

Social Innovation



Solutions Contributing
to Responsible Production and
Consumption in the Bioeconomy
and Beyond





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This 3-CO brochure is showcasing good practice examples of social innovations in action. A wide variety of examples of social innovation practices is presented to serve as an inspiration to different target groups, in particular:

A. Citizens and Communities (including civil society organisations),

B. Private Businesses, and

C. Public Sector.

The selected examples are clustered per target group.

However, many examples are considered of interest for multiple types of targets.

The idea of the presented good practices is to inform, inspire and guide policymakers, civil society organisations (CSOs), private businesses, and other interested citizens, because all of them have a role to play to adopt or support social innovations.

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Colophon

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Introducing the 3-CO Project and the Concept of Social Innovation

The 3-CO Project

The overall aim of the EU-funded project 3-CO (short for: Concise Consumer Communication through Robust Labels for Biobased Systems) is to enable and support consumers to make more sustainable/environmentally responsible purchasing choices. Beyond investigating consumer communication preferences and labelling and certification schemes for bio-based products, the project also aims to assess social innovation practices supporting various stakeholders (citizens and communities, private businesses and the public sector) to switch towards socially and environmentally responsible behaviour within their choices. Beyond the current good practices brochure, 3-CO will also provide policy recommendations on how to (a) deploy measures that support social innovation and engagement and (b) establish innovative governance models contributing to reduced resource consumption and increased innovation capacity of all actors.

Social Innovation

What is social innovation? Simply put, social innovation can be defined as: New ideas that work in meeting social goals¹. More precisely: any innovation that is social in its ends or in its means, or simply any working, innovative solution to help address a pressing societal challenge e.g. climate change, social exclusion, mobility or health issues. In practice, social innovations take form of social enterprises, corporate innovation projects, non-profits, public sector programs, grass-root movements or community initiatives². An overview of different types of social innovations, is provided in Annex B, *“The Power of Social Innovation: Bridging Technology and Humanity”*.

In Europe, social innovation has been on the political agenda since more than 15 years, not only as new way of addressing social issues, but also as a chance to respond to the multiple social, economic and environmental crises that are faced by societies. Various EU-funded programmes support social attention in one way or another. For example, the [ESF+ Social Innovation + initiative](#), managed by the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation, aims to help transfer and upscale innovative solutions to societal challenges, mainly in the fields of employment, education, skills and social inclusion. The [Social Innovation Tournament \(SIT\)](#) is held every year by the EIB Institute, and supports entrepreneurs who generate a societal or an environmental impact. Call topics in the annual work programmes of the Horizon Europe increasing demand that specific attention be paid to social innovation in research projects. And the EU CAP Network recently published a brochure [Social innovation – Solutions leading to thriving agriculture, forestry and rural areas](#). Although there is no dedicated policy strategy on social innovation at the European level, these examples illustrate that Europe is moving forward with social innovation³.

The 3-CO Consortium



In 3-CO, we define social innovation as follows:

“Social innovations are new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives), create new social relationships or collaborations and foster sustainable consumption patterns”.

To understand how social innovation works in practice it is best explained and described through real projects and practical examples.

A structured approach was followed to arrive at a set of good practices of social innovation activities from within Europe and beyond⁴. Firstly, a longlist of inspirational good practices, relevant and inspiring for different types of stakeholders was developed. From this longlist, a pre-selection (shortlist) was made, next, the shortlisted inspirational social innovation activities from within and beyond bioeconomy were elaborated into factsheets (case studies).

Interviewing representatives of the case studies was part of the exercise, to collect, complement and validate factsheet content.

Different target groups are addressed in this brochure:

A. Citizens and Communities (such as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs))

B. Private Businesses (from small and medium enterprises, start-ups and scale-ups to large businesses)

C. Public Sector (such as local authorities, regional development agencies, councils, non-ministerial departments, etc.)

The factsheets (case studies) on good practice examples are organised accordingly.

Sources:

- ¹ Social innovation, what it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated. Geoff Mulgan et al, 2007, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277873357_Social_Innovation_What_It_Is_Why_It_Matters_and_How_It_Can_Be_Accelerated
- ² See <https://www.socialinnovationacademy.eu/introduction-to-social-innovation/> Accessed 11 December 2024 Marine Environmental Research 87–88: p.12–18.
- ³ See e.g. European Sustainable Development Network: Social Innovation in Europe - An overview of the concept of social innovation in the context of European initiatives and practices. By Umberto Pisano, Lisa Lange and Gerald Berger, ESDN Quarterly Report N°36, April 2015, URL: https://www.esdn.eu/fileadmin/ESDN_Reports/2015-April-Social_Innovation_in_Europe.pdf
- ⁴ For a detailed description of the approach followed please refer to 3-CO Deliverable D3.1 Report on Stakeholder Brochures on Measures Supporting Social Innovation.

Social Innovation in Practice

Cluster Citizens and Communities

LeihBar

“Only 20% of the items that people own are actually in use.”

Swiss Consumer Protection Agency



©LeihBar

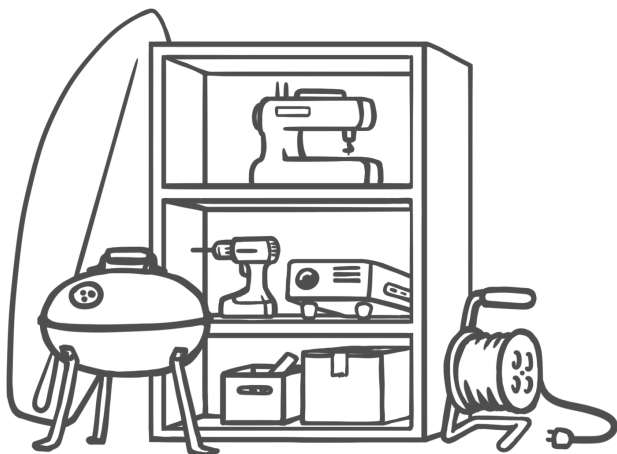
Background

The LeihBar – a library of things of all sorts and forms supports the concept of owning less and using more. As many items found in human household are only rarely in use, renting them for the few occasions they are actually needed rather than buying them can simplify human life, save money, space and especially resources.

Imagine opening a closet or storage space in your home and discovering a collection of forgotten items – perhaps a tile cutter from your last renovation, a sewing machine from an abandoned craft project, maybe a gumball-machine purchased for a memorable college-party, or a child seat used only once for a family visit. Each of these objects holds its own story and fun memories yet many sit unused for long periods of time. In fact, only 20% of the items we own are regularly in use. This raises an important question: what if we could rethink our relationship with ownership? This is where LeihBar comes into play.

LeihBar is a volunteer-run and community-driven initiative located in Bern, Switzerland, that operates as a “library of things”. It encourages individuals to own less and use more by providing access to a wide range of items. The catalogue includes 800 items from common tools like drills and kitchen appliances to leisure equipment such as an inflatable boat, and is available online. Here, members can browse and reserve items in advance in order to borrow them.

This system not only helps reduce clutter in peoples’ homes but also fosters a sense of community by allowing people to share resources. Nearly all items have been donated by the local community and, in many cases, are surprisingly expensive and of high quality while few were purchased on the secondhand market. A wish list for items is available on the website.



LeihBar also emphasises sustainability by repairing broken items in collaboration with the local repair-café and giving them new life reinforcing the value of reusing rather than discarding.

Members pay an annual membership fee of 60 Swiss francs and can then borrow as many items as they please at no additional cost. A one-month trial membership is available for 15 Swiss francs. To make borrowing from the LeihBar affordable for everyone, people with lower income, such as students and apprentices, can choose to pay only 48 Swiss francs a year. People with the cultural discount card “Kulturlegi” may pay only 30 Swiss francs. These membership-fees cover the costs for rent, electricity, website and the acquisition of new items.

Since its foundation, the 700 members have made nearly 16,700 rentals with nearly 4000 rentals per year.

The Spark

The LeihBar concept was initiated by the Swiss consumer protection organisation. Raffael Wüthrich, then head of sustainability, spearheaded the project through a successful crowdfunding campaign. The project's visual identity, including the logo, posters, storage space and lending counter designs was developed in collaboration with a student from the Basel School of Design. A dedicated group of volunteers then worked together to set up the initial space in the building of Bern's communal space “Viktoria”.

LeihBar officially opened its doors in December 2018 marking the beginning of this innovative sharing initiative. The concept quickly gained traction and two years later, in September 2020, LeihBar Bern expanded its reach by opening a second location in Bern's neighbourhood Wabern.

Governance Model

In the spring of 2019, the LeihBar Bern Association was established allowing the Consumer Protection organisation to transfer most responsibilities to it and making it a nearly independent entity. Since then, a cooperative partnership with the Consumer Protection Organisation has been maintained in the form of consulting when it comes to data protection or IT support. To spread the message, Bern's city council for waste disposal and recycling supports Leihbar with an annual budget of 1000 Swiss francs for publicity measures.

The operation and ongoing development of LeihBar are managed by a team of 38 non-paid volunteers. This diverse group spans a wide range of ages, professional backgrounds and social experiences. Collectively, they contribute close to 3,000 work hours, expertise and experience.

The volunteer team's diversity and dedication have been instrumental to LeihBar's growth and success. This collaborative effort ensures that LeihBar continues to serve the community effectively promoting sustainable consumption and resource sharing, but also the priority of ‘thinking local’. Available support from the Consumer Protection Organisation combined with the volunteers' enthusiasm has created a robust foundation for LeihBar's mission of encouraging people to borrow rather than buy, thereby reducing waste and fostering community connections.

Social and Environmental Benefits

LeihBar not only promotes sustainable consumption but also offers a range of social and environmental benefits. Through encouraging people to donate and share items with their local community the association strengthens communal spirit and the feeling of connection. By facilitating the borrowing of items instead of purchasing them LeihBar also significantly reduces the demand for new products, conserving valuable resources such as raw materials, energy and water that are typically consumed during manufacturing. This model helps decrease waste and lowers the carbon footprint associated with producing goods.



©LeihBar



©LeihBar



©LeihBar

Members also benefit financially and can save money by accessing items they may only need occasionally rather than investing in seldom-used possessions. Additionally, LeihBar helps reclaim space in homes as fewer items lead to less clutter and a more organised environment.

A key aspect of LeihBar's success is its diverse group of volunteers who come from various age groups and professional backgrounds. This diversity enriches the community experience fostering connections among members as they engage in sharing resources. By participating in this initiative, volunteers also help building a network of trust and mutual support within their own community.

Additionally, the initiative promotes social equity by making fashion accessible to all. Participants can refresh their wardrobes without spending money, making it easier for individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to access quality clothing. This inclusive approach not only reduces financial barriers but also encourages a mindset shift towards valuing quality over quantity in clothing choices.

