

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



# The role of social innovation in addressing contemporary societal challenges: A cross-country analysis in the European context

Jin young Hwang \*

*University of Edinburgh MA Social Policy and Economics, United Kingdom.*

International Journal of Frontline Research and Reviews, 2024, 02(02), 080-091

Publication history: Received on 17 July 2024; revised on 26 August 2024; accepted on 29 August 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56355/ijfr.2024.2.2.0020>

## Abstract

This qualitative, comparative case study explores the role of social innovation in addressing contemporary societal challenges across European contexts. Through multi-method data collection, it examines 8 organizational cases of social innovation stratified by country (Germany and the UK) and thematic area (sustainability, migration, inequality). Approximately 65 semi-structured interviews, 6 focus group discussions, extensive participant observation and document analysis facilitate investigation of spaces, actors and impacts. Cases range from community energy cooperatives to makerspaces for migrant youth. Cross-case analysis identifies patterns in effective approaches. Key findings show hybrid funding streams enable greater experimentation than grant-dependent models, while participatory multi-stakeholder governance increases adaptation and resources leveraged through networks. Integrated initiatives addressing intersecting issues of displacement, exclusion and environmental damage reflect promising ecosystem thinking, although policy misalignments often hamper such approaches. Digital interfaces appear crucial for accelerating participation, however extremes of tech-centrism or analog elitism proved suboptimal, with blended virtual and embodied community spaces optimal. The research advances contextualized understanding of the potentials and constraints for social innovation to seed alternative systems transforming European societies amid complex, urgent sustainability crises. It concludes with tailored recommendations for supporting and scaling civil society experimentation through coordinated policy reforms.

**Keywords:** Social Innovation; Ecosystem Governance; Core Societal Challenges; Environmental Sustainability; Analog Elitism; Tech-Centrism

## 1 Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the United Nations' introduction of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (Anheier et al., 2019), growing concerns have emerged regarding global development challenges. Issues such as poverty, inequality, political instability, worsening security conditions, and escalating environmental threats have ascended to the forefront of the international agenda. Many of these complex challenges are categorized as "wicked" problems, signifying their intricate and interconnected nature. Addressing such problems necessitates a fusion of diverse knowledge and expertise, collaboration among multiple stakeholders, and an openness to innovative ideas and approaches. It is within this dynamic context that social innovation has gained recognition and flourished in recent years.

The concept of social innovation has garnered increasing attention in both public discourse and academia, particularly within the social sciences. Its definition encompasses a variety of methodological meanings and applications across different fields and disciplines, making it a pervasive term that defies strict boundaries. Consequently, there exists a rich body of literature exploring definitions, processes, and key actors associated with social innovation. One definition characterizes it as "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that

\* Corresponding author: Jin young Hwang

are predominantly developed and diffused via organizations whose primary purposes are social" (Anheier et al., 2019). Another perspective views it as a process aimed at satisfying alienated human needs through the transformation of social relations, thereby enhancing governance systems and establishing new organizational structures (Anheier et al., 2019). Social innovation is also described as "new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations," emphasizing innovations that not only benefit society but also strengthen its capacity to act (Anheier et al., 2019)

Social innovation refers to new strategies, concepts, ideas, and organizations that aim to meet social needs in better ways than existing solutions, improving society's capacity to act by transforming social practices and structures (Afonasova et al., 2019). The concept has gained prominence in Europe and globally over the past decade as an approach to addressing complex, contemporary societal problems not adequately dealt with by current institutions, policies, or markets alone (Afonasova et al., 2019).

Issues like climate change, rising migration flows, youth unemployment, food insecurity, and growing inequality are interconnected, multidimensional societal challenges demanding integrated responses that spur systemic change while elevating excluded voices (Afonasova et al., 2019). Social innovation holds potential to catalyze such alternative economic, social, and political configurations improving inclusion, empowerment, and environmental sustainability through combinations of top-down and bottom-up, market and non-market processes (Afonasova et al., 2019).

Understanding of social innovation remains fairly nascent and fragmented however, with minimal comparative research on how it emerges and functions across European country contexts to drive social change (Afonasova et al., 2019). Analyzing the role of social innovation initiatives, spaces, and policies addressing varied societal challenges across European nations can strengthen conceptualizations and models while informing targeted governance to scale innovative solutions.

### **1.1 Aims and Objectives**

This study aims to investigate and compare how social innovation unfolds to tackle key contemporary societal problems manifesting divergently across European national contexts. It focuses on analyzing spaces, actors, activities, barriers, and impacts related to social innovation addressing select, urgent societal challenges in Germany and the United Kingdom.

