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YOUTH SOCIAL INNOVATION BROKERS
MOBIUS

MOBIUS EUROPEAN COUNTRY REPORT - SPAIN



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1. Introduction

Social innovation is the search for creative and innovative solutions to solve social, environmental or economic problems affecting the community.

In the case of Spain, some of the main economic challenges facing society are the high unemployment rate, especially among young people, and the age of the population. According to Eurostat, 28.4% of young people between 15 and 24 years old were unemployed in Spain in 2023, ranking second in Europe in terms of youth unemployment. Moreover, according to the National Statistics Institute (INE), in 2030 25% of the Spanish population will be over 65 years of age, putting pressure on the health and pension system.

Social challenges in Spain include social inequality and the digital gap, which were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Cruz Roja sources, 27.1% of children in Spain live in households below the poverty line, and during the pandemic, more than a third of Spanish households had problems following the school year due to a lack of computer equipment or Internet connection. To these problems must be added gender violence, which in 2023 increased the number of women victims of this type of violence by 12%, according to data from the INE.

From an environmental point of view, Spain has yet to tackle climate change, as evidenced by extreme phenomena such as droughts, floods and heat waves that have intensified in recent years, as well as the energy transition towards the use of renewable sources, which is progressing at a slow pace.

Taking into account these challenges, promoting social innovation is fundamental in our country, especially for young people who are more affected by the current crisis, precarious conditions, unemployment and difficulties emancipating themselves, which also leads to mental health problems. Young people are aware of the existing problems, which is why it is important to take them into account as one of the main drivers of change and to facilitate their active and real participation in social innovation. Moreover, taking part in this type of initiative has benefits for young people, such as empowering them and developing leadership and entrepreneurial skills.

In Spain, the promotion of social innovation is advancing in small steps, mainly through initiatives at the municipal or regional level, although there are also NGOs and foundations that have their field of action throughout the country, such as [Ashoka Spain](#) or ["La Caixa" Foundation](#), which have initiatives designed for young people.



2. Analysis and diagnosis of existing literature

Social innovation is based on identifying complex challenges and identifying new responses to solve them, which makes it essential to break out of the frameworks in which we normally act and change the established logic. To do this, it is essential to use energy to communicate the opportunities offered by social innovation in order to raise awareness of its potential among the population, first creating small spaces for deliberation where the existing challenges are detected until reaching a group of people who share the same concerns. Innovation is linked to uncertainty and error, so creating these spaces for listening and exchange is also essential to reducing the insecurity that innovation generates and increasing hope for change.

Despite the fact that social innovation and change go hand in hand, in the society in which we live, there is still resistance to change, which is often a key factor in having little support from public institutions, politicians or other professional organisations. In social innovation, it is not possible to think of a pre-designed and closed intervention model, but rather an open process that is built with the contributions of the interested parties, which does not fit in well with bureaucratic operating logics. This is why giving institutions a co-design role can be a key factor for their inclusion, reducing the risk of operations and having more possibilities for funding to carry out social innovation projects. This co-design process is based on seeking solutions through collective intelligence, so no one can take ownership of the final result.

A key figure in the field of social innovation is the "*community broker*" or "*change agent*," people with transversal skills capable of creating connections between people from different fields who can enrich the project and translate the vision into action. Young people play a fundamental role in this position, as they are directly affected by current social challenges and are aware of the need to generate change in society.

Social innovation and youth are linked to promoting the employability of this sector of the population, which is not surprising considering the high rates of youth unemployment in Spain and the social inequality resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, authors such as Torres (2015) suggest that for young people to become promoters of social change, an interdisciplinary approach is needed in order to encourage social entrepreneurship among young people. To this end, they propose linking entrepreneurship and social innovation with creativity, as well as continuing research and studies on this topic for future improvement.

Although the Torres study reveals that young people in Spain feel empowered to become entrepreneurs, the lack of opportunities, funding and institutional support act as a brake. As a result, the level of social entrepreneurship in Spain is lower than in other European countries, ranking 16th out of 27 in terms of innovation.



When creating the enabling environment to foster innovation, it is important to consider the diversity among young people and not generalise their characteristics and needs. However, Vila-Viñas (2020), in his article on social innovation and effective participation of children and teenagers, highlights how young people are relegated to a passive role in society due to traditional conceptions of family and childhood. This view of childhood and youth as a stage of immaturity and dependence has been an obstacle to the active participation of young people in society. This perspective, rooted in Western history, continues to influence the way children are treated, limiting their potential and opportunities. Vila-Viñas therefore suggests the need for a paradigm shift in society that allows using the potential of social innovation to promote youth participation.