Replicability Potential

The LeihBar concept shows strong potential for replicability in various communities. Its model of a “library of things”, can and has been adapted through several autonomous local initiatives to different cities and regions allowing communities to share resources efficiently and sustainably. As of now, there are 23 library-of-things actions in Switzerland, which arose from local initiatives, act independently and are all equally successful. These expansions highlight the growing interest in resource-sharing initiatives across Switzerland as well as other countries such as Germany. Interested parties can find a “make your own LeihBar” manual at the website of the consumer protection agency. The concept proved to be specifically suitable and effective in urban areas with limited and expensive living space, limiting peoples’ options to accumulate things, as well as a large demographic age range between 20 and 50 years.

The flexibility of the LeihBar model makes it suitable for various urban and rural settings as it can be tailored to the specific needs and interests of different local communities. By fostering local engagement and collaboration, the LeihBar concept can effectively promote sustainable consumption practices while building social connections among residents.

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The Clothing Loop

“Communities worldwide, once trapped in the cycle of overconsumption, now have the power to unite and challenge our throwaway culture.”

Nichon Glerum, CEO & Founder



©Clothing Loop

The Spark

Clothing Loop was born out of a desire to find sustainable fashion solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular during the first lockdown in the Netherlands. What started as a response to the growing concerns about textile waste and the environmental impacts of fast fashion quickly evolved into a powerful community-driven initiative. As many people found themselves cleaning out their closets during the pandemic, Clothing Loop provided a creative and eco-friendly way to swap clothes with neighbours.

What began as a pandemic trend has now blossomed into a lasting solution – encouraging people to exchange clothes rather than buy new ones, creating a more circular economy and bringing communities closer together in the process. Through its efforts, the Clothing Loop fosters a **sense of community and connection among participants**. By engaging in this social activity, people not only save money but also strengthen neighbourhood bonds.

Governance Model

The governance model of Clothing Loop relies on a **decentralised and community-driven approach**. Local “loops” are created in various neighbourhoods, where groups of participants – such as in a neighbourhood in Amsterdam with about 45 members – rotate bags of clothing. Participants can take and keep the clothes they like, donate their own items and pass the bag to the next person in the loop. Loops can be tailored to specific needs, focusing on men’s or women’s clothing, kids’ items, toys, or even hobby tools. By allowing communities to adapt the model to their specific contexts, Clothing Loop promotes community involvement and ensures that the initiative remains relevant and effective.

Participants can easily discover or start local loops (group of people who meet to exchange clothes) and track their swaps through an online platform, while the actual engagement with each other takes place in person. These loops not only simplify logistics but also enable participants to share their experiences and photos, enhancing community interaction. The focus on **collaboration and empowerment** fosters a sense of ownership among participants driving the initiative’s success.

Social Benefits

Clothing Loop generates social benefits by promoting inclusivity and community engagement. As neighbours come together to exchange clothes, they build relationships and foster a sense of “community”. This social interaction is particularly valuable in urban areas where individuals may feel isolated. By participating in local loops, participants can meet new people, share stories and create a supportive community around sustainable practice.

26 %

of participants feel more connected to their neighborhood.



On average a participant will get to know 3 new people.

Source: Clothing Loop, Impact Report 2024

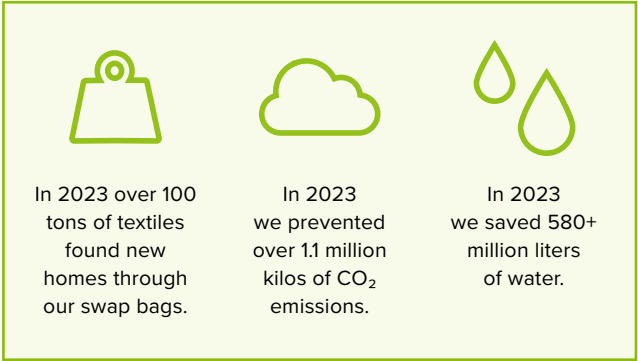


Additionally, the initiative promotes social equity by making fashion accessible to all. Participants can refresh their wardrobes without spending money, making it easier for individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to access quality clothing. This inclusive approach not only reduces financial barriers but also encourages a mindset shift towards valuing quality over quantity in clothing choices.

Environmental Benefits

Clothing Loop contributes to environmental sustainability by reducing textile waste and promoting a circular economy. By facilitating clothing swaps, the initiative helps divert thousands of kilos of clothing from landfills, thereby minimising the environmental impact associated with textile production and disposal. Each swap effectively extends the life cycle of clothes, reducing the need for new production and the resources associated with its production. Moreover, the initiative raises awareness about the environmental consequences of fast fashion by encouraging participants to consider the sustainability of their clothing choices.

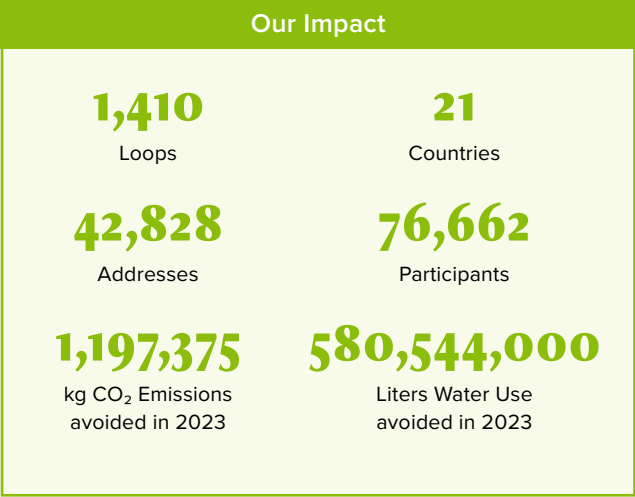
To monitor progress, Clothing Loop is releasing an impact report drawn from survey data gathered from its community members and statistics. According to the latest report, users see this initiative as a chance to promote sustainable consumption, inspire changes in mindset and encourage a reimagining of people’s relationship with clothing.¹



Source: Clothing Loop, Impact Report 2024

Replicability Potential

Clothing Loop demonstrates a significant replicability potential as shown by its rapid expansion from the Netherlands to other countries and regions (see map below). The model’s adaptability allows it to be customised according to local needs and contexts, making it suitable for various urban and rural settings.



Source: <https://www.clothingloop.org/en/>

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Sources:

- www.clothingloop.org/en
- ¹ Clothing Loop 2024: Impact Report.
Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/a8c1962269.html#page/1> accessed on 2 December 2024.
- Interview with Nichon Glerum, CEO & Founder

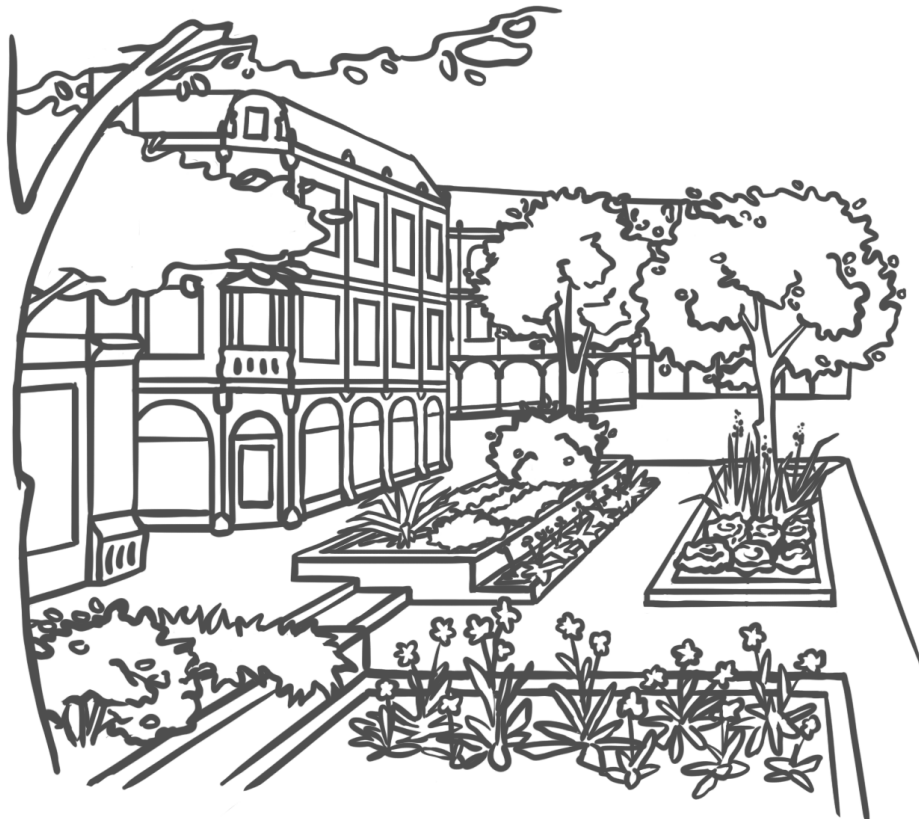
Hungarian Community Gardens

Small spaces for communal activity and as vital tools for enhancing social and environmental sustainability of urban life

“Urban life is often stressful and mentally exhausting. Gardens provide peace and recreation opportunities, helping people relax and reconnect with nature.”

In the heart of a bustling historic European city such as Budapest, a garden thrives as a vital oasis amidst the urban density. But how does a day in one of the many Budapest community gardens look like? Let's have a look at a snapshot of a summer morning: The warm, golden sunlight filters through the canopy of young trees, dappling the mosaic of cobblestones with light. On one bench, two elderly women sit together chatting. Nearby, a group of children play hopscotch, their laughter bouncing off the brick walls of the surrounding buildings. In the middle of the park, a young father and his children crouch, tending to a patch of peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes that they and their neighbours have planted as part of the Hungarian Community Gardens Project.

The air hums with life, blackbirds are singing and a butterfly is tumbling by – a stark contrast to the traffic noise just beyond the iron gate. Budapest with its dense buildings and heritage-protected areas cannot create additional large parks. Therefore, these small citizen-maintained community gardens offer a respite for human recreation, social connection, and a touch of nature's calming embrace. These sanctuaries are lifelines, especially as the world's population rapidly increases, with over 50 % of people already living in cities.¹



The Spark

Since its founding in 2005, the Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre (Kortárs Építészeti Központ – KÉK) focuses on improving urban liveability and developing urban green spaces. This has led them to consider interim uses for vacant properties, a result of the 2008–2010 economic crisis, as a tool for urban development. In this context, they introduced the urban and community garden movement in 2010. Under the guidance of KÉK, the Hungarian Community Gardens Project essentially grew out of a public space forum in autumn 2009 dealing with “Pocket Parks”. Besides KÉK, many professional and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local and community patriotic initiatives and municipalities were involved in the opening of the community gardens.

Governance Model and Replicability Potential

KÉK popularises community gardens in Hungary – an initiative with decades of tradition in Western Europe and North America – and developed the methodology, legal framework and adaptable models for the Hungarian context. Additionally, they supported the movement’s now largely self-organised nature through education, consultation and knowledge base development.