The specific objectives are

- To examine and conceptualize understandings of core societal challenges from political, scholarly, and grassroots perspectives within each country
- To map key spaces and policy ecosystems enabling and constraining social innovation responding to designated societal challenges in each context
- To explore dominant and marginalized actors and networks driving social innovation around chosen issues in each country
- To assess implemented social innovations addressing specified challenges and determine variation in strategies, processes, and impacts
- To formulate recommendations on public policies and collective actions to facilitate scaling of social innovation addressing complex societal problems in Germany, the UK, the EU, and broader international contexts.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

Europe faces a number of complex, interconnected social, economic and political challenges—from immigration to inequality to sustainability—that demand urgent yet innovative policy and practical interventions (Anheier et al., 2019). Bureaucratic inertia, inadequate coordination across government departments, and siloed issue expertise often inhibit development of integrated solutions attuned to contemporary societal needs and future uncertainties (Anheier et al., 2019). Civil society actors have initiated many experimental, collaborative initiatives through social innovation labs, hubs, hackathons, and incubator programs targeted to specific unmet needs (Anheier et al., 2019). Yet conceptual learning and policy levers remain underdeveloped for scaling creative grassroots solutions emerging from self-organized, networked spaces lacking traditional institutional resources and capacity (Anheier et al., 2019). This research addresses gaps in understanding how spaces, actors, and activities driving social innovation to tackle complex societal challenges in European countries can be further catalyzed through supportive ecosystem governance, addressing debates on the role of social innovation in driving structural change and social progress.

### 1.3 Rationale

This study matters for several reasons. First, mapping key societal challenges along with barriers and enablers for social innovation to address them constructively informs both strategic priority setting and governance reforms by state and non-state actors (Avelino et al., 2019). Second, comparative analysis allows identifying transferrable lessons on structures, policies, and leadership strategies that best facilitate experimental solutions with transformative change potential (Avelino et al., 2019). In addition, examining variegated change-maker actors, spaces, and activities driving social innovation strengthens conceptualizations moving beyond limited focus on individual social entrepreneurs or enterprises (Avelino et al., 2019). Finally, formulating tailored recommendations on scaling social innovation by sectoral policy fields and across municipal, national, and EU institutions can accelerate diffusion of models tackling complex challenges in a rapidly evolving Europe (Avelino et al., 2019).

### 1.4 Hypotheses

This study will test four central hypotheses:

- The UK case will demonstrate more top-down policy prioritization of core societal challenges but slower, less coordinated social innovation initiatives compared to Germany's decentralized yet networked approach.
- Germany will indicate higher diversity of independent civil society actors driving social innovation initiatives compared to the UK.
- Immigration and integration is perceived and prioritized as a more central, politicized societal challenge across cases versus youth unemployment or sustainability.
- Successfully scaled social innovations in both countries predominantly integrate digitally-enabled components in strategies and design.

The hypotheses draw on contextual understanding of the two countries' policy landscapes, voluntary sector traditions, and contemporary debates. They will be examined through collection and analysis of interview, focus group, survey and observational data assessing social innovation processes, spaces, impacts, barriers, and needs around key challenges.

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## 2 Literature review

This chapter reviews scholarship on social innovation as an evolving concept and practice for addressing complex societal problems. It is structured into three main sections. The first section examines definitions, theories and frameworks on social innovation to situate the study amidst current academic discourse and debates. The next section synthesizes empirical research on spaces, actors, processes and impacts of social innovation initiatives in Europe. The final section highlights gaps in understanding and areas for further exploration that this dissertation aims to address through its research questions around social innovation's role in tackling pressing societal challenges facing European societies.

### 2.1 Conceptualizing Social Innovation

Multiple disciplines have taken growing interest in social innovation as a phenomenon and process with seemingly rising significance (Avelino et al., 2019). Yet analysis remains fragmented across fields, yielding decentered discourse lacking dominant paradigms. Conceptually, foundations stem from three main areas. Innovation studies expanded focus from science, technology and economic competitiveness to social dimensions of public value and purpose (Bertello et al., 2022). Social economy scholarship documented the emergence of new models economic organization oriented to unmet social needs (Bertello et al., 2022). Additionally, some sociological theories focused on social change dynamics pointed to grassroots experimentation and new institutions addressing contemporary problems as social innovation (Bertello et al., 2022).

Most definitions now share a common emphasis on novel solutions to social issues that transform social relationships and systems (Aksoy et al., 2019). The most cited framework comes from Aksoy et al., (2019) who synthesize social innovation as "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed by organizations whose primary purposes are social." This interpretation usefully combines notion of social purpose-driven initiatives with elements of change and novelty in methods and results (Aksoy et al., 2019).

Reviewing theoretical standpoints, approaches largely concentrate into two camps. The first sees social innovation as corrective, improving societal functioning through more effective problem solving often diffusing through mimicry (Aksoy et al., 2019). Alternatively, transformative perspectives frame social innovation as seeding alternative future

systems that fundamentally reshape economic, social or political relations towards greater inclusion, participation and sustainability (Bayuo et al., 2020). This study aligns more closely with the latter camp in assessing social innovation's change potential across European societies.

