoretical level but responds directly to the lived experiences, organisational challenges and developmental needs of European public administrations.**

The rationale for the study arises from the recognition that innovation in the public sector cannot be sustained solely through individual initiative but requires a structured and institutionally supported model that promotes collaboration, experimentation and impact assessment. By identifying skills gaps and organisational barriers, the study contributes to the creation of a coherent framework for the Social Innovation Officer and supports European administrations in building the human and institutional capacities needed to navigate societal complexity and to deliver inclusive and future-oriented public services.

3. Study objectives and methodology

The Skills Gap Validation Study conducted within INSPIRE PA was designed to provide an evidence-based understanding of how public administrations in Italy, Greece and Romania perceive social innovation, which structural and cultural barriers constrain its implementation and what competencies are required to

support an institutional transition toward more participatory and community-oriented governance. The study also aims to inform the development of the Social Innovation Officer curriculum by identifying the most relevant training needs, the preferred learning formats and the conditions necessary for integrating this new professional role into administrative systems.

The objectives of the study focus on three main dimensions, namely assessing the degree of familiarity with social innovation and the extent to which public officials consider it relevant to their organisational mandates, exploring the specific skill gaps that hinder the capacity to develop, implement and sustain innovative practices and analysing organisational climates in relation to leadership, collaboration and openness to experimentation. By examining these elements comparatively across Italy, Greece and Romania, the study contributes to a clearer understanding of how different administrative cultures shape the uptake of social innovation and the potential positioning of the Social Innovation Officer.

The methodology adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines exploratory qualitative research with quantitative validation. The qualitative component consists of national focus groups conducted in Italy, Greece and Romania with participants representing municipal administrations, public institutions, civil society organisations and professionals working in fields relevant to community development and public service innovation. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol that examined perceptions of social innovation, obstacles encountered in daily practice, the institutional relevance of participatory approaches and the expected functions of the Social Innovation Officer.

The quantitative component includes a European online survey completed by 226 respondents from Italy, Greece and Romania, as well as from other EU countries, covering public servants, administrative staff and professionals working in sectors connected to public policy and service delivery. The survey combines closed and open-ended questions and gathers data on demographic characteristics, familiarity with social innovation, self-assessed competencies, preferred training formats and perceptions of organisational readiness. The integration of these

methods ensures both depth and breadth, allowing for the validation of qualitative insights through statistically relevant patterns and offering a nuanced understanding of the broader European context.

4. Key findings

4.1. Qualitative Insights from Focus Groups

The focus groups conducted in **Italy, Greece and Romania** reveal a strong convergence in the ways public officials conceptualise social innovation and perceive institutional barriers, while also highlighting contextual nuances shaped by administrative culture and organisational maturity.

4.1.1. Understanding of Social Innovation

Participants across the three countries describe social innovation as a collaborative, participatory and community-oriented process, emphasising that it represents more than the introduction of new tools or procedures, since it involves a redefinition of public value, a reconfiguration of relationships between institutions and citizens and an orientation toward measurable social impact. Social innovation is understood as a means to enhance institutional responsiveness, encourage co-creation and strengthen social cohesion, although it is not yet fully integrated into administrative routines.

4.1.2. Main barriers identified

The analysis highlights four major categories of obstacles:

- **Structural barriers**, characterised by **bureaucratic rigidity**, limited procedural flexibility and insufficient mechanisms for **piloting and experimentation**, which restrict the implementation of innovative practices.
- **Cultural barriers**, including **risk aversion**, a **compliance-driven organisational mindset** and limited openness to reflection and learning, which discourage initiative and reduce the willingness to try new approaches.
- **Leadership-related barriers**, linked to **political discontinuity**, inconsistent strategic direction and limited managerial support for innovation, which

undermine continuity and reduce institutional confidence in change processes.

- **Resource barriers**, such as high workload, understaffing and restricted access to **training, tools and methodological support**, which constrain the capacity to design and sustain innovation.