Community gardens offer a high replicability potential and have already been established around the world. They can vary significantly between cities and continents, and can easily be adapted to locations, social and environmental needs, native wildlife and local crops. They are often community-led, which makes them more independent of governmental money and probably increase the citizens’ connection to “their” community garden and willingness to participate in the gardens’ maintenance.

In Budapest, the community gardens are maintained by urban residents and local neighbours, active youth, individuals or civic groups, green-minded organisations and their supporters, families without their own gardens, school and kindergarten groups, university and college students in fields such as art, design, landscaping and cultural work, retirees, and of course municipalities, which play a crucial role.

Social and Environmental Benefits

Community gardens in Budapest are transforming urban life by addressing critical social and ecological problems. In densely populated areas where urban isolation and lack of community are prevalent, these gardens serve as vital spaces for residents to connect, collaborate and build supportive relationships. They provide a peaceful retreat from the stresses of city living, promoting mental well-being and offering recreational opportunities. Additionally, community gardens enhance food self-sufficiency by enabling city dwellers to grow fresh, locally grown vegetables and fruits, thereby reducing personal food insecurity. They also function as educational hubs, teaching basic and sustainable gardening practices to those lacking knowledge and skills.

Environmentally, these gardens create much-needed green spaces that improve microclimate and air quality and support biodiversity by providing (stepstone) habitats for pollinators, birds and other organisms. Furthermore, they contribute to waste management through promoting zero-waste practises, composting systems, and community-led collection and processing of organic waste. Community gardens help combat climate change by contributing to urban climate adaptation by increasing green spaces, reducing the urban heat island effect and sequestering carbon dioxide.

Ultimately, Budapest’s community gardens are not only enhancing social cohesion but also fostering environmental sustainability in the urban landscape. These gardens demonstrate that local initiatives and communities can effectively address global problems at the local level.

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Sources:

- ¹ <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications>
- Written interview with Monika Kertész (KÉK) in November and December 2024

Schmitzundkuntz e.V.

"This is how communities work."



©Schmitzundkuntz e.V.

Community is at the heart of the Schmitzundkuntz e.V. initiative. The project is run by a group of likeminded people, fostering the sharing of things, knowledge, time and other resources, providing communal support and encouraging a more sustainable and creative lifestyle in urban areas.



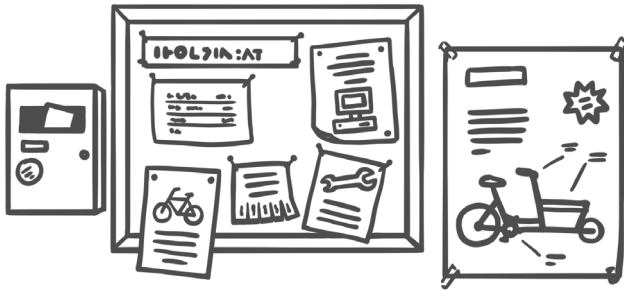
©Schmitzundkuntz e.V.



©Schmitzundkuntz e.V.

People in urban communities face a variety of different challenges: limited spaces for cultural and creative activities, high rents that limit their resources and lower their living standards or tiny living spaces that do not allow the accumulation of many things. But some are also victims to more serious threats like poverty, anonymity and above all loneliness, that make them feel small, invisible and insignificant although they are surrounded by a huge number of people. While anyone can face these challenges, these struggles disproportionately affect marginalised groups like the elderly, migrants, refugees, students, and single parents.

Against this backdrop, the Schmitzundkuntz e.V. located in the "Komponistenviertel" (composers' quarter) in Cologne, Germany, emerges as a beacon of hope by putting community and mental health in the spotlight. Its concept is based four key-pillars: art and culture, community, sustainability and community service.



The organisation's heart is a vibrant community space that pulses with life. Here, theatre performances and music practice blend with craft workshops, clothing-, book- and plant swaps intersect with seniors' cafés, and a public bike repair station. Yet the vision extends beyond these walls through urban gardening projects, bird and nature preservation efforts, street art initiatives or neighbourhood walking tours. Central to their philosophy is a powerful belief: everyone's voice matters and everyone can and should have an impact on their local community. By creating a space where ideas can take root and flourish, Schmitzundkuntz doesn't just talk about community, they live it.

While some working groups are transient, others become long-standing institutions. All share a common goal: to reimagine urban living as a collaborative, sustainable and meaningful experience through shared resources, like an equipment and tools rental, urban gardening, clothing swaps, a repair station or rentals for bikes and cargo bikes.

The Schmitzundkuntz website features a dynamic calendar of upcoming activities, embodying their "act fast and try out" philosophy. The organisation welcomes ideas from both members and non-members, supported by a team of nearly 110 volunteers. This innovative approach earned them the prestigious Elisabeth Prize from the German Caritas Foundation, recognizing exceptional social engagement. Additionally, they've been nominated for the German volunteering award.

The Spark

The legend has it, that founder Günter Schmitt, sought creative inspiration in a dedicated art-space. An IT professional and part-time artist, Schmitt rented an art studio that quickly evolved into a shared creative hub. As ideas and fellow creatives multiplied, the initiative soon expanded to occupy more spaces in the neighbourhood.

The project rapidly grew beyond art, encompassing educational and community support activities. A cornerstone of their offerings is the "FAIRLeih" (fair rental) system, a library of over 2000 items including high-tech equipment, e-bikes, and even an excavator, available free of charge to all.

Governance Model

Schmitzundkuntz champions grassroots community action, driven by 110 non-paid passionate volunteers reshaping urban social dynamics. The inclusive approach encourages both members and non-members to bring ideas to life, fostering a dynamic sense of community.

With 620 members all across Europe, membership fees ranging from € 60 to € 15 annually ensure accessibility for all, including students and those facing unemployment. This model sustains the organisation while reinforcing social equity.

Beyond membership fees, the project recently tapped into public funding, collaborating with, e.g., "Essbare Stadt Köln" ('Edible City Cologne'), which fights overproduction and overconsumption. In addition, local businesses provide crucial support, from supermarkets offering gift cards for low-income elderly to garden centres donating plants and urban gardening supplies.

The Schmitzundkuntz sustainability focus extends to partnerships with local enterprises like organic markets, bike-shops and craft shops, offering discounts to members. Meanwhile collaborations with community colleges and programs like "Aktiv im Alter" ('Active in Old Age'), provide education for senior citizens, and weave a rich tapestry of intergenerational learning and cultural exchange while expanding the initiative's network.

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Replicability Potential

The Schmitzundkuntz e.V. initiative demonstrates significant replicability potential, as evidenced by its successful expansion to a temporary field office in Cologne's neighbourhood Sülz. This model of community engagement and resource sharing can be adapted to suit the unique needs of any neighbourhood or local community. The project's flexible structure allows for the incorporation of individual requirements specific to each area, whether it's focusing on clothing swaps, tool rentals, or environmental education.

The key to replicability lies in the initiative's core principles of fostering community connections, promoting sustainability, and encouraging creative problem-solving. By providing a framework that can be tailored to local needs, Schmitzundkuntz offers a blueprint for other communities to establish similar projects. For instance, the collaboration with local schools, showcasing how such initiative can be integrated into existing community structures. This adaptability ensures that the Schmitzundkuntz model can be effectively implemented in diverse urban and suburban settings, promoting sustainable living and community cohesion across different neighbourhoods.

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Social and Environmental Benefits

The Schmitzundkuntz e.V. initiative magnificently illustrates the profound social and environmental advantages of community-driven endeavours. By providing a platform for creative expression and genuine connection, the project nurtures an inclusive environment where diverse individuals can thrive and seek support.

The project's innovative approach tackles multiple urban challenges simultaneously. By fostering connections across generations, it effectively combats loneliness and supports mental health. Their resource-sharing model, from tool rentals to clothing swaps and bicycle programs, promotes a sustainable lifestyle that prioritises repairing and reusing over mindless consumption.

Urban gardening and nature preservation activities engage community members and transform residents into environmental advocates. Participants learn about local ecosystems, developing a nuanced understanding of their immediate natural environment. This educational approach turns passive urban dwellers into active, informed stewards of their local landscape.

Through these multifaceted approaches, Schmitzundkuntz demonstrates how local communities can simultaneously address social isolation, personal creativity, and environmental challenges, creating a more connected and sustainable urban eco-system.

Plastic Pirates – Go Europe!

“[In an ideal scenario] environmental data gathered as part of citizen science initiatives is recognised, valued and considered in the policy-making process.”

Mandy Hinzmann, Ecologic Institute, Interview 09-12-2024



The Spark

Every year around 6 million tons of plastic waste leaks to rivers and coasts, and about 15% of that waste finds its way to our oceans¹. This plastic waste accumulates and over time breaks down into tiny pieces that are eaten by fish and other animals, poisoning them and ultimately entering our own food chain². Even though rivers and coastlines are a major pathway to the ocean, being the origin of 75% of the ocean plastics, there is still a big data gap on plastic pollution patterns across Europe³. That is where Plastic Pirates – Go Europe! comes in. The program originated from the Científicos de la Basura, a citizen science programme initiated at the Universidad Católica del Norte (UCN) in Coquimbo, Chile. The initiative unites young people (ages 10 to 16), scientists, teachers and volunteers to collect and analyse data on plastic pollution in rivers, beaches and along coastlines. By standardising methods and working together with governments, research institutions and schools, the project not only generates valuable insights for researchers but also empowers young citizens with environmental knowledge and responsibility.

After its foundation in Chile the initiative was transferred to Germany where the Kiel Science Factory (KSF) first developed the Plastic Pirates campaign in 2016. During the German EU Presidency in 2020 the German campaign was extended to also include Portugal and Slovenia in 2020–2021. In the last three years the initiative saw a further Europeanisation, including a total of 12 countries within the EC-funded project Plastic Pirates – Go Europe.

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Governance Model

The initiative employs a participatory governance model that connects science, citizens and policymakers. Twice a year young citizen scientists from 12 European countries join sampling campaigns to collect and use a standardised methodology to document plastic waste in and near rivers. Results of the samplings (including counted litter items, types of litter and overall weight) are uploaded to a central database. Their contributions generate large-scale data whilst fostering co-creation of knowledge by empowering the youth to actively contribute to research. By validating and centralising the gathered data the project strengthens the science-policy interface by advocating for citizen-generated data to be recognised and valued in decision making.

Throughout its different stages of implementation, the citizen science campaign enjoyed financial support from a range of sources. Starting with funding from the Chilean Science Foundation CONICYT for the initial methodology, followed by national support structures for the implementation of the campaign in Germany, Portugal and Slovenia.



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The Europeanisation of the citizen science initiative since July 2023 is funded under the EC's Horizon Europe Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030". The European funding is supplemented with national funding to pay for funds to the local implementation of the campaign.