## **2.2 Empirical Insights on Social Innovation in Europe**

Extant European research provides useful contextual insights on spaces, actors, processes and impacts of social innovation initiatives documented across various countries and issue areas. Regarding spaces, scholarship identifies variety of enabling niches and experimental zones supporting social innovations from the grassroots including makerspaces, social centers, community hubs, hackathons, incubators and FabLabs (Bayuo et al., 2020). Comparative spatial analysis remains limited. Proximities, both digital and physical, are shown as important though for diffusing ideas and linking actors (Bayuo et al., 2020). More research is needed examining how spaces facilitate co-design and partnerships boosting social innovation successes.

In terms of actors, scholarship evolved from spotlighting heroic, individual social entrepreneurs towards analyzing collaborative dynamics and networks across sectors (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). States play mixed roles- both directing funding flows and priorities while sometimes inhibiting grassroots initiatives through bureaucracy or control (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). Recent studies highlight young people pioneering alternative economic and organizational models; more comparative European analysis could document marginal voices advancing radical social innovations (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022).

Regarding processes and design factors enabling social innovations, findings point to openness, user-centricity, experimentation, and multi-disciplinarily as common features (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). Storytelling, visual media, gaming and experiential processes support viral diffusion of compelling social innovation narratives and impacts, though most examples involve digital tactics versus physical spaces and artifacts (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). Questions persist around replicating and scaling radically transformative initiatives vs moderately mainstream models.

Finally, numerous methods and frameworks aim to assess social impact, including SIAtools, Social Return on Investment (SROI), and Middlesex University's approach (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). Comparative empirical analysis evaluating economic viability, societal change contribution and environmental sustainability of social innovations across countries remains rare but instructive for translating high potential initiatives across contexts (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). This project aims to help address that gap through its mixed-methods, comparative case study approach.

## **2.3 Contemporary Societal Challenges**

Persistent societal issues including climate breakdown, rising xenophobia, economic precarity, and youth marginalization continue to demand urgent policy and grassroots interventions. Yet dominant European institutions have proven inadequate in facilitating just, sustainable transitions. This complex, interlinked set of contemporary challenges constitutes both spaces of conflict and zones holding potential for alternative futures driven by social innovation (Carayannis, & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022).

## **2.4 Climate Change and Sustainability**

Scholars widely frames the climate emergency as an epochal societal challenge necessitating deep economic and social innovations transforming energy systems, transportation norms, supply chains and consumption patterns towards sustainability (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020). Technical transitions remain insufficient without disrupting carbon-centric political economies and cultural behaviors. Diverse sustainability-focused social innovations demonstrate early attempts at seeding alternative systems. Eco-village experiments in Northern Europe model localized circular economies, cohousing arrangements and organic agriculture coops reinventing communal lifestyles beyond carbon intensity (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020). The transition towns movement links together community-led initiatives on renewable microgrids, repair cafes for circular goods flows and participatory sustainable urban planning in cities across Europe (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020). Mobility hubs likewise facilitate shared eco-transportation options reshaping urban travel behavior (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020). These social innovations privileging sufficiency, localization and grassroots self-governance contain kernels of system change towards ecological regeneration demanding institutional shifts unlocking resources and removing structural barriers (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020).

#### *2.4.1 Rising Xenophobia and Anti-Immigration Movements*

Parallel to sustainability reckonings, Europe faces societal crises around integration, identity and inclusion amidst populist nationalisms. Anti-immigration, Islamophobic, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic movements instrumentalize xenophobia for political projects attacking the pluralistic European project (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020). Diverse forms of everyday racism and systemic discrimination manifest widening societal fissures demanding reconciliation. In response, social innovations building intercultural solidarity and inclusive futures push back against fracturing anxieties. Initiatives like community sponsorships for refugee resettlement foster belonging across difference through interpersonal bonds nurturing dignity (Domanski et al., 2020). Participatory theater productions bringing together marginalized youth counter dehumanizing stereotypes through artistic storytelling and shared staging (Nicholls, 2019). Urban architecture and street art celebrating diversity raise minority representation in public spaces combating exclusionary landscapes (Domanski et al., 2020). These social innovations cultivate intergroup contact and collective capacities for equality amidst societal complexities.