For this to be possible, it is necessary to invest in public policies that promote equal opportunities, strengthen support networks for families and young people, and encourage their active participation in society. Vila-Viñas proposes making changes in public policies that recognise young people as agents of innovation and promote more collective and less commercialised approaches; democratising institutions to encourage openness, horizontality and participation in spaces such as the family and school.

In education, the use of educational methodologies focused on developing innovation and entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted. These include project-based learning, where a challenge question is posed based on a real situation and must be solved by teams in a collaborative and autonomous manner, developing skills such as creativity, cooperation and critical thinking; gamification, which uses elements of games to make learning more attractive and motivating, encouraging collaboration and problem solving; design thinking, which allows learning how to design innovative solutions to problems, following a creative process that involves empathy, ideation and prototyping; and emotional education, which fosters the development of young people's socio-emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness and emotion management, so that they can be agents of change in their communities. Furthermore, digitalisation is fundamental in this process, understood from the point of view of using digital tools to promote collaborative processes, without the digital replacing the face-to-face. So having a good command of information and communication technologies (ICT) is of great importance in the social innovation process.

Finally, the presence of social agents as mentors and facilitators is essential throughout this process, figures capable of supporting and guiding young entrepreneurs on their path towards innovation.

One point that has yet to be developed is the evaluation of the results of social innovation projects. So far, there is no clear methodology on how to do it, and it is often assumed that goodwill is enough. However, it is essential to evaluate the impact of these processes in order to learn from them and consolidate social



innovation as a real tool for change. For this, it is also essential to have strong funding support, as the current lines are short term, which is also a burden for the development of this sector.

3. Current situation of social innovation for young people.

Having superficially analysed the existing literature on social innovation with young people and collected the most important data, the next step is to analyse the current situation in Spain.

In order to do so, the existing framework of action will be analysed, especially on the basis of programs or reference frameworks on innovation and social action, in order to then discuss examples of existing good practices at different levels (national, regional and local or municipal).

This is especially important in the case of Spain, which has a territorial organisation where competences are distributed among the governments of the different levels and therefore different realities and projects can be found in each of them.

With this analysis it will be possible to review some of the most interesting projects and strategies in terms of social innovation and youth in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses and then take them as a reference for the MOBIUS project.

According to the *Regional Innovation Scoreboard (RIS)*, which is one of the main instruments used by the European Commission to evaluate the performance of European regions in terms of innovation, Spain has high innovative potential, as, in 2021, Spain was in 16th place out of 27, with a higher rate of growth in innovation than the European Union since 2014. However, although these results appear promising, Spain is in the ranking of countries with a moderate level of innovation and its peers have experienced higher growth in recent years, so it is necessary to evaluate the resources invested in innovation and how to improve the results obtained.

At the national level, there is no specific public body working on social innovation, although there are different programs or strategies that promote social innovation. This is especially remarkable in the case of some employment programs that are based on social innovation and intervention to improve the employability of the population; most of the European programs that are aimed at social action or transformation, and some other programs with a framework of reference on more social issues.



Among the highlights of social innovation programs at the national sphere is the [Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan \(PRTR\)](#), designed by the Spanish government and financed by Next Generation EU funds to respond to the economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It takes into account measures for the modernization and reinforcement of social services, promoting innovation and people-centered care.

Another EU-funded national program is the [Program for Employment and Social Innovation](#), which promotes growth and job creation as well as labor mobility and social progress, and the [Spanish Active Employment Support Strategy \(2021-2024\)](#), which focuses on strengthening programs targeting the long-term unemployed and the over-50s, as well as young people without professional qualifications. This strategy draws guidelines to follow in order to work with long-term unemployed people and youth in order to improve their employability capacities and also some personal skills, to better their future perspectives but also to include a social vision on it.

The Ministry of Social Rights has a funding line for social intervention. However, these subsidies are on an annual basis, which makes it difficult to carry out significant initiatives. As part of the [European Social Fund \(ESF\)](#), programs to promote social innovation are carried out at the national or regional level. Although in Spain there is no specific section dedicated to social innovation, projects have been carried out in this field as part of the ESF 2014-2020 programs, such as the European Innovation Network, coordinated by ActionAid.

At the regional level, there are some regions in Spain that have more experience in the implementation of innovation initiatives that are a result of public-private sector collaboration and community participation, such as Navarra, which has a Social Reality Observatory that depends on the Department of Social Rights, or the Basque Country, a major promoter of the social economy and the third sector, which has a specific department for social innovation in the Basque Government. This type of project is important to boost regional social innovation because it takes into account the specific reality of the region where it is implemented, so the chances of success are higher. However, this generates a difference in the level of progress in innovation from one region to another. For example, regions such as the Canary Islands have lower investment in innovation and development, both by public and private initiatives.