Social Benefits

The project actively engages and empowers citizens, particularly young people, across Europe. Plastic Pirates motivates active involvement by involving youth in hands-on scientific research. By participating in the project young citizens become more aware of the environmental impact of plastic waste and the benefits of preserving ecosystems. The experience promotes a sense of responsibility and motivates participants to take action to protect the environment.

Through the collection and documentation of waste the initiative enhances the scientific understanding of plastic pollution. Young citizen scientists gather valuable data, which researchers analyse to gain insights into pollution patterns. Additionally, the project contributes to long-term solutions for the prevention, reduction and removal of pollution. It can set a standard for creating strategies to combine citizen science with scientific research.



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Environmental Benefits

During each sampling campaign, Plastic Pirates teams gather waste from rivers, coastlines and beaches which is then analysed. Afterwards, the waste is disposed of responsibly. This contributes to reducing the environmental impact of plastic litter.

For the long term, the collected data provides insights into plastic flows before they reach the ocean. These findings could guide environmental policies and shape conservation strategies to stop plastic at its source, helping reduce marine pollution in the long run.



Impact numbers of Plastic Pirates – Go Europe! since June 2022

Replicability Potential

Plastic Pirates – Go Europe! has proven it can work anywhere. After its foundation in Chile and its transfer to Germany, EU funding for the PlasticsPiratesEU initiative in 2022 led to successful expansion to 11 other European countries. This expansion highlights the project's adaptability and its ability to unite diverse communities in the shared mission of reducing plastic pollution. Additionally, the gathered data is analysed across countries as a joint scientific cooperation.

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Save the Waves Coalition

“By protecting surf areas, we safeguard marine and terrestrial ecosystems and create win-win situations for local stakeholders.”

Diego Sancho Gallegos, Stewardship & Resilience Manager



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The Spark

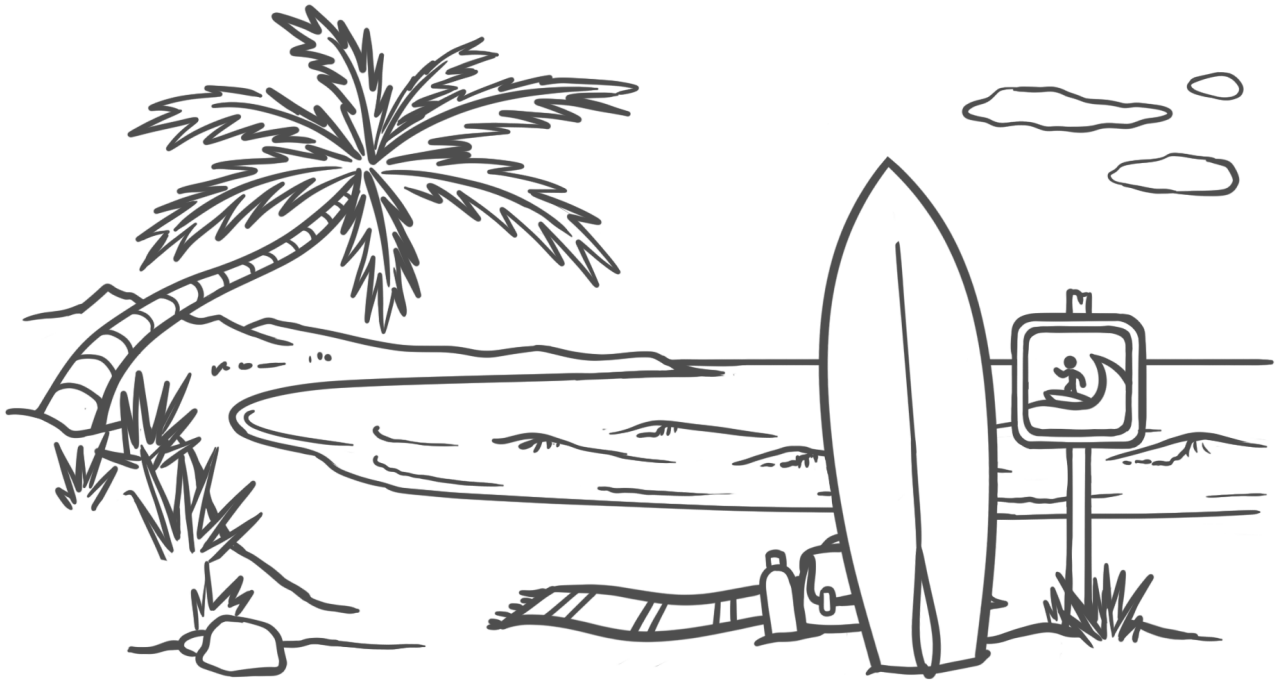
The Save the Waves Coalition is a global nonprofit organisation dedicated to protecting surf ecosystems through a mix of conservation, advocacy and innovation. Its core motivation is to preserve the unique cultural, ecological and economic value of surf breaks and coastal environments that are under threat from climate change, pollution and uncontrolled development.

By collaborating with local communities, governments and environmental partners the coalition establishes World Surfing Reserves, supports community-led conservation projects and leverages the power of surfers and ocean lovers as stewards of these vital areas. The Collaboration's mission is rooted in the belief that saving surf ecosystems ensures the preservation of natural habitats, biodiversity and the vibrant coastal cultures associated with them.

Governance Model

Financed by donations and grants, the Save the Waves Coalition operates under a collaborative governance model that emphasises coalition building and community engagement to protect surf ecosystems. The organisation partners with local communities, governments and environmental groups to establish protected areas such as World Surfing Reserves, and to implement stewardship and advocacy initiatives.

This approach ensures that conservation efforts are locally led and culturally relevant. Save the Waves works collaboratively with local coalition partners at each site, guiding them through a conservation planning process that results in the creation of a Local Stewardship Council (LSC) and a Reserve Stewardship Plan. The LSC is responsible for the ongoing management of the Reserve once established.



Social Benefits

The Save the Waves Coalition fosters social benefits by empowering local communities to actively participate in conserving their coastal environments. Through collaborative efforts, the organisation instils a sense of ownership and pride among residents, enabling them to become stewards of their surf ecosystems. This participatory approach not only strengthens local capacity for environmental conservation, but also promotes social cohesion by connecting diverse stakeholders such as governments, NGOs and businesses to work towards shared goals. Additionally, the Coalition plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage by protecting surf breaks that hold historical and spiritual significance, ensuring that traditional practices and lifestyles remain intact for future generations.

Beyond cultural and community impacts, the Coalition contributes to the economic and well-being aspects of coastal populations. Sustainable surf tourism driven by the protection of pristine coastal areas provides economic opportunities, creates jobs and supports local businesses. Cleaner environments enabled by pollution mitigation and conservation initiatives improve public

health and offer recreational spaces for physical and mental well-being. Through education and awareness campaigns the Coalition instils a culture of environmental responsibility, not only benefiting local communities but also inspiring a global network of surfers and ocean enthusiasts to take action for the preservation of coastal ecosystems.



©Save the Waves Coalition

Environmental Benefits

The Save the Waves Coalition creates environmental benefits by protecting and preserving surf ecosystems and their surrounding habitats. By safeguarding critical coastal and marine environments such as coral reefs, mangroves and estuaries, the Coalition ensures the survival of diverse plant and animal species, supporting biodiversity and ecological balance. These efforts also reduce the risks of habitat loss caused by pollution and unsustainable development, preserving vital ecosystems that act as natural buffers against coastal erosion and storm surges. Moreover, by advocating for clean water and better waste management practices the Coalition improves water quality and reduces pollution, directly benefiting aquatic life and marine ecosystems.

In addition to these immediate conservation efforts the Coalition's work contributes to long-term environmental sustainability and resilience. Protecting ecosystems like mangroves and coral reefs enhances their natural carbon sequestration capacities, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change. These ecosystems also provide natural defence against rising sea levels and extreme weather, improving climate resilience for coastal communities. By raising global awareness and promoting sustainable tourism practices, the Coalition not only preserves surf breaks but also inspires a culture of environmental stewardship among surfers and coastal populations worldwide. This holistic approach ensures that the environmental benefits extend far beyond the areas directly protected by the organisation.



©Save the Waves Coalition

Replicability Potential

The Save the Waves Coalition's model has replicability potential due to its scalable, community-driven approach to conservation. By focusing on partnerships with local stakeholders, leveraging the global surfing community and employing a tiered engagement framework, the Coalition can adapt its strategies to diverse cultural, ecological and economic contexts. The concept of World Surfing Reserves, where iconic surf breaks and their ecosystems are designated and protected, provides a replicable template for other organisations aiming to identify and conserve similar niche environments worldwide.



©Esteban Delgado

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Social Innovation in Practice

Cluster Private Businesses

Oma's Soep

“Every Cooking Day offers a little encouragement, and is a reminder that you are being thought of and not alone.”

Grandma from Amsterdam (NL) participating at Oma's Soep Events



©Oma's Soep

The Spark

Loneliness is a major and growing problem in the Netherlands, also among the elderly. In 2023 nearly 11% of the Dutch population aged 15 or older felt very lonely, whereas 29% percent felt somewhat lonely. Among the elderly nearly half felt lonely regularly.¹ Lonely people experience social loneliness which is the feeling of emptiness around them and the lack of fun. Emotional loneliness, on the other hand, is the feeling that they do not have people around them who they feel connected to and who they can trust to catch them when they fall.

On Christmas Eve 2016, the grandma of one of the founders of Oma's Soep (Granny's Soup) told him she really enjoyed cooking for family and friends, but that family members were living too far away and that more and more of her friends were less mobile. Inspired by her remark and only a few days later, the idea to bring elderly and young people together to make soup and to combat loneliness was born over a beer in a pub.

The main goal of Oma's Soep is to organise recurring social contact for elderly people living alone. In addition, a contribution is made to reducing food waste.



Governance Model

The social enterprise Oma's Soep consists of two entities: a foundation, Stichting Oma's Soep tegen Eenzaamheid, and a commercial enterprise, Oma's Soep B.V. In its early days, the foundation was mostly supported by several funds and is now mainly funded through the profits of the commercially operating sister enterprise. The latter produces soup in a professional production kitchen based on recipes from elderly people created during cooking days. The soup is sold across physical and online supermarkets in the Netherlands. In accordance with the articles of association, at least 50 % of the profits of this commercial enterprise are transferred to the foundation. This financing amount differs due to investments by the commercial enterprise. Therefore, Oma's Soep also applies for funds and additionally invests in creating strong relations with companies and individuals to obtain financing.

The foundation organises different types of activities where the young and the old are brought together to combat loneliness. Student boards of 7 to 8 people (renewed annually) oversee local operations in 13 student cities across the country. In each city, up to 100 volunteers undertake the activities that bring young and old people together. At weekly **Cooking Days**, young student volunteers and lonely elderly cook soup together in community centres and eat it for lunch. During the Covid-19 pandemic organising these Cooking Days was not possible, and the **"Soup-at-Home Days"** were initiated. Volunteers deliver soup and handwritten cards to the homes of the elderly. They drink coffee with the elderly and/or take them for a walk/ride.