#### *2.4.2 Economic Precarity and Youth Marginalization*

The global financial crisis and ensuing Eurozone austerity regimes heightened economic precarity and inequality across European societies, with devastating impacts on youth futures in southern countries like Spain and Italy (Domanski et al., 2020). With bleak employment prospects, university graduates face increasing spells in involuntary temporary, informal and unpaid jobs lacking living wages, stability or social protections. Young people suffer disproportionate hardships from contracting welfare states as families struggle with debilitating debts. Social innovations building alternative solidarity economies provide survival lifelines in scarcity climates while potentially seeding new systems. The rapid expansion of FabLabs and other makerspaces across southern Europe enables youth digital manufacturing of marketable goods, tools for the social and solidarity economy, and peer skill sharing in the absence of traditional jobs (Domanski et al., 2020). Timebanks and food cooperatives likewise facilitate non-monetary community exchange meeting basic needs like sustenance and healthcare using non-capitalist logics during market failures (Domanski et al., 2020). Such creative grassroots experiments driven by those most marginal illuminate possibilities for inclusive economies rebuilt from the bottom up through social innovation.

Together these complex challenges demand urgent social innovations. Key scholars argue such initiatives require integrated approaches transforming systems towards shared prosperity, participation and sustainability through novel combinations of market mechanisms, redistributive policies and reciprocal exchanges rooted in marginalized communities (Domanski et al., 2020). This dissertation examines pioneering examples of such transformative social innovations across European societies.

### **2.5 Social Innovation and Addressing Contemporary Societal Problems**

Scholars highlight a range of social innovations emerging in response to pressing issues like climate breakdown, xenophobia, inequality and youth marginalization. These grassroots experiments attempt to seed alternative futures through innovative combinations of market mechanisms, cooperative platforms and cultural shifts transforming systems towards sustainability and social justice.

### **2.6 Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability**

Scholars document diverse sustainability-oriented social innovations pioneered by civil society actors aiming to reboot local economies, energy systems and social relations around ecological principles. Eco-villages represent shared living experiments building participatory governance and solidarity economics to enable low-carbon lifestyles (Foroudi et al., 2021). They model practices like organic farming, peer-to-peer energy microgrids, collaborative housing, and community-based social care. Transition town initiatives similarly strive for environmental integrity and local resilience through community-led projects around circular economic exchanges, skill sharing, food sovereignty and renewable energy cooperatives (Foroudi et al., 2021). Sustainable mobility experiments promote shared transport options and pedestrianized urban design overturning car-centric planning. Platform cooperatives likewise leverage digital technology for low-carbon asset sharing rather than carbon-intensive hyper consumption encoded in dominant extractive platforms (Foroudi et al., 2021). These social innovations advance sustainability through combinations of mutualism, communalism, and localization principles prioritizing sufficiency, regeneration and grassroots self-governance over profits and perpetual growth logics.

### **2.7 Tackling Xenophobia and Supporting Migrants**

In response to resurgent xenophobia and racist populism across Europe, scholars point to social innovations fostering intercultural exchange, solidarity and inclusive futures. Community sponsorship programs for refugee resettlement link

newcomers to local supports and friendship networks cultivating belonging against anti-immigration hostilities (Gasparin et al., 2021). Crowdfunding platforms enable broad participation in financing protection, housing and livelihoods for precarious migrants otherwise denied under restrictive policies (Gasparin et al., 2021). Social centers offer gathering spaces and participatory programming amplifying migrant voices in public discourse while providing access to advocacy, language classes or arts (Gasparin et al., 2021). Public museums and Storytelling-theater engaging both migrants and host communities through dialogue, curation and creative collaborations generate empathy highlighting shared humanity across difference (Gasparin et al., 2021). These social innovations drive culture shifts celebrating diversity against xenophobic imaginaries.

## **2.8 Tackling Inequality and Economic Precarity**

Amidst widening inequality gaps, scholars highlight social innovations counteracting austerity regimes through solidarity economies and grassroots services protecting vulnerable community residents. The proliferation of fab labs, makerspaces and digital manufacturing microenterprises enable income generation for unemployed youth through peer production of marketable goods using open source designs, trouncing lack of opportunities in scarcity climates (Hewitt et al., 2019). Alternative food networks likewise facilitate solidarity exchanges as community gardening and cooperative distribution overcome hunger and nutritional deficits (Hewitt et al., 2019). Non-market timebanks allow participants reciprocal access to basic needs like healthcare, housing, carework and legal assistance by contributing time and skills alongside others rather than traditional payment (Foroudi et al., 2021). These social innovations plant participatory platforms parallel to contracting public services and exclusionary labour markets using non-capitalist logics to provision basic necessities.

Cutting across these issue areas, transformers argue social innovation requires moving beyond isolated initiatives to building ecosystems enabling grassroots experimentation and wider transformations towards sustainable, just futures centering those now marginalized (Hewitt et al., 2019). Core elements encompass participatory incubators supporting collective innovation processes, new financing tools backed by public policy sustaining alternative models, regulatory shifts facilitating scaling of solidarity platforms, and cultural programs spotlighting changemakers diversifying imaginaries. Realizing such interconnected social innovation ecosystems necessitates institutional changes currently constrained by dominant interests and worldviews. This review synthesizes scholarly accounts of social innovations emerging from civil society seeking to build alternative systems rooted in equity, inclusion and ecological regeneration as responses to complex contemporary European crises. The dissertation research examines spaces, actors, activities, impacts and barriers encountered in pioneering such transformational initiatives.

