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YOUTH SOCIAL INNOVATION BROKERS
MOBIUS

MOBIUS EUROPEAN COUNTRY REPORT - BULGARIA



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1. Introduction

"Social innovation is innovation inspired by the desire to meet social needs that have been neglected by traditional forms of provision in private markets and often poorly served by services offered by government." The Youth Employment Initiative exclusively targets young people who are not in education, employment or training, including long-term unemployed young people or those who have not registered as jobseekers. Young people are one of the most important target groups of the employment policy, both because of their characteristics (first jobseekers have no work experience and work habits, some young people have specializations not sought by employers, or are unqualified and have low educational attainment; low motivation to work, including given the financial support they receive from their parents and relatives, etc.) and the fact that during the 2030 employment strategy they have to prepare for their most active years and, if they have not acquired education, experience and work habits, they will carry these problems as a feature of the next age cohort, where they will continue to worsen. This calls for targeted and intensive integrated action, described in an individual action plan, to engage young people in employment (including apprenticeships, traineeships or dual training), training and education to prevent or overcome their inactivity.

Promoting entrepreneurship, including by developing an entrepreneurial culture among young people, will be an approach to integrating them into the labor market. According to a Eurobarometer innovation report of March 2023. Bulgaria is emerging as a leader in the EU in terms of attitudes towards entrepreneurship and its realization among young people. Statistics show that Bulgaria has the highest share of engaged young people aged between 15 and 30 - 14% compared to the EU average of 9%." Over the last few years there has been a decline in youth unemployment in Bulgaria. Eurostat data show that in January 2023 it was 8.6%, a significant improvement on the 13.6% in January 2022. However, the problem of young people not in employment, education or training, education or training remains a challenge given the need for skilled labor in Bulgaria. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2020 the percentage of unemployed young people in Bulgaria will be among the highest in the EU - 18% compared to an average of 14% in Europe. In tourism, by 2030, 10% of the workforce or around 1.3 million workers will have acquired new skills and 6.5 million workers



(50% of the sector) will have access to career guidance services and special support.

2. Analysis and diagnosis of existing literature

In the second quarter of 2020, the number of 15-24 year olds in work fell sharply by 17% compared to a year earlier, leading to a rise in NEETs rates again - 18% in 2020, compared to a European average of 14%. In this context, the Employment Agency and municipalities are recruiting activators/mediators who focus on reaching and activating NEETs. The main objective of the initiative is to contribute to the successful integration of 25+ NEETs into the labor market by increasing knowledge on the implications of employment initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, building the capacity of stakeholders to conduct impact studies and improving the quality of labor market interventions. This is achieved through the establishment of an international research network that shares knowledge on good practices, evaluations of government and community initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, and stakeholder engagement. Particularly vulnerable groups, such as the younger Roma population (making up 50% of all NEETs in Bulgaria), are systematically under-targeted by programmes and initiatives.

There are numerous publications and studies in the field of social innovation. There is social policy and legislation in the field as well as projects related to social investment. One such is a study by the University of Veliko Tarnovo in 2021. This study presents in great detail the main characteristics of the concept of social innovation and provides a thorough historical overview. It also traces trends on the subject in European statistics such as the Eurobarometer, for example.

As a result of the above, the following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn. Social innovation generates social and societal change, while opening new opportunities for social inclusion of large groups of society. They will play a key role in promoting European policies for a green, digital and inclusive society. At the same time, a new attitude towards social innovation is needed to ensure progress, social cohesion and well-being, with adequate policies and strategies for social inclusion. Social innovation goes hand in hand with overall social progress, with the condition that all stakeholders are involved and benefit, and that added value is distributed



equitably and with respect for social rights. Social innovation will play an increasingly active role in the development of integrated social services and other public services aimed at improving impact and optimizing resources in the social sphere.

Through the developed methodology for identifying social innovations, good practices can be effectively identified to increase their added value through multiplication and dissemination in different contexts. The application of the methodology should take into account its limitations in terms of the scope and level of detail of the social innovation, as well as the setting of criteria to meet the research objectives. Nevertheless, the methodology is an effective tool for identifying good practices of social innovation.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that all social innovation initiatives have a common basis, namely they respond to and aim to address social needs and issues through innovative means. As well as the fact that differences in knowledge and technology explain more than 60% of income and growth differences between countries. .