To reach elderly people in areas where there is (not yet) an active student board, "Grandma's Pen Pal/ Call Pal" was initiated. Student volunteers are matched with elderly living in or near the same neighbourhood and regularly send a letter, or make a phone call, creating a personal bond.² To further spread the mission of Oma's Soep and to put the elderly in the spotlight, large and small fun events and PR campaigns are organised a few times a year (e.g. Gala Evening, Disco Balls Bingo, Cooking with Queen Maxima).

Social Benefits

Oma's Soep is a new care concept **supporting people** that connects elderly, that do not cook themselves but rather pass on their knowledge of recipes, and young student volunteers who do the actual cooking. **Vulnerable people** (elderly) benefit from extra activities (large and small fun events) where they are put in the spotlight. This leads to reduced loneliness and improved health of elderly. In addition, the contact between young and old results in valuable and fun contacts.

©Oma's Soep



©Oma's Soep



Environmental Benefits

Food waste is avoided by making soup (and other meals) from “leftover” vegetables that are still good and edible, but do not meet certain quality standards for regular sales. This not only reduces the environmental impact of food waste by lowering greenhouse gas emissions from discarded produce but also raises awareness among people of all ages about the importance of sustainable food practices and the value of every resource in our food system.

Oma's Soep Impact from 2023³



28,000
Encounters
between young
and old yearly



12,000 kg of
Food saved by
Oma's Soep
yearly



500+
Volunteers help
yearly

Replicability Potential

Oma's Soep illustrates that the basic concept of this social innovation can be transferred to other geographies. After starting in Amsterdam in 2017, operations were rolled out to other parts of the country and now include a dozen other university cities. Their goal is to be active in all 17 student cities in the Netherlands, and international expansion to England is investigated. The active involvement of motivated student volunteers is considered key for successful expansion.



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©Oma's Soep

Happy Hours Market

“Your groceries half-price to fight waste!”

Happy Hours Market Website



©The Good Com

Every minute in Belgium eight tonnes of food are thrown away. Meanwhile, about 19% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and approximately 13% struggle to buy healthy food.¹

The Spark

The story of Happy Hours Market (HHM) started when the two founders, freshly out of university and aware of the issue of food waste in Brussels, decided to try and see if they could do something about it. They borrowed a truck from a local catering company and knocked at the door of a few supermarkets in the university's neighbourhood. They explained that they wanted to redistribute the food the shops could not sell and were astonished to be given not a small basket but several carts full of goods!

They then proceeded to offer the products to students on the nearby high street and managed to sell most of them within the same day, which confirms that people are willing to buy food with a short expiry date if the price is low enough. This was before leftovers apps like Too Good To Go existed, and the founders needed to prove that there was an interest from consumers.

The leftovers of the sale were then donated to the university's community grocery which helps poor students. They repeated the exercise a couple of times, and then Happy Hours Market was officially launched in 2020. The main goal of Happy Hours Market is to tackle the issue of food waste by redistributing unsold food to those in need, reducing the environmental impact of food production and offering discounted prices to consumers.





©The Good Com



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Governance Model

Every morning, the Happy Hour Market team collects unsold food products from 52 partner stores. Most of them are franchises of the main Belgian grocery store chains: Delhaize, Carrefour or Intermarché. Donating companies can receive retributions for the goods that are later sold by Happy Hour Market, based on a share of the offered sales price.

The food is brought to the company's storing facility in Brussels and is listed on the company's digital app. Consumers can buy more than 5000 products for a discounted price every day between 8 am and 10 pm. Discounts can be up to -70 % and are on average half the original price if the expiry date falls on the same day.

The orders are delivered in the evening or the next day to several distribution points in Brussels, where consumers can collect them. The remaining food is donated to local associations that help vulnerable people. HHM currently works with 16 charities and employs more than 100 people. Since its foundation, more than 2000 tons of food have been saved from being wasted and more than 400,000 products have been donated to charities. 30,000 orders are placed each month.

Social Benefits

By offering food at a discounted price the initiative helps consumers access affordable and varied food options. Associations that support vulnerable people also benefit from the donations by receiving food for free.

Companies benefit from reduced waste management costs and costs related to managing products with a short shelf-life. They also avoid some of the loss of revenue from unsold products.

Environmental Benefits

Food waste from main retailers is reduced, lowering the environmental impact of not utilising all the produced food and transportation to the cities. Retailers have access to data on what HHM collects from them and sells, which can help them better plan their orders and avoid ordering too much.

By using or hearing about the Happy Hours Market app, consumers are made aware of the issue of food waste. Since half of food waste happens in homes, educating consumers can play a crucial role in addressing the issues related to food waste.

Replicability Potential

The initiative can be replicated to any country with large retailers. The retail market depends on proposing a wide array of products and will always generate surplus products, which means that actors like Happy Hour Market will always have a space to balance the market. Happy Hours Market aims to extend its activities beyond Brussels.

There are companies similar to HHM, such as Too Good to Go or Phenix, with the difference that they do not offer collection points. HHM originality lies in its logistics system, which helps to make the food more accessible and helps redistributing it to charities that often lack the resources.

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ResQ Club



Background

Scandic, a leading hotel chain in the Nordics, faces a frequent challenge. Each day, their hotels serve thousands of guests with high-quality meals ranging from breakfasts to dinner, but inevitably some of this food goes uneaten. The surplus meals, still perfectly good are at risk of going to waste. This was a troubling scenario for Scandic.

Enter ResQ Club, a Helsinki-based Finnish social innovation aimed at reducing bio-based waste. Launched in 2015, ResQ Club offers hope for businesses like Scandic. The mobile app connects consumers with surplus food from nearby restaurants, cafés and grocery stores, allowing users to purchase these meals at a discounted price. With 100,000 active monthly users ResQ Club has created a vibrant community dedicated to sustainability.

Scandic Finland joined the ResQ Club platform becoming part of a network of 10,000 other businesses, including restaurants, cafés and grocery stores. Each week about 3,000 of these businesses actively sell their surplus through the platform. For Scandic, this meant that the surplus meals from their hotels could now find a new home, reducing waste and generating additional revenue. Consumers could now enjoy Scandic's high-quality meals at a fraction of the price ensuring that good food did not go to waste.

The story of ResQ Club began with its founder who was deeply troubled by the environmental impact of food waste. As he delved deeper into the issue he was struck by the staggering amounts of surplus food and the significant CO₂ emissions it generated. This growing awareness ignited a passion in him to make a difference. Drawing on his experience from working on a similar Finnish app he envisioned a modern solution that could bridge the gap between businesses and consumers. Thus, ResQ Club was born – a service designed to reduce waste and promote responsible consumption.

ResQ Club's innovation didn't stop at food. Today, the platform has expanded to include other surplus items with expiry dates such as flowers and cosmetics. This has broadened its impact, helping even more businesses turn potential waste into opportunity. Additionally, ResQ Club has begun addressing food waste at the wholesale level further amplifying its positive effects.

The collaboration between restaurants and ResQ Club prove how innovative solutions can transform challenges into opportunities. By leveraging ResQ Club, restaurants enhance their sustainability efforts but can also strengthen their connection with the community.

Governance Model

ResQ Club operates as a private company with a mission-driven approach. By partnering with food businesses to list surplus meals on its platform, ResQ Club offers significant benefits to restaurants. Firstly, it increases restaurant revenue by turning potential waste into profit. Secondly, it helps in customer acquisition by attracting new patrons who try out the restaurant offerings through the app.

Additionally, ResQ Club appeals to eco-conscious consumers who prioritise sustainability, thereby enhancing the restaurant's reputation and customer base. The company ensures a seamless and efficient process for both sellers and buyers, taking 25 % of the sales as a commission.

Social Benefits

The platform fosters a community of environmentally conscious consumers and businesses working together to reduce waste. With the ResQ app, consumers can save by purchasing discounted meals to go, become more aware of how to reduce food waste and reconsider their preference for food freshness. The company also helps to raise restaurant industry awareness of food waste as it educates restaurants on pricing to show how sustainability and discounts can result in a profitable business.

Environmental Benefits

ResQ Club follows the circular economy strategy of re-use, helping consumers purchase meals that would otherwise be discarded even though they are still in good condition and fulfilling their original function. This approach significantly reduces food waste and consequently lowers CO₂ emissions.

In addition to rescuing prepared meals ResQ Club enhances resource efficiency. The platform already helps restaurants by rescuing foodstuffs that go into meal production. To further expand its impact, the company is now piloting initiatives with fruit and vegetable wholesalers, as well as flower shops to sell their surplus directly to consumers.

This new approach addresses a key challenge: The availability and quantity of surplus vegetables and fruits from wholesalers can vary greatly, while restaurants often require specific amounts at specific times. Consumers on the other hand are more flexible and can absorb these surpluses more readily. By connecting wholesalers directly with consumers, ResQ Club can further reduce food waste and make resource use even more efficient.

Replicability Potential

ResQ Club's model educates consumers about the importance of reducing food waste, and helps them reconsider the fate of slightly less fresh food. The model is highly replicable. The ResQ Club's app combines technology, consumer-restaurant map-based targeting and business model innovation in the food waste reduction domain, a space also recognised by other players like Too Good To Go (<https://www.toogoodtogo.com>), and Karma (<https://staging.karma.life/>). The award-winning model has been successfully adapted to various cities and countries expanding to multiple locations in Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Germany.

Key factors for replication include establishing strong connections between local food businesses and nearby consumers, and encouraging restaurateurs to rethink their pricing and preparation strategies. Drawing from the elements of consumer education, community connection and restaurant service rethinking create ample opportunities for other companies to replicate ResQ Club's success in their own communities, fostering a more sustainable and resource-efficient food system.

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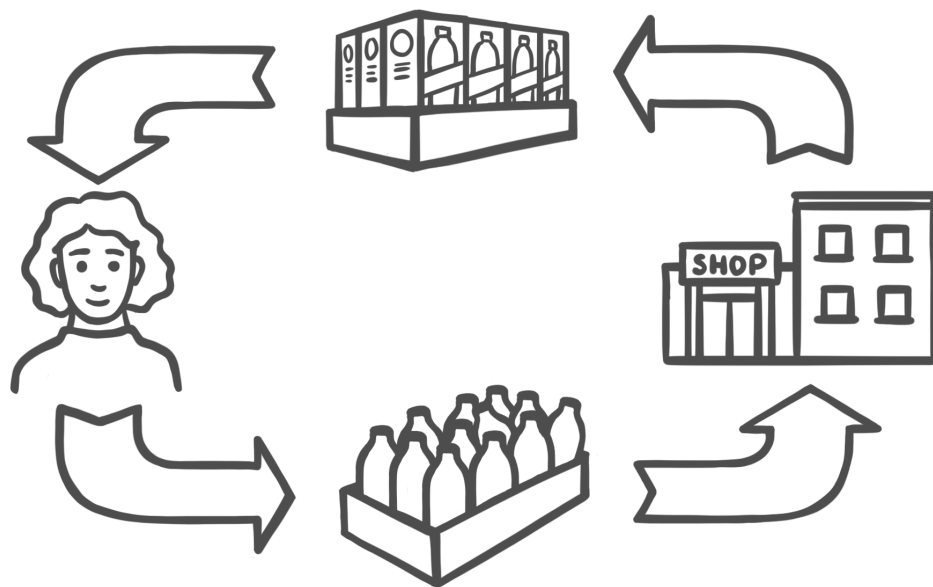
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RRR'biocosmetics

"Thanks to RRR'biocosmetics, working at the company meant finding a place to feel valued and employees' work matters."