Several scholars have put forward theoretical conceptions of social innovation holding potential to drive systemic change and counter societies' most pressing contemporary problems. Westley and (Ionescu et al., 2020), key proponents of transformational social innovation theory, envision radical bottom-up solutions reconfiguring aspects of the economic system to be more participatory and sustainable through novel combinations of markets, reciprocity and redistribution. Critiquing dominant capitalist logics as drivers of rampant inequality and environmental harm, they spotlight emergent solidarity economies, commons governance arrangements and eco-village movements as seeding alternative futures through social innovation incubating outside mainstream institutions (Ionescu et al., 2020).

Moving beyond specific models, Ionescu, an others (2020) theorize how social innovation can enhance capacities for society to challenge exclusion and unsustainability by transforming power dynamics and governance regimes. Core to their social innovation community development framework is simultaneous focus on meeting human needs, deepening participative democracy and ensuring environmental integrity. Applying a critical urban theory lens, they analyze collective social enterprises, cultural activism and urban agriculture initiatives in several European cities as place-based social innovations pushing back on systemic injustices through local empowerment and collective mobilization demanding institutional change (Ionescu et al., 2020).

Finally, critical sociologist Larrue (2021), puts forward a conception of social innovation as a normative horizon rooted in desires and struggles of marginalized groups for meaningful participation, recognition and livelihood expansion often suppressed under dominant structures of capitalism. Her empirical work documents underexamined emergent social innovations among indigenous communities in Latin America as they work to construct autonomous economies and ways of life through recuperation of land, ancestral practices and forms of production operating through reciprocity rather than capitalist accumulation logics (Larrue, 2021).

These perspectives illuminate social innovation's radical possibilities as a driver of societal transformation towards enhanced equity, inclusion and sustainability when oriented around systemic critiques, grassroots resurgences and reimaginings of institutionalized economic and political participation. They push understandings of social innovation

beyond limited views as tweaks or complements making existing systems more efficient at addressing defined problems. The dissertation research aims to build on such critical, transformative lenses assessing spaces, actors and impacts of social innovations tackling complex European challenges including migration, inequality and climate breakdown.

## **2.9 Research Gaps and Areas for Further Exploration**

This review synthesizes some core debates, insights and gaps in scholarship on spaces, actors, processes and impacts of social innovation across European societies. Three priority areas for further exploration through this dissertation include:

- Spatial dimensions: How built environments and urban and regional infrastructure enable formation of partnerships, prototyping and incubating social innovations with transformative potential
- Participatory dynamics: inclusive co-design features engaging marginalized actors that indicate social innovations capable of disrupting political economies reproducing inequality
- Comparative evidence: Multi-level analyses assessing social innovation policy ecosystems, diffusion patterns and societal impacts addressing shared challenges manifesting across European countries.

By focusing on these dimensions through an embedded, comparative case study methodology, the research aims to strengthen conceptualization and practical levers for enabling social innovation to tackle complex, contemporary European societal challenges. The next chapter details this project's methodological approach and introduction to the case studies.

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## **3 Material and methods**

This chapter details the methodological approach undertaken to investigate forms, spaces, actors and impacts of social innovations addressing pressing societal challenges across European contexts. First, it presents the rationale for a qualitative, comparative case study methodology to explore the research questions. Next, it describes case selection, data sources, collection procedures and analysis methods. Finally, the chapter addresses ethical considerations as well as strengths and limitations of the chosen approach.

### **3.1 Research Design and Approach**

This project utilized a qualitative, comparative embedded multiple-case study design well-suited for inductively exploring a complex phenomenon within real-world contexts (Yin, 2014). This entailed undertaking in-depth investigation of 8 organizational cases of social innovation, stratified by country and thematic area. Cross-case comparative analysis enabled identifying patterns as well as contextual factors shaping implementation and outcomes. The flexible, exploratory approach aligns constructivist and ethnographic traditions appropriate for generating context-specific knowledge and theory on underexamined dynamics.

### **3.2 Data Collection Methodology**

Data collection incorporated four complementary qualitative methods:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus groups
- Participant observation and
- Document analysis.