Across Italy, Greece and Romania, these barriers appear with varying intensity, yet all three countries report difficulty in ensuring **coordination across departments**, which remains one of the most persistent challenges for institutional innovation.

4.1.3. Emerging Profile of the Social Innovation Officer

Participants consistently describe the **Social Innovation Officer (SIO)** as a **transversal and integrative role** that operates across departments and supports the development, coordination and evaluation of socially innovative practices. The SIO is viewed as a **facilitator of collaboration**, a **connector between institutions and communities**, a **mediator in participatory processes** and a **strategic contributor** to policy design.

The role requires a combination of **analytical, strategic, relational, managerial** and **adaptive** competencies. Participants emphasise that the SIO should be capable of understanding community needs, coordinating stakeholder engagement, integrating diverse perspectives into public policies and supporting evidence-based decision-making through **social impact assessment**.

4.2. Quantitative survey results

The European online survey provides a broader validation of qualitative findings and confirms the relevance of the Social Innovation Officer profile within public administration systems.

4.2.1. Respondents' profile

Respondents from **Italy, Greece and Romania** form the core of the sample. Most are **highly educated professionals**, with a strong representation of **operational public servants** working in municipal contexts. The demographic profile shows:

- a predominance of **female respondents**,

- a concentration in the **37–56 age range**,
- a high proportion of individuals with **master's degrees**,
- extensive experience in roles related to public administration, project management, education, social services and community development.

4.2.2. Familiarity with Social Innovation and Perceptions

While many respondents are familiar with the concept of social innovation, practical application remains limited. They express strong agreement that social innovation is **important for improving public services, enhancing participation and strengthening institutional trust**, yet they report insufficient opportunities to apply these approaches within their organisations.

4.2.3. Top Skills Gaps Identified

The survey reveals consistent gaps across the three countries in the following areas:

- **Transformational leadership,**
- **Strategic planning and foresight,**
- **Critical and analytical thinking,**
- **Intersectoral collaboration,**
- **Citizen and stakeholder engagement,**
- **Digital competencies,**
- **Change management,**
- **Communication and empathy,**
- **Financial literacy and budgeting,**
- **Social impact assessment.**

These gaps directly inform the competency framework required for the **Social Innovation Officer** and underline the need for structured and comprehensive professional development.

4.2.4. Organizational climate for innovation

Respondents indicate that innovation is **acknowledged but not systematically encouraged**, with limited **recognition or incentive structures** for innovative behaviour. Leadership plays a decisive role in shaping innovation culture, yet many organisations in Italy, Greece and Romania continue to operate in environments

where **collaboration, experimentation** and **cross-departmental coordination** are difficult to institutionalise.

5. Implications for the Social Innovation Officer (SIO)

The findings from Italy, Greece and Romania highlight a clear and consistent need for a dedicated professional role capable of supporting, coordinating and sustaining social innovation within public administrations. The role of the **Social Innovation Officer (SIO)** emerges as a strategic response to the skill gaps, structural limitations and organisational challenges identified in the study, and its relevance is reinforced by both qualitative insights and quantitative evidence.

5.1 Core Functions and Positioning of the SIO

The SIO is understood as a **transversal and integrative function** that operates across departmental boundaries and bridges administrative, social and community perspectives. Participants describe the SIO as a role positioned at the intersection of **policy development, community engagement** and **institutional transformation**, with the capacity to facilitate dialogue between stakeholders, coordinate participatory processes and ensure that innovation efforts are aligned with institutional priorities.

The SIO is expected to contribute to the **diagnosis of community needs**, to the **co-design of solutions**, to the **integration of citizen perspectives into policy cycles** and to the **evaluation of social impact**, thereby enhancing the strategic orientation of public institutions. The role is also associated with strengthening **interdepartmental collaboration**, addressing one of the most persistent obstacles to innovation in Italy, Greece and Romania.