At the municipal level, some large city governments, such as Madrid or Barcelona, have developed competencies to promote innovation initiatives, bring together change agents and fund projects, many of which are related to the [European Urban Innovative Actions Initiative](#). In Madrid, the local city council created a Social Innovation Office and manages 3 incubators for social, technological and digital projects. In Barcelona, there is a Directorate General for Social Innovation, and a Social Innovation Plan has been adopted that aims to foster citizen participation, digital transformation and provide access to municipal services.



Although there is no public organism in Spain that acts as a leader in supporting innovation in the social sphere, there are some private entities and, overall, social entities that are the main promoters of it.

In the private area highlight the [COTEC Foundation](#), a private foundation with more than 25 years of experience that provides a space for knowledge exchange between companies, public administration and experts; or the "La Caixa" Foundation, which develops social inclusion projects with an innovative approach, such as the EPYCO program, which promotes training for employment in prisons. Another entity that stands out in the national territory is Ashoka, a global network of social entrepreneurs founded in the United States that seeks to identify, support and connect innovative people who are creating sustainable solutions to the challenges of today's world.

Although the aforementioned programs take youth into account in an indirect way by mainly promoting labour market insertion, in Spain, Ashoka plays a fundamental role in the promotion of social entrepreneurship, as it also has specific programs for young people, supporting young entrepreneurs with transformative ideas and promoting an ecosystem of social innovation. On the one hand, the [Young Changemakers](#) program seeks young people under the age of 23 who are driving significant social change in their communities, with the capacity to develop innovative solutions to social problems and capable of inspiring and mobilising others, to create a network of young "changemakers."

On the other hand, Ashoka has the [Transformative Education](#) Program, a community of people who seek a transformation in the educational world, with the aim of awakening the potential of children and young people as future agents of social change. As part of this program, they have created the free online course Introduction to Transformative Education and the Ashoka Learning Ecosystem (ALE) platform, the first online educational platform in Spanish designed to facilitate collaborative and accessible learning in the field of innovation and social entrepreneurship.

At the educational level, the [ESADE Institute for Social Innovation](#) also stands out. With a focus more closely linked to the business world, it offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs, courses and workshops for young people, specialising in training future leaders in social innovation, social entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility.

At the regional and local level, there are also different initiatives aimed at promoting innovative youth in the social sphere. In Andalusia, the [Andalusian Youth Awards](#) stand out, which recognise projects in different categories for having a positive impact on young people. Locally, we can highlight in Valencia the NGO [JovesSólides](#), whose main objective is to promote the social commitment and active participation of young people in their communities, through projects and initiatives at the local and international level. Also in Valencia, the [Culturama Awards for Social Innovation in](#)



[Youth](#) are also a benchmark that aim to recognise innovative projects in the field of youth that promote community development through art and culture.

After analysing the situation in Spain, it is possible to observe the differences in social innovation throughout the Spanish territory. Firstly, the lack of a state body to promote innovation in social issues stands out. It also highlights the differences in regional policies in the promotion of social innovation and how private companies and NGOs play a fundamental role in this field. Therefore, it would be necessary to achieve state policies that regulate this situation, giving the opportunity to all territories to promote social innovation and take advantage of the benefits it has for the community.

4. Backslash's experience

Backslash's main expertise lies in implementing youth cooperation projects with the aim of empowering young people and promoting social inclusion. These objectives are strongly aligned with social innovation with young people, so Backslash has experience in developing social innovation projects. Among the most "innovative" ones, we can highlight the European projects FUSION and Creative Invisibles.

The European project [FUSION](#) aims to use festivals as a platform for social innovation. In this way, the goal of the FUSION project is to serve as a springboard for young people in organisations to use festivals to implement their own ideas, products and technologies for the benefit of society.

Nowadays, festivals are not only spaces for music and party, but also host workshops, exhibitions, talks and awareness-raising campaigns, so that fun is not incompatible with learning and outreach. For this reason, the FUSION project wanted to take advantage of this new reality to ensure that, beyond the event itself, festivals become incubators of social innovation, allowing young people to develop their potential to be the driving force for change in social issues.

To make this possible, the challenges of merging social innovation with festivals were analysed by organising focus groups with experts in festivals and social causes. From these conversations, a series of materials were generated to unlock the innovative potential of young people and organisations, including the following:

- The FUSION guide, with examples of good practice in social innovation at festivals, provides a guiding path to follow.
- A set of educational tools for festivals, young people and organisations to jointly implement their social projects,
- FUSION alliances, which will connect festivals, youth organisations and young people to start their journey in social innovation together.



A specific example of a festival that hosts social innovation in Spain is Cruïlla, in Barcelona. This festival, which attracts around 50,000 people over three days, hosts, in addition to musical events, spaces such as the Cruïlla Talks, to deal with current affairs, society and politics in the form of conferences and interviews, or information stands where NGOs such as Save the Children and Oxfam Intermon organise educational activities to raise awareness of their work, making this event a multidisciplinary experience. Moreover, the social impact of this festival is not limited to the event itself, as Cruïlla organises cultural and social activities in and around Barcelona throughout the year.