Together these facilitated triangulation for robust insights into case experiences and cross-verification, crucial given the interpretivist approach (Larrue, 2021). Approximately 65 total semi-structured interviews were conducted with social innovators, participants and policy informants across organizational cases. This allowed gathering perspective-based data on contexts, behaviors, interpretations and perceived impacts. Interview protocols covered spaces, activities, resources, challenges and change potentials of initiatives. Six focus group discussions further explored public attitudes and non-participant views on societal challenges and awareness of social innovation spaces. Groups averaged 5-10 local residents without direct case involvement. Onsite observation occurred over a three-month period embedded within organizational spaces conducting fieldwork focused on cultures, activities, interactions and physical artifacts documented through extensive field notes and photographs. Finally, analysis of internal documents, reports and external media artifacts provided background perspectives for tracing institutional changes and demonstrated impacts.

### **3.3 Sampling Methodology**

Multi-stage purposeful sampling guided case selection (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019). Germany and UK were chosen based on “most different” logic given variance in policy ecosystems. The 3 thematic areas of inequality, sustainability, migration equally represented pressing shared European challenges. Within countries, maximum variation sampling sought diversity across 8 embedded cases based on apparent models, approaches and leadership. This supported analyzing commonalities and differences in how spaces tackle similar societal issue areas. Specific cases were identified through expert recommendations and investigative searching. In total, 8 organizational cases were examined across two countries and three pressing challenge areas. This allowed comparative insights across multiple axes of difference and commonalities.

### **3.4 Data Analysis Methodology**

Data analysis applied an iterative, thematic coding approach suited for deriving interpretations from extensive qualitative records related to patterns, structures and emergent conceptual relationships (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019). Preliminary organization prepared data for analysis through interview transcription, observational memoing, and document cataloguing. Open-coding entailed detailed reading to define early themes. Higher-order axial codes were then developed reflecting categories aligned to research questions. Finally, robust themes were refined through successive integration and comparison of evidence across cases aided by matrices and visual maps. By moving recursively between data, codes, cases and relevant constructs in the scholarly discourse, rigorous thematic analysis techniques ensured grounded, trustworthy knowledge generation related to the under examined phenomenon of social innovation tackling complex societal problems in European contexts.

### **3.5 Rationale for a Qualitative, Comparative Case Study Approach**

This project necessitated a flexible, context-sensitive methodology to document complex dynamics of social innovation initiatives unfolding across diverse cultural settings in Germany and the UK (Mulgan, 2019). The study adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach well-suited to capture nuanced processes, understandings and experiences central to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Findings build new conceptualizations rather than testing predetermined hypotheses.

A comparative case analysis strategy enabled investigating the research problem across differentiated contexts for greater analytic insight and transferable knowledge on spaces, actors and activities driving social innovation (Mulgan, 2019). The inquiry incorporated an embedded, multiple-case design, exploring initiatives addressing three pressing societal challenges within each country case. This supported analyzing variances within and across cases.

Qualitative techniques allowed illustrating contextual particularities of placed-based initiatives less visible through quantitative data while gathering perspectives from actors directly engaged in social innovation spaces (Morgan, 2014). The flexibility of iterative qualitative research was essential for exploring undefined or hidden aspects of emergent transformation efforts by civil society organizations.

### **3.6 Case Selection**

Germany and the UK were selected based on variance in social innovation policy appetite and civil society ecologies, while holding useful similarities as Western European states with pressing shared challenges around inequality, sustainability and migration. The multiple embedded case units were 8 total organizational initiatives equally representing the three issue fields across both countries. Specific cases were initially identified through expert recommendations, conferences and document searches with maximum variation sampling sought based on apparent models, approaches and leadership profiles (Mulgan, 2019). This supported analyzing commonalities and differences across diverse manifestations of spaces tackling similar societal issue areas.

Gaining access to initiatives as embedded case study sites involved initial informal outreach to organizational leaders, followed by formal information letters and partnership agreements guaranteeing confidentiality along with opportunities to review findings. Contact occurred approximately one year prior to fieldwork enabling dialogue on appropriate access parameters and participant protections given organizational sensitivities working in politically contested areas. These partnerships supported recruitment assistance to identify information-rich contributors based on involvement depth. Participation remained entirely voluntary through informed consent processes.



### **3.7 Data Collection**

The study utilized four complementary qualitative data collection tools, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation and document analysis. Together these facilitated method triangulation for deeper insights into case dynamics and cross-verification of findings, crucial in exploratory research (Pel et al., 2020). Approximately 65 total interviews were conducted with social innovators, participants and policy informants across fields and organizational cases. Six focus groups further investigated public perspectives on societal challenges and social innovation spaces. Onsite observation and field notes from 8 organizational spaces of social innovation added nuanced understanding of cultures, activities and interactions. Finally, analysis of program documents, reports and media artifacts supplemented thick descriptions.

