The EaSI programme is the main instrument through which the EU delivers its social innovation policy. It is a Swiss Army knife policy tool that includes three different instruments to achieve its goals. The programme comprises three axes, each representing a different facet of social innovation. To understand properly how the programme works, we first have to understand the term "social innovation."

The concept of social innovation

According to Sabato et al. (2017), the concept that informs EaSI was first defined by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA): "Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words they are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society's capacity to act." The BEPA identified three different perspectives that need to be integrated to promote social innovation:

1) A social demand perspective, which conceives the economic and social sphere both as separate and complementary. Social innovation is the means through which social needs that are not addressed by the market are satisfied.

2) A societal challenge perspective, conceiving society "as a whole," and looking at the "social" and the "economic" as supplementary – social innovation can then generate "economic, social and ecological returns."

3) A systemic change perspective, expressing the need to reform society "in the direction of a more participative arena." The challenge in this case is to fundamentally change attitudes and values, strategies and policies, organizational structures and processes.

These three approaches are all present in the EaSI programme, and especially in the EaSI PROGRESS axis: "social innovation is conceived as a way to address unmet social needs and emerging societal challenges and to create new social relationships and collaborations." In particular, objectives 1 and 3 of the EaSI PROGRESS axis address the social demand and the societal challenge perspectives by fostering learning processes and social policy experimentation. Objective 2 addresses the systemic change perspective by facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and creating a "participatory policy debate." In a similar fashion, the Microfinance and Social Entrepreneurship axis "stands at the crossroads between economic and social preoccupation," contributing "to economic initiative and entrepreneurship, job creation and self-employment, the development of skills and active inclusion for people suffering disadvantages." Let us now examine in more detail how the three axes of EaSI contribute to fostering social innovation.

EaSI PROGRESS

The first EaSI axis, PROGRESS, was created in 2006 for the 2007-2013 programming period as "an EU financial instrument supporting the development and coordination of EU policy in the areas of employment, social inclusion and social protection, working conditions, anti-discrimination and gender equality" (European Commission 2013). According to Sabato et al. (2017), the PROGRESS programme involved the mainstreaming of the "underlying principles of the EQUAL programme," which was a 2000-2006 initiative aimed at combating discrimination and inequality in the labour market. One of the EQUAL programme's priorities was to create "innovation and mainstreaming" through the analysis, benchmarking and dissemination of innovative solutions. The PROGRESS programme was launched in 2006, and was extensively employed to finance "most of the activities of the Social OMC," which was also launched in 2006. In particular, PROGRESS funded "mutual learning, analytical and dissemination activities." PROGRESS was first reformed in 2013, with the creation of EaSI, which streamlined three existing separate programmes.

The 2013 PROGRESS axis had several policy goals. The first three are based on mechanisms of institutional learning, on EU policies (objective 1) and societal needs (objective 2). The third objective deals directly with social innovation: "to test social and labour market policy innovation and build capacity to design and implement social policy innovation." Social policy innovation mainly concerns employment and social inclusion: in this respect, PROGRESS supports the quantitative 2020 anti-poverty target set in the Europe 2020 Strategy.

During the period 2014-2020, PROGRESS accounts for 61% of EaSI financial resources – a total of €540,619,903. (The EASI budget for the same period is €886,262,137). In terms of its thematic sections, the most important is "social protection" (with at least 50% of the total budget), followed by "employment" and cross-cutting (both with a minimum 20% share), and finally, "working conditions" (10%).

EaSI EURES

The second axis of EaSI—EURES—stems from the SEDOC system (European system for the international clearing of vacancies and applications for employment), which was created in 1972 as a "Community-wide labour exchange" based on a "computer age" database. This was designed to enable the establishment of a Community-wide labour market. The EURES network replaced the ageing SEDOC system in 1993. It was conceived as a "comprehensive European employment agency" and a "forum for discussion of European employment issues at operational level." At its inception, it had 400 trained advisers "to deal with transnational job seekers." In 2011, the Commission started the network's reform, with the stated aim of integrating it into the Europe 2020 strategy. The main innovation involved "targeted mobility schemes" (TMS) to support specific groups of workers "with a high propensity for mobility, as well as employers experiencing recruitment difficulties on their domestic turf."

Operationally, EURES has two objectives. The first is to ensure that job vacancies and applications and corresponding information and advice are transparent. The second is to support the provision of EURES services for the recruitment and placing of workers in quality and sustainable employment. Both objectives should work in conjunction to improve job market clearance at EU level and to favour the cross-national mobility of workers.

During the period 2014-2020, EURES accounts for 18% of EaSI financial resources – a total of €159,527,185. In terms of its thematic sections, the most important is "transparency on job vacancies" (at least 32%), followed by "development of services" (at least 30%).

EaSI Microfinance and Social Entrepreneurship (MF/SE)

The third axis, MF/SE ("microfinance/social entrepreneurship"), was instituted in 2014 to provide credit to micro-enterprises and vulnerable groups, and to support the development of social enterprises. The programme is not entirely new. The efforts of the Commission to support micro-credit dates back to 2007, when the communication "A European initiative for the development of micro-credit in support of growth and employment" was issued. In 2009, the European Parliament urged the Commission to provide "for the co-financing of projects (…) targeted at promoting the availability of micro-credit for (…) disadvantaged targeted groups." In 2010, the EU established the "European Progress Microfinance Facility" for employment and social inclusion (EMPF), a joint initiative between the European Investment Bank and the Commission. It was discontinued in 2016. In 2014, the MF/SE axis was launched along with its EaSI Guarantee Financial Instrument (EaSI GFI). It is based on the previous EMPF initiative, and is managed by the European Investment Fund (EIF).

According to Torfs and Lupoli (2017), social enterprises "lack sufficient access to finance." The same also applies to small and microenterprises (Unterberg et al. 2014). This is due to credit rationing, which in turn depends on information asymmetries between the banks and social borrowers. With these premises in mind, the chief objective of the MF/SE axis is to promote access to finance for vulnerable groups and micro- and social enterprises. This objective is articulated in two thematic sections: social entrepreneurship and microfinance for vulnerable groups and micro-enterprises.

During the period 2014-2020, MF/SE accounts for 21% of EaSI financial resources – a total of €186,115,049. In terms of its thematic sections (see the policy goal section in this dossier), the resources are split evenly between "microfinance" and "social entrepreneurship" (45% each).

Conclusions

Social innovation is a polysemantic concept. The EU social innovation policy acknowledges this in its application of EaSI, a Swiss Army knife policy instrument. As we have seen, the three axes that comprise EaSI target different phases of social innovation. They depend on social research and experimentation, innovative job market services and microfinance facilities to finance projects that are socially relevant. Putting these policy instruments under the same umbrella has helped to make the EU's social innovation policy more visible, though this may change when EaSI is incorporated into the new ESF+ instrument as part of the 202-2027 multiannual financial framework. On the other hand, the social innovation paradigm will be consolidated within the wider EU social policy framework. Research and experimentation in innovative social policies will become part of the established policymaking repertoire, and may allow cross-fertilisation with other EU social policy areas.

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