3. Current State of Social Innovation for Youth

To measure EU countries' progress on innovation, each year a so-called European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) is used to guide countries towards specific areas of public life that need more research and innovation. According to it, Bulgaria is penultimate in terms of innovativeness among the EU countries and enters the group of "modest innovators", as it is below 50% of the EU average for 2020, which shows the need to promote innovation in our country, especially in the context of the NextGenerationEU tool and the national recovery and sustainability plan. NGOs are the natural conduit for the enforcement of social entrepreneurship and social innovation in Bulgaria, as this is one of the main ways to ensure their sustainability in fulfilling their missions and causes for improving the social environment. In their work they integrate innovative approaches to fundraising, engaging public attention and supporting causes. Over time, the response to these approaches has transformed them into social innovations that are being replicated by a growing number of organizations. The topic of 'social innovation' remains of particular



interest to several funding programmes (most notably ESF and Erasmus+) and to the organizations (mostly NGOs, but also businesses) that apply to these programmes.

There is a growing interest in social innovation in business. Unfortunately, this growing interest is coupled with continued skepticism of anything labeled 'social', which business people associate with 'not-for-profit' and often 'low quality'. On the other hand, the research confirmed that the concept of 'social innovation' is not well accepted and recognised within the general discourse on 'innovation'. For example, the State Agency for Research and Innovation does not recognise social innovation" as a topic of particular interest". Another example is that leading innovation fora and initiatives not only do not mention 'social innovation', but also do not recognise social innovation as an area of special interest.

The desk research and additional interviews with experts did not identify any specific organizations or institutions in Bulgaria that identify 'social innovation' as their main interest and area of activity or expertise, with the exception of project-based initiatives and websites and platforms. The survey found no evidence to conclude that 'social innovation' is a focus of interest for national and local public authorities, business communities, financial institutions, academia and research bodies. It is particularly striking that universities and research institutions largely ignore this topic.

The Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation 2021-2027 is also based on the implementation of an inclusive process - a "process of entrepreneurial discovery", in line with EU methodological recommendations and with the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. Among the priorities are - making Bulgaria an innovative, smart, green, digital and connected country through a new common policy for interaction between research, innovation and technology, as well as increasing international and cross-sectoral cooperation and intensive use of data for accelerated specialization in products and services with high technological and scientific intensity and significant economic impacts for sustainable competitiveness, technological transformation of the economy, increasing resource efficiency and digitalization.



4. Partner's own experiences

Promoting social entrepreneurship in higher education for a prosperous society is the goal of Project PROSPER. Higher Education: Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships.602415-EPP-SEIS: Social Entrepreneurship and Innovative Solutions is an initiative. Erasmus+ Building capacity in the area of youth the young social entrepreneurship promotion was the main goal of the SEIS project. The goal of the other project in this area, Schools Engage, is to develop, test, and validate a cutting-edge curriculum for active citizenship education in secondary schools, with the goal of encouraging civic engagement, shared values, and civic involvement. The SCHOOLS ENGAGE educational program was developed using the Service Learning (SL) methodology, which is widely acknowledged as one of the most successful pedagogies for promoting civic engagement and developing a sense of responsibility towards society. Challenges: During the SEIS project's implementation, we ran into the following issues: trouble recognizing the idea. Most people in society find it challenging to define social innovation precisely.

The project's primary target demographic, young people, often struggle to comprehend the value of participating in social innovation-related projects. It is only seen as an occasional one-time event and not as a business endeavor. That is to say, continuity and sustainability are not being considered. There isn't a current law that encourages social entrepreneurship. There are several NGOs-related projects, but while they carry out their operations, society does not show any anticipation of interest, and there is no active following spread of the results. There are no courses that focus on preparing young people for the workforce through social entrepreneurial activities. Subjects pertaining to certain activities are not of interest to universities. The Prosper and Schools engage projects ran across similar issues during deployment. The outcomes of the projects themselves allowed us to overcome the difficulties we faced throughout project preparation. Specifically. SCHOOLS ENGAGE aims to make a significant difference in the lives of teachers and students in secondary schools, which are its main target groups. They will have the freedom to experiment with cutting-edge SL teaching and learning strategies, which will enhance their professional experiences and teaching abilities. Students will experience a number of benefits from their involvement in SL assignments, including



the development of democratic values and civil-social competencies, which include a stronger sense of social responsibility, an increased interest in and awareness of social issues, the ability and willingness to effect positive change, and an increased sense of motivation for future community involvement. In terms of numbers, we anticipate that over 100 students will participate in SL experiences during the course of the project. SL teachers training program: a thorough course designed to teach instructors SL, comprising the following modules: Overview of SL, SL & 21st Century Skills, SL & Civic Engagement, SL Practices, and Additional SL Resources. The SCHOOLS ENGAGE teacher training is the foundation for this highly interactive online course offered by Schools Engage. The SL Resource Bank is a collection of useful materials, case studies, teaching and learning scenarios, and hands-on learning exercises. In order to give youth workers from Europe and Latin America the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to work with young people on this subject and to raise awareness of youth and social entrepreneurship, its benefits, and the opportunities it presents, SEIS will concentrate its efforts on building the capacity of these workers in this area. Additionally, the project will develop a cutting-edge platform for knowledge-sharing and capacity building: a mobile application for both young people interested in social entrepreneurship and experienced social entrepreneurs from each partner country; on the one hand, the application will be available on the web and include training materials and extra information about working with young people on social entrepreneurship. The app and platform will work together to create a space and an easy way for peers and mentors to communicate. This will promote the use of social entrepreneurship as a creative response to the problems that the target countries are currently facing by empowering people through networking.

