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Promoting active and healthy living through cooperation: Involving stakeholders in innovative projects

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The ageing of the population in Europe implies rethinking several socio-economic issues and promoting the creation of opportunities that allow people to age well (Boerio et al., 2023). To develop successful solutions, bringing together the different stakeholders to a shared discussion is crucial. This presentation explores the involvement of multiple stakeholders in developing solutions for active living and successful ageing, based on the authors' experience in European funded projects.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defined active ageing at the beginning of the 21st century as a “lifelong process shaped by several factors that, alone and acting together, favour health, participation and security in older adult life” (WHO, 2002). Determinants related to the individuals, families, communities and nations impact active ageing. These determinants,

linked to material and social conditions, influence individual behaviour and feelings, affecting the way people age (WHO, 2002). The concept of “active ageing” has been most recently approached, on the policy level, as “Active and Healthy Living”, emphasising a “life-course” perspective ageing begins at birth (European Commission, n.d.), including now a wide range of studies that include interventions with babies, children and adults at any ages. Although the lifelong approach has been widely spread, it is still understudied as a concept at the academic level. Moreover, there is great potential to deepen our understanding of the factors that can promote activity in the different phases of life, and to develop solutions to face the challenges found.

Developing solutions that enhance active living demand for socio-economic innovation, covering environmental, organisational and procedural changes, which fall within the scope of Social Innovation (SI). SI involves “the design and implementation of new solutions that require conceptual, process, product or organisational changes that ultimately aim to improve the wellbeing and welfare of individuals and communities” (OCDE, n.d.). A central feature of this approach is the value of the citizens and their participatory role, where they are called to be part of the implementation pathway of programs, services, technology, social responses or others (Dantas et al., 2022).

SI introduced the idea of forming communities shaped by individuals who actively share their ideas and solutions, especially those emerging from grassroots initiatives, thus promoting equity and empowerment (Dantas et al., 2022). These communities bring together diverse experts to promote interdisciplinary solutions, foster knowledge that is both competitive and socially beneficial, and enhance the quality of life (Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). This fact, ultimately, brings added value to policymaking because it also considers the uniqueness and specific conditions of the implementation reality (Dantas et al., 2022).

SI is gaining attention worldwide, with various models and interventions that promote the involvement of diverse stakeholders and the resolution of local challenges with inclusive and sustainable solutions. Recognising its socio-economic value, the European Commission has led efforts to develop and implemented these approaches, co-funding projects based on social innovation, among other initiatives. The following examples illustrate EU-funded initiatives that emphasise SI and stakeholder involvement.

NewEcoSmart (NES) is a European Social Fund+ funded project that seeks to develop an inclusive social innovation strategy to improve the skills of adults aged 45 and over in rural

areas, enabling them to adapt to green and digital transitions in their current roles or to explore new opportunities in habitat-related sectors. This project aims to promote a more active living, increasing opportunities for workers of all ages to engage in productive, healthy work environments until retirement, backed by mutual commitment from employers and employees (BusinessEurope et al., 2017).

NES focuses on rural areas in Spain, Portugal and Italy, with a strong tradition in manufacturing habitat-related products. It identifies and addresses the training needs of adults over 45, SMEs and micro-enterprises in entrepreneurship, green and digital skills, using digital tools centred on social innovation to support the twin transition. This project highlights the importance of connecting stakeholders to find viable solutions for their own territories. NES established three NES Communities, one in each country, supported by workshops and group discussions. These communities, involving civil society, businesses, adult education organisations and public authorities, identified the main local challenges and continue to participate in co-creation sessions to tackle them. Moreover, to expand its ecosystem and involve more stakeholders, a Hackathon and an Open Call searching for solutions to the challenges found are being organised. NES shows how cooperation between different stakeholders who deeply know their territories can lead to tailored solutions.

SIRENE (Social Innovation Responsive Environments NETwork) is a Horizon Europe co-funded project aiming to improve the wellbeing and housing conditions by empowering social innovators, innovation ecosystems and entrepreneurs. To such aim, it is co-creating a SI Framework with experts and ecosystems of over 30 European countries composed of five components: a manual for innovation actors; a capacity-building framework; a hands-on toolkit for networking; a sustainability strategy; and a blueprint of good practices. SIRENE also co-developed a new innovation model evolving from existing ones (König et al., 2021): the Transnational Local-sphere Model. This model emphasizes stakeholders, underrepresented entities, a user-centred bottom-up approach, (trans)national collaboration, integration of global and local ecosystems, and civic society engagement via media and the public. The Transnational Local-sphere model connects local ecosystems and unites stakeholders across sectors to ensure accessible, sustainable outcomes for users.

PRIORITY45 is an Erasmus+ project that aims to upskill and reskill 45+ adults, creating a workforce that succeeds in today's dynamic work environment. To such aim, the consortium developed a virtual course, tailored for workers and SMEs to develop their soft skills, such as innovation, creativity and cooperation. The project also advocates for organisations to

implement training programmes for adults 45+, and to do that, materials such as a Digital handbook of best practices and videos to promote lifelong learning are being developed. PRIORITY45 is a good example of the power of cooperation with stakeholders to achieve great results and promote a more active living. The project involves stakeholders from civil society, education, SMEs and universities through workshops and group sessions to co-create, test and refine the training platform and content.

These projects exemplify how SI promotes people's empowerment and better research results. They emphasised cooperation with various stakeholders to design, test and implement solutions, promoting interdisciplinarity, diversity and democratic principles, while supporting broader innovation efforts. Stakeholders can improve services by focusing on quality, people-centred solutions, efficient resources and technology, ultimately improving well-being, quality of life and a more active life.

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