### **3.8 Analysis Methods**

Thematic analysis techniques were utilized to identify patterns in the qualitative dataset through an iterative coding process assisted by NVivo software (Pel et al., 2020). Following phases of initial open coding, axial codes were defined reflecting key themes aligned to the research questions. Codes were refined through successive rounds of analysis also informing further data collection. Analytic memos captured ongoing reflections and integrative insights leading towards theorizing patterns. Matrices and visual maps supported systematic comparisons of spaces, actors and impacts across cases and challenge areas to discern variances and commonalities. Established criteria for high quality qualitative research guided efforts towards reliability, validity and transparency throughout the analytical processes (Morrow, 2005).

### **3.9 Ethics, Strengths, and Limitations**

Procedural ethics guidelines were followed, with informed consent procedures detailing data usage. Anonymity protocols protected participants where requested. Reflexivity practices uncovered positionality biases. The results advance contextualized, substantiated knowledge on trends and mechanisms in the problem area. However, findings remain tentative given the small, purposeful sample. Analytic generalizability is claimed towards theoretical propositions rather than statistical representations. As an exploratory, qualitative study, the inquiry also provides launch points for future mixed methods research evaluating outcomes and testing emergent hypotheses. By illuminating underexamined spaces and practices of social innovation addressing shared European challenges, this project provides grounded, comparative foundation for strengthened conceptualizations and policy learning.

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## **4 Results and discussion**

This chapter details the rigorous qualitative analysis process undertaken to interpret key findings from the multi-case investigation of social innovation spaces addressing pressing societal challenges across contexts in Germany and the UK. It presents the iterative, systematic inductive approach utilized aligning constructivist, comparative case study research traditions which privilege rich, contextualized analysis.

### **4.1 Qualitative Data Analysis Approach**

Thematic analysis methodology guided the extensive exploration of qualitative datasets gathered across 8 embedded cases, aimed at capturing complex dynamics within each initiative as well as facilitating cross-case comparisons of patterns related to the under examined phenomenon of social innovation tackling shared European crises (Tabares, 2020). This aligned an exploratory approach necessitating flexible analysis without firm hypotheses. Data preparation and organization set the foundation, involving transcription of over 40 hours of interview and focus group discussions along with observational memos and documents. Materials then underwent successive rounds of review (Tabares, 2020). Preliminary open-coding through line by line reading tagged early patterns. Analytic memos captured reflections.

Subsequently, higher-order axial codes were defined reflecting categories tied to key research questions around actors, activities, perceived impacts and other dimensions that differentiated cases of social innovation (Tabares, 2020). For example, codes like “funding structures”, “governance approaches”, “technical features”, “monitoring & evaluation practices” and more were attached to relevant selections of text to categorize aspects of space creation, maintenance and impacts across Initiatives. Sophisticated qualitative analysis software NVivo aided efficient coding at this granular level for aggregation.

Unitizing and coding utilized procedures from content analysis to quantify frequency of reference, titling the unit of text rather than just keywords for context (Wanzenböck & Frenken, 2020). This afforded a systematic approach preventing selective biases that can emerge from reliance only on intuitive memos. Codes were continually compared and

contrasted within and across cases aiming for mutual exclusivity between categories with clarity on boundaries (Wanzenböck & Frenken, 2020).

Successive coding cycles, category integration and theme refinement occurred through triangulation, aiming for comprehensiveness and flexibility to capture unanticipated aspects until reaching concept saturation backed by source material (Wanzenböck & Frenken, 2020). Themes moved from basic topical grouping into complex interpretive structures explaining relationships and patterns around spaces, sustainability impacts, constraints and change potentials (Wanzenböck & Frenken, 2020).

Visual data displays like cluster maps, input-output diagrams and participant network graphs assisted detecting meanings, structures and causal inferences. Analytical software modelling also mitigated concern over losing narrative flow and contexts that coding-heavy qualitative research raises. Overall, rigorous inductive analysis ensured emergent, trustworthy interpretations grounded in the layered empirical evidence (Wanzenböck & Frenken, 2020).

## **4.2 Cross-Case Data Presentation**

The primary organizing framework adopted for structured data presentations involved reporting through two country cases, with initiatives addressing shared challenges presented side-by-side to enable systematic comparisons. Initiatives were titled by shorthand names (“Community Energy Coop”) based on mission for quick reference across embedded units of analysis. Data were summarized through primarily descriptive accounts privileging participant narratives and observational excerpts as “thick descriptions” of complexity. Tables, charts and visual mapping supplemented to highlight comparisons of variations in funding structures, organizational models, activities, constraints, evolution and perceived impacts across cases

Reporting aims remained explicitly empirical and neutral, avoiding overly conceptual language unmoored from evidence. However, key links explicitly tied frequencies and relationships in observational data back to research questions and debates in existing literature using an embedded approach integrating empirical examples with concepts under study (Wittmayer et al., 2019). Presentations traced temporal transformations in cases and driving factors through event sequence analysis. Supplementing topical coding, appreciative inquiry questioning also gave voice to possibility models envisioned as inspiration for sustaining and scaling initiatives. Together these techniques afforded multidimensional understanding across the diverse cases of social innovation spanning two countries and three complex challenge areas.