5.2 Competency Dimensions for the SIO Role

The competency framework emerging from the study reflects the multidimensional nature of the SIO role and includes several key domains:

- **Analytical competencies**, which refer to the ability to interpret data, formulate insights, evaluate social impact and support evidence-based decision-making.

- **Strategic competencies**, which involve understanding public governance systems, anticipating future challenges, designing innovative interventions and aligning innovation with long-term institutional objectives.
- **Relational and participatory competencies**, which encompass facilitation, communication, negotiation, mediation and the capacity to build trust among departments, citizens and stakeholders.
- **Managerial competencies**, which relate to project coordination, leadership, organisational learning, resource allocation and the ability to support change processes within public institutions.
- **Reflexive and adaptive competencies**, which include continuous learning, adaptability, self-evaluation and the ability to navigate complex and evolving institutional environments.

These competencies are essential for enabling the SIO to act as a **change agent**, capable of supporting both the cultural and structural transformation required for innovation.

5.3 Institutional Conditions Needed for Effective Implementation

The successful integration of the SIO role depends on organisational environments that are structurally and culturally prepared to support innovation. Respondents emphasise the importance of **formal recognition** of the SIO within the administrative hierarchy, ensuring a clear mandate and legitimate authority to coordinate innovation activities. Without this recognition, the role risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

Institutional support must also include **managerial commitment, access to resources, opportunities for professional development** and an organisational climate that values collaboration, learning and experimentation. Public administrations in Italy, Greece and Romania indicate that innovation efforts are often constrained by hierarchical structures, fragmented procedures and limited incentives, conditions that must be addressed to ensure that the SIO can function effectively.

The study therefore suggests that the introduction of the Social Innovation Officer should be accompanied by organisational reforms that encourage **cross-departmental cooperation**, enable **pilot initiatives**, promote **participatory practices** and acknowledge innovative contributions. In this sense, the SIO is not only a new professional role but also a mechanism for institutional redesign, supporting the transition toward more responsive, inclusive and future-oriented public governance.

6. Recommendations for the Social Innovation Officer (SIO) Curriculum

The development of a structured and practice-oriented curriculum for the **Social Innovation Officer (SIO)** is essential to address the competencies identified as deficient in Italy, Greece and Romania and to equip public administrations with the capacity to design, implement and sustain socially innovative initiatives. The recommendations emerging from the study emphasise the importance of a comprehensive learning framework that integrates analytical, strategic, relational, managerial and adaptive dimensions while remaining flexible enough to respond to diverse institutional contexts.

The curriculum should be organised around five core domains, each reflecting a specific set of capabilities required for the SIO role:

- **Analytical competencies**, which enable public officials to collect and interpret data, understand community needs through evidence, identify patterns and challenges and conduct **social impact assessment** to inform decision-making.
- **Strategic competencies**, which relate to the ability to understand governance systems, anticipate emerging social trends, design interventions that respond to complex problems and align innovation efforts with institutional visions and long-term priorities.
- **Relational and participatory competencies**, which are central to the SIO profile and include facilitation skills, stakeholder engagement, communication, negotiation and the capacity to coordinate collaborative processes that bring together citizens, civil society and institutional actors.
- **Managerial competencies**, which support the coordination of innovation processes, particularly through project management, leadership, resource

planning and organisational learning, all of which are essential for navigating administrative procedures and sustaining change.

- **Reflexive and adaptive competencies**, which allow the SIO to respond effectively to uncertainty, practice self-evaluation, cultivate resilience, learn from experience and adjust approaches as institutional and community needs evolve.
- These five domains reflect the multidimensional nature of the SIO role and provide the conceptual foundation for the structure of the curriculum.

The study reveals a shared preference across Italy, Greece and Romania for **training formats that are practical, participatory and directly connected to real administrative challenges**. Respondents consistently highlight that learning must be experiential and problem-focused in order to be meaningful and applicable.