CEO RRR'biocosmetics



The Spark

Founded in 2020 by the Ribalta sisters and Agustín Vilar in Sant Cugat del Vallès, RRR'biocosmetics surged from a commitment towards sustainability and inclusivity. Drawing inspiration from their father, Ramón Ribalta, an industrial engineer and environmental advocate, the siblings envisioned a brand that would promote resource conservation as well as responsible consumption in the cosmetics industry.

When Ana's son faced challenges finding a job due to his disability, it led to a business idea in which individuals with disabilities could have meaningful job opportunities. Therefore, RRR'biocosmetics intends to "create an environment in which people with functional diversity could feel useful and proud of their work".

The cosmetics industry mostly relies on the use of plastic packaging, whereas this initiative decided to introduce a circular economy model based on aluminium packaging, a material that can be reused or recycled. Thus, RRR'biocosmetics was founded with a triple mission: to reduce environmental waste, ensure high-quality sustainable biocosmetics and create job opportunities for people with disabilities.

Governance Model

RRR'biocosmetics works as a social enterprise, as they prioritise inclusivity and sustainability, being structured to provide stable employment for people with disabilities, especially through its Pack Return Programme. In this programme, employees clean, disinfect, and reintegrate returned cosmetic packaging into the production cycle, allowing RRR'biocosmetics to contribute to waste reduction and provide job opportunities.

Unlike traditional business structures, RRR'biocosmetics incorporates environmental and social considerations into its decision-making process, for instance by collaborating with non-profit and social organisations, and with the organic certification organisation ECOCERT.

©RRR'biocosmetics



Social Impact

Inclusivity represents the core of RRR'biocosmetics by actively employing disabled workers and providing them with economic stability as well as professional development opportunities. By collaborating with organisations like Aspasim employees can receive specialised training and are supported to succeed in their roles. To make the work process easier for their employees, the company has developed a colour-coded packaging system that simplifies sorting for employees that have difficulties with motor skills.

Beyond employment the company intends to raise awareness about the relevance of workforce inclusion and to encourage other initiatives to adopt similar practices. By leading through example, the company fosters a culture valuing disabled individuals and their work.

Environmental Impact

RRR'biocosmetics exclusively uses aluminium packaging for their products which can be infinitely recycled, hence reducing the reliance on plastic waste. In addition, their products are formulated with 100 % biodegradable and organic ingredients which ensures a reduced environmental impact.

To expand its sustainability reach, RRR'biocosmetics has partnered with Veritas, a Spanish supermarket chain, and Amazon to promote responsible consumption and make eco-friendly products more accessible to the public. Nevertheless, return of the packaging remains a challenge despite the efforts to encourage users.

As an attempt to boost the packaging return rates the company offers discounts on future purchases to customers who return the packaging. Additionally, awareness campaigns through social media, in-store promotions and direct engagement are being adopted to educate consumers on the benefits of their Pack Return Programme.

Replicability Potential

RRR'biocosmetics model represents a scalable approach to sustainable business and its strategy is already expanding by means of distribution agreements in France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Simultaneously, the company is refining its logistics to improve its Pack Return Programme to ensure that participation is even more accessible. The company is also collaborating with ECOCERT for product certification and with laboratories for sustainable formulation to stay at the forefront of scientific advancements in eco-friendly cosmetics and set a benchmark for sustainability in the industry.



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Contact:

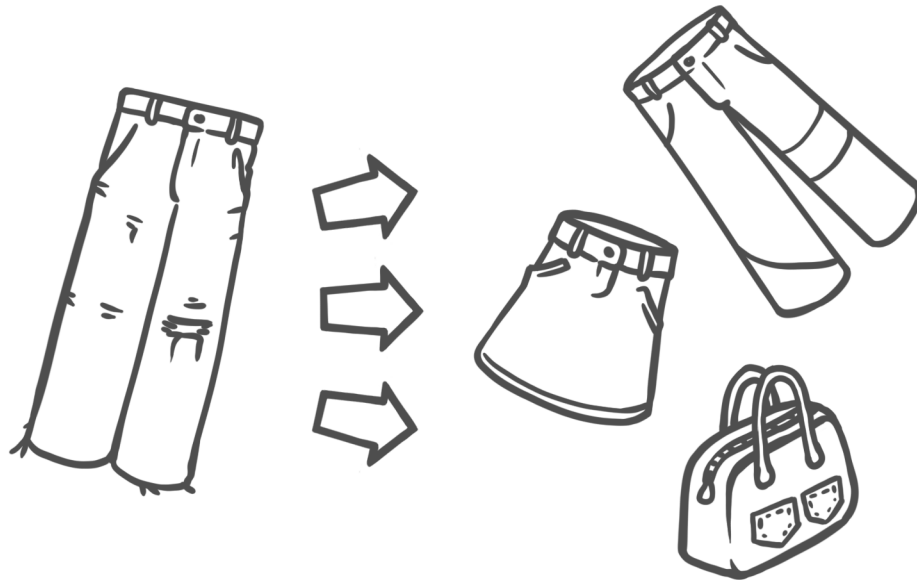
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Infini Denim



The Spark

Infini Denim's establishment was driven by the need to address the environmental consequences of the fashion industry, especially denim production, which requires a high demand of energy, water and chemicals. Infini Denim has worked to establish itself as a reference in sustainable fashion, by combining innovative recycling techniques with contemporary designs to attract both ethical consumers and those seeking quality and style in their clothing.

The company uses post-consumer denim waste, vegetable fibres and recycled cotton, and transforms these materials into new fibres and clothes, thus reducing carbon emissions and water consumption. Nonetheless, the co-founder Montse Bayén emphasised that even though sustainability is fashionable, having a sustainable business is not easy. The company needed to develop innovative solutions to obtain high-quality recycled raw materials and to optimise production processes while keeping the aesthetics and functionality of the clothing.

Governance Model

Infini Denim operates with a mission to integrate social and environmental goals. Its governance is built on three pillars: ethical labour, circular economy and consumer transparency.

As a social enterprise, Infini Denim combines ethical labour practices with community engagement. The company collaborates with local workshops and empowers women from vulnerable backgrounds, ensuring fair compensation and safe working conditions. By prioritising local production in Barcelona, it minimises carbon emissions from transportation while also supporting the regional economy.

Transparency is an important principle of the organisation. Through detailed product traceability customers can understand the social and environmental impact of their purchases, which also increases conscious consumerism.

Infini Denim actively engages in policy discussions and industry initiatives intending to improve sustainability regulations. By doing so, the firm hopes to contribute to shaping a more ethical and circular fashion industry.

Social Impact

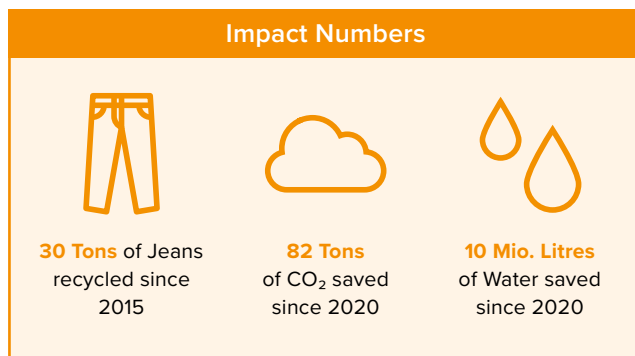
By working with local workshops which provide employment opportunities for marginalised communities, Infinit Denim integrates social responsibility into its operations. They also partner with other social initiatives promoting fair wages and safe working conditions in the industry.

Additionally, Infinit Denim has implemented training programmes for its employees to make sure they obtain valuable skills in textile recycling and sustainable production.

Environmental Impact

One of the company's main contributions to reducing the environmental impact is the significant reduction of water used in their production process. Traditionally, denim production requires around 10,000 litres of water per pair of jeans (Moda, 2023). Infinit Denim's textile process reduces this amount to nearly zero. Chemical waste is also minimised by using natural and non-toxic dyes instead of synthetic ones.

Infinit Denim incorporates biodegradable fibres in its manufacturing, which ensures that the clothes have a smaller environmental footprint compared with clothes using non-biodegradable fibres. By developing alliances with research centres and universities, the organisation keeps exploring new ways of making the production of textiles even more environmentally friendly and efficient.



Source: Infinit Denim, 2024

Replicability Potential

Infinit Denim's business model is designed to be both adaptable and scalable across several markets. Their circular economy approach including upcycling, textile recycling, or local production, could be replicated in other urban areas where textile waste management systems are in place or being implemented.

As the demand for sustainable clothing keeps growing, Infinit Denim is an example of how the industry can transition towards responsible production methods. For instance, by spreading its model towards other businesses through the company's involvement in knowledge-sharing initiatives.

Disclaimer: This factsheet has not been validated by Infinit Denim, all information has been extracted from online, publicly available sources.

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Good On You

“Wear the change you want to see.”

Sandra, Gordon and the Good On You Team



Background

The fashion industry is marred with issues of poor working conditions, animal welfare abuses and environmental destruction.¹ Textiles are on average the fourth-highest source of pressure on the environment and climate change from a European consumption perspective. According to the EEA², EU consumers buy annually 6.0 kg of clothing – approximately 24 new garments per year per person. Consumers regularly buy clothes with the intention to keep them for a short time; at the same time, the quality of garments has dropped significantly leading to fast disposal: 16 kg of textile waste was generated per capita in Europe in 2020, including clothing and footwear. In addition, poor working conditions and human rights' violations are rife across the global textile industry. Brands wield significant power over their value chains to keep prices below the cost of production – at the expense of nature and people.

Consumers can and want to improve the situation by supporting brands doing better, but they lack accessible tools to find reliable and relevant information to identify the most sustainable brands.

The Spark

Good On You was founded as a response to the Rana Plaza disaster, when in Bangladesh a building hosting the production of fast-fashion clothes collapsed in 2013 which resulted in the death of 1134 workers and injuries of many others.³ A group of campaigners, consumer advocates, sustainability experts and tech developers launched the project in Australia to mobilise consumers to buy from brands that adopt more sustainable practices.