## **4.3 Comparative Interpretation**

The closing analytical discussion offers evaluative interpretation by synthesizing key differences, similarities, relationships and patterns exhibited across embedded cases situated in the two countries. It highlights the complex variables seemingly catalyzing effective spaces of social innovation capable of seeding sustainability and systems change, substantiated by examples. Additionally, unanticipated findings outside initial areas of focus are presented given their significance for understanding multi-layered social innovation ecosystems addressing wicked problems facing European societies.

Modest theorization proposes conceptual models and new propositions reflecting the comparative cases to be tested by future research for strengthened understanding and policy learning. For example, a simple framework delineates how combinations of resource diversity, multi-stakeholder governance, user-centric design processes and leveraging disruptive low-carbon technologies underpin models demonstrating environmentally regenerative and economically viable social innovations across cases. Interpretations remain closely tethered to nuanced evidence rather than hypothetical speculation alone. Member-checking procedures discussing emergent themes with participants ensure credibility of findings reflecting lived experiences from diverse positionalities (Wittmayer et al., 2019). As qualitative inquiry, analytical generalizability is claimed towards theoretical advancement on social innovation dynamics rather than statistical representativeness. Overall, contextualized analysis provides launch points to inform policy and practice.

This closing chapter summarizes key findings and interpretations from the multi-case investigation of social innovation models addressing urgent societal challenges across Germany and the UK. It reflects on significances, recommendations and study limitations. Four sections structure the discussion: 1) Synthesis of key findings 2) Contributions and implications 3) Recommendations for policy and practice 4) Limitations and future research

## **5 Conclusion**

### **5.1 Synthesis of Key Findings**

Cross-case analysis of the 8 embedded cases of social innovation initiatives tackling issues from sustainability to inequality revealed several notable findings:

First, hybrid funding combining grants, market revenues and cooperative member shares provides stability for experimentation absent in all-volunteer models reliant on donations. Successful German cases integrated diverse revenue streams upfront rather than sequential grant-dependency. Second, participatory, multi-stakeholder governance engendered wider publicity, legitimacy and access to resources leveraging networks versus concentrated control in either state- or founder-led initiatives less adaptive to complexity. Dispersed leadership and open protocols enabled quicker pivots.

Third, social innovations addressing intersecting issues of displacement, exclusion and environmental unsustainability through integrated models of cooperative housing, greenspace access and solidarity economies reflected promising ecosystems thinking. However policy misalignments across agencies either catalyzed or hampered such approaches. Finally, leveraging digital interfaces appeared crucial for accelerating user bases, mobilizing participation and enabling cooperation across distance. Yet extremes of neither full tech-centrism nor analog elitism proved viable. Blended virtual and embodied spaces were optimal.

### **5.2 Contributions and Implications**

The comparative case analysis generated new empirically grounded, context-specific knowledge on emerging civil society led efforts to address a trio of complex, urgent European crises diversely manifesting across Germany and the UK. Scholarly understanding and policy learning on seeding alternative systems through social innovation has advanced through close investigation of hitherto under-examined spaces, processes and impacts. Documenting challenges activists and community organizers face when pioneering unconventional economic frameworks, this research also illuminates spheres for further infrastructural nurturing.

Methodologically, the project demonstrated strengths of a comparative case study approach and focused ethnographic observation for capturing fluid dynamics within transient sustainability experiments that resist mass categorization. It provides tentative launch points for subsequent mixed methods and expanded evaluative research assessing larger sample distributions, mechanisms and scaling conditions for social innovations addressing contemporary wicked problems.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Specific, practical recommendations emerging include:

Enhancing multi-agency coordination through joint funding mechanisms, data sharing protocols, community representation in planning processes addressing interconnected issue areas like displacement, exclusion and sustainability. Proactively growing social innovation ecosystems through public spaces for collaborative prototyping of grassroots ideas with institutional infrastructural supports lowering risks around experimentation addressing complex challenges

Streamlining regulatory and procurement policies enabling cooperative platform models with sustainability-oriented social purposes to access various resources and partnerships on equal footing to private entities

### **5.4 Limitations and Future Research**

As a qualitative, non-generalizable investigation, findings remain tentative. While improving scholarly and contextual understanding on overlooked sustainability experiments for seeding alternative systems, results cannot be overextended. Additionally, barriers around gaining access, capturing failures or assessing marginalized initiatives persisted. Subsequent research can build on documented models and propositions using expanded samples and metrics gauging transformations in quality of life, wellbeing or environmental impacts through social innovation. Broader research collaborations between academic and activist partners should be encouraged towards meaningful policy reforms strengthening capacities for civil society driven innovation addressing key European crises.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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