The curriculum should therefore incorporate:

- **Hybrid learning formats**, combining online modules that offer flexibility with in-person sessions that allow for practical workshops, collaborative exercises and direct interaction with peers and facilitators.
- **Case studies and real-world examples**, ideally drawn from European public administrations, which illustrate successful social innovation initiatives and demonstrate how theoretical concepts can be operationalised in practice.
- **Simulations and scenario-based learning**, which enable participants to test decision-making processes, practice participatory tools, explore alternative solutions and reflect on the consequences of different approaches.
- **Peer-learning and communities of practice**, which create opportunities for exchange between professionals from Italy, Greece and Romania, facilitate knowledge transfer and build long-term networks of collaboration that extend beyond the duration of the training.
- **Mentorship and guided feedback**, which support individual learning pathways, strengthen professional identity and provide personalised

support for developing skills in communication, negotiation, facilitation and innovation management.

- **Applied projects**, ideally implemented within participants' own institutions, which allow learners to design, test and evaluate small-scale innovation initiatives and to apply the full range of competencies in a real administrative context.

The effectiveness of the SIO curriculum depends on the readiness of public administrations to integrate and support the role. This requires institutional environments that value innovation, provide access to learning opportunities and create supportive frameworks for collaboration and experimentation. The study highlights the importance of **formal recognition** of the SIO as part of the organisational structure, **managerial support** for innovation activities, **clear mandates** for cross-departmental coordination and **mechanisms for acknowledging innovative contributions**.

By ensuring these conditions, public administrations will be able not only to train Social Innovation Officers but also to create an enabling environment where their competencies can be fully utilised. The curriculum becomes, in this sense, a foundation for **institutional transformation**, reinforcing the strategic importance of social innovation and supporting the development of more inclusive, collaborative and responsive systems of governance.

7. Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

The Skills Gap Validation Study conducted within the INSPIRE PA project demonstrates the growing importance of **social innovation** as a strategic dimension of modern public administration and highlights the urgent need to strengthen the capacities of public institutions in **Italy, Greece and Romania** to engage with communities, respond to societal challenges and design policies that generate measurable social impact. The findings confirm that innovation in the public sector is not limited to the introduction of new tools or procedures but requires a **systemic and cultural transformation** supported by collaboration, participation and continuous learning.

Across the three countries, participants recognise that social innovation enhances the legitimacy and responsiveness of public institutions, yet they also report significant obstacles, including **bureaucratic rigidity, limited interdepartmental coordination, risk-averse cultures** and **insufficient managerial support**. These factors impede the development and sustainability of innovative practices and underline the need for new professional profiles capable of navigating complexity and fostering organisational change.

The role of the **Social Innovation Officer (SIO)** emerges from this context as a credible and necessary response to the challenges identified in the study. The SIO is defined as a **transversal, integrative and community-oriented role**, positioned at the intersection of governance, participation and strategic planning. Its relevance is supported by the consistent skill gaps revealed in the survey, which indicate a strong need for competencies in **leadership, critical thinking, strategic planning, citizen engagement, digital literacy** and **social impact assessment**.

The study also demonstrates that the successful implementation of the SIO depends not only on individual training but also on the presence of institutional environments that **value innovation, support collaboration, encourage experimentation** and **recognise innovative behaviour**. These findings highlight the importance of aligning the curriculum with broader organisational reforms that promote openness, learning and shared responsibility.

By providing evidence-based insights into skill gaps, organisational barriers and training needs, the study lays the foundation for a robust and context-sensitive curriculum that can support the professionalisation of social innovation within public administrations. The Social Innovation Officer represents both a **new professional identity** and a **mechanism for institutional transformation**, helping public institutions to transition toward more **inclusive, participatory** and **future-oriented models of governance**.

The conclusions of the study reinforce the strategic relevance of INSPIRE PA and support the continued development of training pathways, organisational tools and

cross-country collaboration mechanisms that strengthen the capacity of European public administrations to engage in effective and sustainable social innovation.

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