Another social innovation initiative in which Backslash has participated as a partner is the European project [Creative Invisibles](#). The aim of this project is to introduce new models of entrepreneurship training in the creative sector through actions carried out in the field of street culture. This form of social innovation aims to combat the high rates of youth unemployment in Europe, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus mobilise young people and "NEETS" ('not in employment, education or training') considered "invisible" in society.

The Creative Invisibles project is aimed, on the one hand, at professionals in the creative sector who are provided with new skills and tools within the framework of non-formal education and the development of entrepreneurial projects in the street culture sector. On the other hand, it is aimed at young "NEETS", so that they can use the street space to develop their creative projects, initiatives and businesses.

Using street culture as a source of innovation stems from its exponential growth in recent years. From street art to food trucks, pop-up markets, fashion and sport, street culture is any commercial activity that takes place outside the "dedicated and institutional zones" and has the creative power to shape lifestyles, fashions and boost the economy.

To make the most of this, as part of the project, a series of resources for both youth and entrepreneurship professionals and young people have been created to provide guidance for entrepreneurship in the street environment. These include a good practice guide to identify "invisibles" and encourage their participation in cultural and creative actions at the European level, a methodological guide for the creation of creative partnerships between young people and institutions with the aim of creating a cultural network to develop their projects and educational resources and proposals for activities based on "street culture" in the form of interactive multimedia content. All these resources for both young people and creative agents are collected in a [mobile app](#), available for both Android and iOS.

5. Recommendations

Taking into account the existing panorama in Spain in the field of social innovation, it is necessary to carry out measures to improve initiatives aimed at young people. For



this movement to grow, it is essential to create a collaborative network, both at the regional and national level, that allows young people to share ideas, concerns, tools and resources, connecting young entrepreneurs with partner companies and public entities to create stronger innovation ecosystems. Digital platforms can be a good option to create a social innovation community.

In addition, it is important to give young people an active role, involving them from the very beginning of the projects and using participatory methodologies that guarantee a solution to the problems posed.

The environment is essential to the development of social innovation projects. For this reason, the figure of the mentor is a key element in enabling young people to develop their full potential in the field of social innovation. Also, having a physical space that allows young people to work on their projects, such as coworking spaces, incubators or social accelerators can significantly enhance their chances of success in launching their own projects.

For all this to be possible, it is essential to have public policies that encourage youth social innovation, for example, through tax exemptions, simplification of procedures and access to public funds. These policies should also be implemented from the earliest levels of the education system, integrating social innovation into educational curricula, encouraging critical thinking, creativity and social commitment in students. To this end, it is essential to invest in continuous teacher training in innovative methodologies and social entrepreneurship so that they can accompany their students in their projects, as well as foster collaboration between educational centres and social enterprises, with the possibility of offering professional internships and work-based learning opportunities.

Finally, in order to achieve significant progress in social innovation, it is necessary to evaluate the projects that are carried out. For this is essential to develop indicators and methodologies that allow the impact of these projects to be measured and their results to be communicated effectively.

6. Conclusion

In Spain, there are several projects in the field of social innovation that seek to respond to the new needs of society, and are mainly promoted by non-profit organisations, both public and private.

On the national scene, Spain does not have public policies that promote social innovation in general, or focused on young people in particular, so there is a need for an entity that deals with the promotion and support of social innovation, created by a network of experts in the field. Furthermore, there is an inequality in the level of innovation in Spain: some autonomous regions such as the Basque Country or



municipalities such as Madrid or Barcelona, are active in social innovation, while other regions lag behind.

Bureaucracy and administrative obstacles play an important role in this area, as social innovation projects require open design and flexible work processes for which the administration is not yet prepared. The funding received is usually short-term, for one year and with very strict rules, which does not help the sustainability of the projects. Moreover, in Spain there is not enough public funding from the State: many of the social innovation projects in Spain are financed by European funds, such as the European Social Fund, or by private entities like "La Caixa" Foundation.

Although the right environment does not yet exist to foster innovation, there is great potential for social innovation in Spain, and governments have a fundamental role to play in this regard. Therefore, in order to promote social innovation among young people in Spain, it is necessary to invest in public policies that encourage innovation and promote it in the educational sphere, training young people from an early age in social entrepreneurship, and also providing teachers with the tools needed.

It is also essential to create an environment conducive to the development of social innovation, giving young people an active role, encouraging the creation of collaborative networks, with experts acting as guides and creating physical spaces as incubators that provide the right conditions for their projects to grow.



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