The initiative's key insight is that in order to support sustainable consumption we must recognise that consumers make a range of trade-offs when buying a product. Sustainability is just one factor motivating consumers, whereas price, product features and brand reputation are other factors that play a role in decision-making. For this reason, consumers need help to compare how sustainable different brands are, and to identify which brands fit all their needs.

To achieve this, the platform provides information on fashion and beauty brands across the world through brand ratings. Those ratings are available to consumers via the Good On You directory (on web and app) and through Good On You partners.

They include both a succinct rating, and a more detailed analysis of how a brand addresses issues of animal welfare, working conditions and environmental issues. By targeting millions of consumers, they hope to reach a critical mass that can push even the largest brands to change their practices.



The platform offers visibility not only to larger brands but especially to small sustainable brands that have more difficulties being known by the wider public or being featured by mainstream platforms and retailers.

Good On You primarily supports sustainable consumption by providing trusted comparative information on thousands of fashion and beauty brands, making it much easier for consumers to choose the best option for their particular needs.

It also supports sustainable production by promoting the most sustainable brands and highlighting the shortcomings of the least sustainable ones.

Replicability Potential

Good On You's success lies in its methodology and its global reach (most users and partners are in the US, Europe and the UK with significant numbers in Australia, and a Japanese language version launched in 2024). Good On You's model can be replicated to most consumer products, as proven by its extension to beauty products and with more sectors to follow in 2025.

Governance Model

Good On You rates brands by analysing relevant public information. Information may come from the brands themselves, but also from credible third-party reports and certification schemes. The methodology developed with the support of industry experts comprises more than 900 data points across 54 key issues and indicators. Shoppers are invited to request new brands to be rated, and they can also send messages directly to brands, asking them to do better. Users can also browse Good On You's award-winning journal, which publishes helpful shopping content alongside reporting by top journalists.

Good On You also offers access to its sustainability ratings data and expertise to retailers worldwide that are looking to assess, source and market more sustainable brands. While the ratings are available to consumers for free, Good On You derives revenues from such business-oriented tools.

The Good On You directory was first launched with 300 ratings in Australia in 2016. It was then launched globally in 2018, and it now covers more than 6000 brands including mainstream fashion and beauty labels and smaller, more ethical and sustainable brands. In 2024, they started rating beauty brands. Good On You has a fully remote team of 25 staff, located mostly in Europe, UK and Australia.

Social Benefits

Good On You provides a new digital solution to empower consumers to make sustainable decisions. With its global orientation, it enhances the capacity of the worldwide consumer community to act and influence the largest brands.

Contact:

Gordon Renouf, CEO

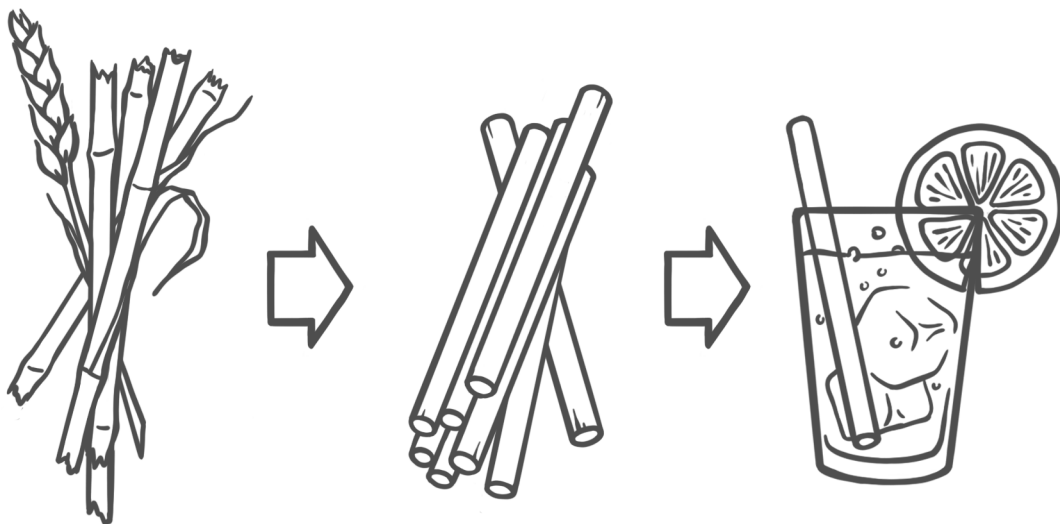
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Sources:

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Staramaki Social Cooperative



The Spark

Within the agricultural plains of Northern Greece, in the Kilkis region, rural communities struggled with economic decline due to youth migration to urban areas, leading to agricultural stagnation and rising poverty rates. In response, a group of local people founded Staramaki in 2018, a social cooperative dedicated to the production of biodegradable straws made from wheat-stem as a sustainable alternative to plastic.

By transforming agricultural waste into a product Staramaki intends to reduce plastic waste. Additionally, they reinvest their profits into local development such as the adoption of regenerative agricultural practices to improve soil quality and promote biodiversity.

Governance Model

As a social cooperative, Staramaki operates under a governance model valuing equity, inclusion and transparency. The Gini Index is zero, meaning that salaries and decision power are equal across all levels in the company's hierarchy. This ensures a fair distribution of economic benefits and strengthens the cooperative's commitment to social equity. 65% of the company's profits are reinvested in the company, while 30% are allocated to employees and the remaining 5% is reserved for future security.

Social Impact

The cooperative fosters social inclusion and economic resilience. It initially provided employment opportunities to six refugees and still supports more than 30 local farmers by purchasing wheat stems, which offers them an additional means of income and promotes sustainable agricultural practices.

Furthermore, the cooperative also contributes to education on sustainability in local communities, where it encourages people to acknowledge the value of agricultural waste, demonstrating how discarded materials can be transformed into valuable goods.

Impact Numbers

1,000 Mio.

Plastic Straws are consumed
in Greece every Year

72 %

of the Land in the Kilkis Region
has a Decline in Soil Fertility

Source: Website Staramaki <https://www.staramaki.gr/en/faqamaki>

Environmental Impact

The core mission of Staramaki is the reduction of plastic waste by substituting plastic straw with biodegradable straws made from wheat-stem, requiring minimal processing and no synthetic additives. The company integrates regenerative agriculture by testing crop rotation, soil enrichment and water conservation techniques, while complying with European and national regulations on food safety.

Another significant innovation in Staramaki's circular economy model is its partnership with InCommon, an NGO based in Thessaloniki. Together, they mix coffee waste from local cafés with straw residues to produce natural fertilisers for use in wheat fields. This collaboration not only reduces waste but also supports soil generation and long-term agricultural sustainability.

Replicability Potential

Overall, Staramaki's model demonstrates a high potential for replication for instance in wheat growing areas, which are found widely across Europe. Their strategy could be adopted in other countries, provided there's adequate policy and financial support for social initiatives.

Besides financial scalability, Staramaki also collaborates with research institutions (e.g. Aristotle University and the Soil & Water Institute) to improve the quality of wheat steams, composting techniques and production efficiency. Finally, the cooperative is also working with major retailers and food companies to expand its distribution channels, and hence make sustainable alternatives more accessible.

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Rejoué

“With Rejoué, give toys a second life.”

Rejoué Website



The Spark

In France, 40 million toys are thrown away every year. That is 100,000 tonnes of waste, not including the discarded packaging for new toys. On average, toys stop being used after only 8 months and are either thrown away, or most often left unused in attics and cabinets.¹

When her son was born, Claire Tournefier realised how many toys were thrown away each year and decided to act. As a volunteer with the French Red Cross, she was also conscious that many people face difficulties in finding jobs. In France, 35 % of people in search of a job are held back by health issues, lack of digital or language skills, long unemployment or lack of commuting option.²

She decided to launch an association to tackle both problems at once. The goal of Rejoué is to provide high-quality second-hand toys and support vulnerable people to take up sustainable employment and thus avoid social exclusion.

Governance Model

The association collects toys directly from citizens or during company collection events. Toys are then sorted according to safety norms, tested, completed if needed, and cleaned with environmentally safe products. Finally, Rejoué sells the second-hand toys at a discounted price (40 % cheaper than a new toy) directly to families, but more often to childhood professionals. They work with kindergartens, toy libraries, leisure centres, municipalities and other solidarity networks. They also gift a share of their collection to children thanks to partnerships with companies.

To do all this work, Rejoué hires people who are excluded from the traditional labour market. For example, they focus on isolated mothers. Working contracts are adapted to the needs of the employees and are typically long-term contracts to give them stability. In addition, the association offers regular monitoring and support to ensure that employees develop their skills to keep their jobs. This support can include advice on how to solve work problems, trainings, and teaching of new skills. They can also support employees in obtaining disability recognition and accessing housing.

Rejoué's programme aims to create all conditions for workers to stay employed in the long term, even after they stop working for the association and find new jobs. Besides, the association had a permanent staff of 18 people in 2024. Volunteers are also welcome to help restore toys or sell them in the association's shop. As a supportive activity, the association organises company events during which teams can discover the work of Rejoué, and work alongside Rejoué's employees. It acts as a team building and awareness campaign.

Half of Rejoué's funding comes from public money. Local authorities fund part of the salaries of workers. Rejoué also receives grants from the European Social Fund, the state, regions, and some public agencies like ADEME. The sale of toys and services to companies (team building events) sums up to 18% of the association's revenues. The final share (about 30%) is covered by private donations from foundations and companies.

Rejoué has now been active for more than 10 years in the French region Ile-de-France and is growing steadily.

Social Benefits

Rejoué helps vulnerable people to re-enter employment by providing them with stable jobs and tailored follow-up support to help them build the skills and conditions they need to stay employed. The benefits extend beyond the employees themselves: many of them are parents, and their children benefit. Stable employment for parents means more stability for children, safer housing, more stable education and better access to health services. If parents have to learn French, they can also better support their children's education (e.g. help with homework).

Rejoué also provides affordable toys, and children in need can also receive some of the toys as gifts. The association has built a network of public actors, companies, civil society and volunteers to reach its goals of fighting social exclusion and unnecessary waste.

In 2023, the association reports the following successes:

More than
82,454 Toys
were restored.

82 People
were supported, of which 65% are woman.

6,245 Children
received gifts as part of solidarity initiatives.

Environmental Benefits

By collecting, restoring and recirculating old toys, Rejoué addresses the issue of waste generation in the toy sector. The association contributes to a circular economy, helping products last longer and reducing the purchase of new products. In addition, the association adopts sustainable practices in its processes by using ecological products for cleaning toys.

By promoting the reuse of toys through its outreach activities, Rejoué contributes to changing consumption patterns and raising awareness across society towards the need to keep products in use for longer.