In a longer-term and more comprehensive sense, this seeks to address problems with youth unemployment and the marginalization of social groups that encounter barriers to work integration to provide young people with the chance to learn about social entrepreneurship and gain relevant skills and knowledge, but also to observe successful cases, absorb best practices, and receive guidance from professionals in the field. PROSPER was created in response to the well-documented need for people of all educational backgrounds to be empowered and equipped to become social entrepreneurs and to have a purpose that is centered around generating social



benefit via entrepreneurship. Based on the above-mentioned concrete outcomes, PROSPER will create an inventive, transdisciplinary, and successful educational program for higher education. In the five pilot countries, the course will be tested by more than 50 students and teachers, and more than 25 service-learning projects will be created in partnership with more than 100 social enterprises and community actors; - the teachers' training toolkit will support the course's implementation and ensure its smooth and successful execution. Through the transnational training workshop, over 25 university professors will receive instruction on how to use this toolkit and apply for the course that fits into their curriculum. Throughout the project, over 100 educational resources will be generated, and students will have free access to them through cooperation, knowledge and experience sharing, and the online platform PROSPER social entrepreneurship.

5. Recommendations

One of the main obstacles to social innovation is the lack of financial resources. To stimulate youth initiatives, it is important to: Establish dedicated funds to finance youth-focused projects. Encourage collaboration between NGOs and businesses to provide resources and expertise. Increase government funding for programmes that target social inclusion and innovation.

Education plays an important role in preparing young people for an active role in society. Introduce curricula in schools and universities to teach young people how to develop and implement social projects. Create opportunities for internships in successful social enterprises, which will give real experience and knowledge. Connecting young entrepreneurs with experienced professionals who can provide guidance and support.

Develop digital spaces where young people can share ideas, resources and best practice. Stimulate collaboration between different organizations and groups of youth activists.

It is important to inform society at large about the importance of social innovation: this can be done by organizing information campaigns that highlight the successes and benefits of social innovation. Drawing attention to successful examples through



media coverage. Engaging with municipal authorities to promote and support local initiatives. Bulgaria can benefit from international experience in the field of social innovation: establishing partnerships with international NGOs to exchange knowledge and practices. Involvement in European or global initiatives that offer resources and training. By implementing these proposals, Bulgaria can significantly improve the conditions for the development and realization of social innovation among young people. This will not only lead to a better quality of life for them, but will also strengthen the overall social fabric of the country. In this respect, the main challenge related to measures to address the situation of NEETs in Bulgaria, their evaluation and monitoring, is that the NEETs group in particular remains relatively under-targeted in relevant policies. The NEETs category itself remains conceptually underutilized by the administrative authorities - a reality that may have contributed to the lack of a comprehensive national strategy specifically addressing the problems faced by NEETs. In conclusion, improving educational practices in Bulgaria requires a comprehensive approach that brings together innovations in education, support for teachers, active participation by the community and parents, and adequate social innovation policies.

6. Conclusion

Implementing recommendations to improve social innovation initiatives for youth in Bulgaria can have a significant impact on different aspects of society. Social innovations are new ideas that solve social problems and respond to the needs of communities, and in the context of youth, they can include projects focused on education, integration, health and active citizenship.

One of the main areas where social innovation can have an impact is education. By introducing innovative approaches and methodologies in education, young people will have access to better quality educational resources. For example: the possibility of online courses and self-learning platforms can help young people develop new skills. Programmes that connect young people with employers and offer internships or apprenticeships can increase their chances of a successful career.

Social innovation also plays an important role in the integration of vulnerable youth groups. These programmes can provide the support and resources needed to



participate fully in society. Initiatives that encourage young people to participate in local politics or volunteer activities can strengthen democratic processes and social cohesion.

Healthy lifestyles and mental health are critical aspects of young people's lives. Through social innovation: initiatives to promote physical activity and healthy eating among young people. Projects that offer counseling and therapeutic services can significantly improve young people's wellbeing.

Social innovation can also contribute to the economic sustainability of young people through: Entrepreneurship training programmes can inspire young people to start their own businesses. Initiatives that offer microfinance or grants for young entrepreneurs. In conclusion, implementing recommendations on improving social innovation initiatives for young people in Bulgaria can lead to significant progress in education, social inclusion, health and economic sustainability. These efforts will not only improve the quality of life of young people, but also strengthen the whole society through active participation and engagement.



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