Replicability Potential

The concept of Rejoué can be replicated in other places. The success of the organisation depends on successful partnerships to fund the activities (notably with companies that can sponsor used toy donations), and adequate support of employees to ensure their continued employment. Rejoué's financial model is built on the French system of local authorities sponsoring jobs for people that face employment challenges. It also benefits from the tax rebate offered to companies when they donate to associations.

Rejoué operates in the Paris region, but since 2017 they work on disseminating their model. In 2020, Rejoué launched the Rejouons Solidaire Network to support the creation and federate similar structures. Since 2024 the network is independent from Rejoué.

The dissemination strategy is to replicate the model in other regions and become active at this local level. This is more environmentally friendly than to collecting and selling toys over longer distances (including online). When Rejoué is contacted by companies outside its region, it shares contact with the local association.

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Social Innovation in Practice

Cluster Public Sector

Soft Landing



©Soft Landing

The Spark

Every year, according to the Australian Bedding Stewardship Council (ABSC), 1.8 million mattresses are disposed of in Australia, with around 740,000 mattresses (22,000 tonnes) ending up in landfill. Mattresses are made from multiple materials, including textiles, metal springs, latex, and foam, which require careful separation to recycle effectively.

When mattresses are sent to landfill, they take up significant space, pose fire hazards, and contain chemicals of concern, such as flame retardants. They can also damage landfill machinery and release shredded particles into the air, causing further environmental harm.

Soft Landing provides a better solution and addresses two growing challenges: the environmental problem of discarded mattresses and the opportunity to create stable and meaningful jobs for people facing barriers to employment. Through its manual mattress recycling process, up to 100% of mattress materials are recovered for recycling, contributing to the circular economy and reducing the environmental impacts of landfill disposal.

Soft Landing believes recycling should do more than protect the planet – it should empower people. For every 23 mattresses collected and recycled each day, Soft Landing creates a job for someone who really needs one.

Governance Model

Soft Landing is part of Community Resources, a national not-for-profit organisation in Australia focused on creating jobs that care for people and the planet. As a registered charity, Soft Landing operates with the support of Community Resources' governance framework, which includes an experienced board of directors and senior leadership team. This governance ensures financial sustainability, compliance, and alignment with the organisation's mission.

Through various certifications, Soft Landing is committed to measurable social impact and sustainable practices, including its role as a Certified Social Traders social enterprise, an Approved Recycler with the Australian Bedding Stewardship Council (ABSC), and a member of the Australian Council of Recycling (ACOR).

Soft Landing has a collaborative approach by working with local governments, retailers, and residents to provide various mattress collection and recycling services, such as curbside collection programs, central depot collection, collecting old customer mattresses from retailers, and taking direct bookings for mattress collections.

This model reflects Soft Landing's dedication to environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

Social Benefits

Soft Landing focuses on creating employment opportunities for people experiencing barriers to work, including former refugees, people who have been in contact with the justice system, and individuals experiencing long-term unemployment.

Manual recycling methods are chosen to maximise job creation. Soft Landing actively supports team members to gain valuable skills, such as forklift and truck licenses, that set them up for future employment within the organisation or in external roles.

Impact (2023–2024)¹

288

Employment opportunities created.

2,084

Training and development outcomes achieved.

76 %

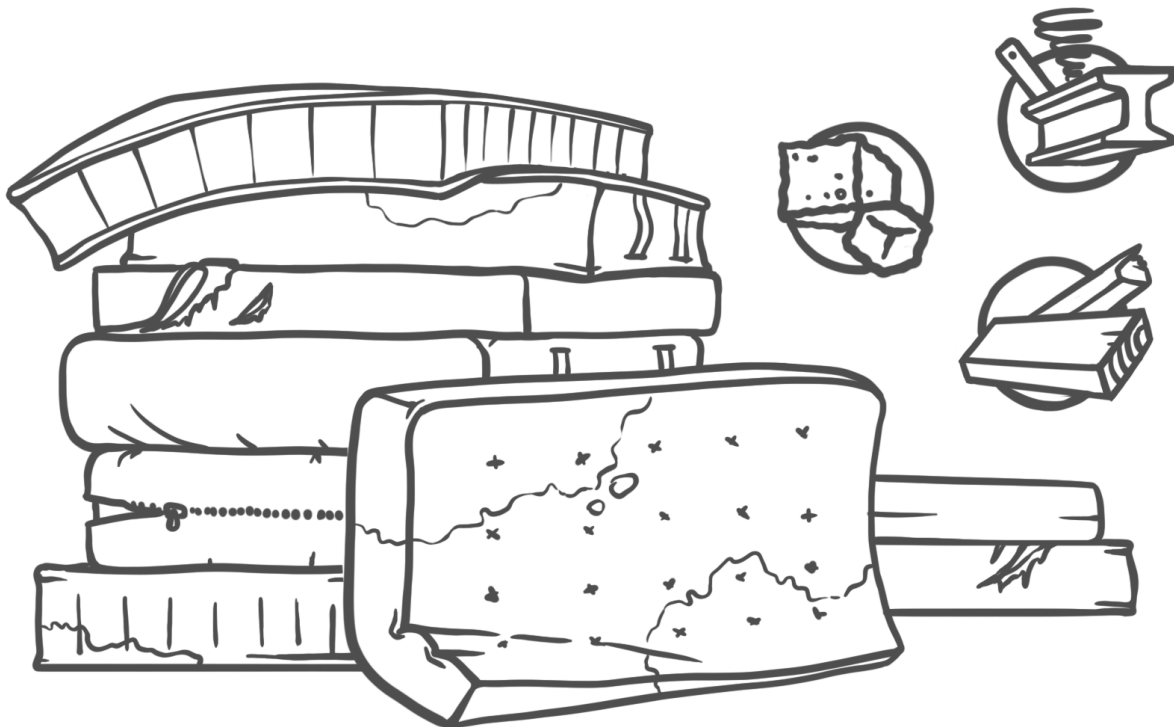
of the workforce comprises people who have experienced barriers to employment.



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In 2023-2024, Soft Landing recycled¹

433,371
Mattresses

5,190
Tonnes of Steel

1,585
Tonnes of Foam

750
Tonnes of Timber

Environmental Benefits

Soft Landing maximises resource recovery to reduce landfill waste and promote the circular economy:

- Steel springs enter the scrap steel market and are used in the manufacture of new steel.
- Foam is recycled into floor underlay.
- Timber from bed bases is reused in the manufacture of new bed bases, mulched, processed into engineered timber, or diverted to waste-to-energy recovery.
- Textiles will soon be diverted to waste-to-energy recovery. While this process ensures landfill diversion, Soft Landing continues to seek higher-value recovery options.

Soft Landing’s manual recycling process ensures greater material recovery compared to mechanical shredding methods, while using less energy and reducing environmental impact.

Replicability Potential

Soft Landing’s model is scalable and replicable, offering a proven solution to both environmental and social challenges. By collaborating with councils, retailers, and communities, Soft Landing has successfully expanded operations nationally across New South Wales, Victoria, Australian Capital Territory, and Western Australia.

The use of manual recycling methods ensures high-quality material recovery, while the focus on creating employment opportunities for people facing barriers to work high-lights its broader social impact. With the right policy frameworks, partnerships, and investment, this model can be adapted to other regions and industries, demonstrating the potential for scalable circular economy solutions that deliver measurable environmental, social, and economic outcomes.



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Sources:

- <https://softlanding.com.au/about/>
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Junker App

“The Junker app functions as a bridge between municipalities and citizens.”

Paolo Fornari, Junker’s Social Media Manager

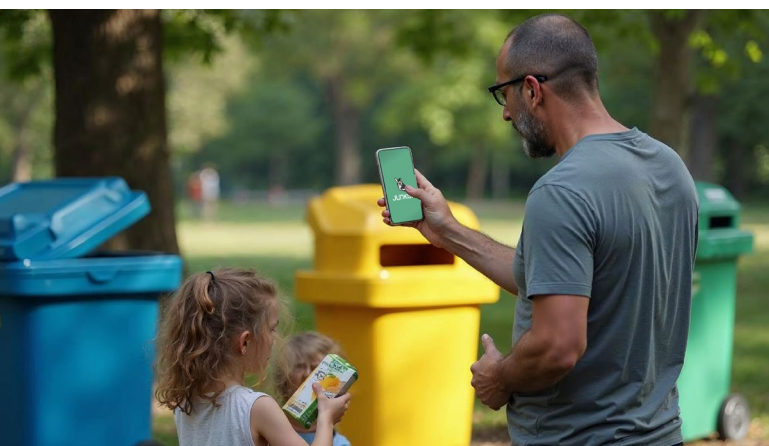


The Spark

In 2014, on a sunny afternoon in Bologna, Italy, Giacomo Farneti, a computer science student, finished a refreshing juice. Wanting to avoid the fines Italy imposes on improper waste sorting, he tried to recycle the packaging responsibly. This ends up being a difficult endeavour since the packaging was made from a combination of carton, aluminium and plastic, so where should it go? Determined to find a solution to this question that many people struggle with, he teamed up with two friends and began building a prototype for an app they called Junker.

The trio started small, scanning product barcodes at night in a local supermarket to identify materials in packaging. They created a product database and used artificial intelligence (AI) to expand it. After that, they started adding local sorting rules, which differ across municipalities.

Soon, Junker evolved into a nationwide waste-sorting assistant. Just scan a product’s barcode, and Junker tells you about the components in the packaging and indicates how, where and when to sort these for local recycling in your area. In case the barcode is missing, the app uses image recognition to identify the product.



©Junker

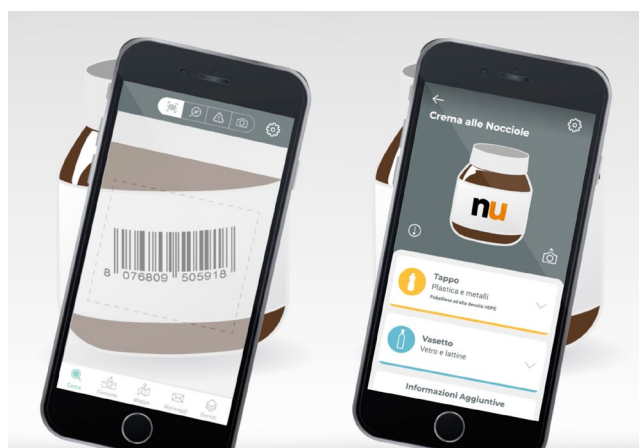
Today, the Junker app is a virtual assistant for waste sorting used across the whole of Italy. There are 1.8 M classified products in Junker's database.¹ If a product is not in the database yet, a user can alert the Junker team, who will add it within a day. Already 500,000 products have been suggested by users and verified by the Junker team.¹ The Junker app aims to be inclusive, and to leave no one behind. Therefore, the app is available in multiple languages (so that tourists and expats can also use it) and fully accessible for visually impaired or blind people.

Governance Model

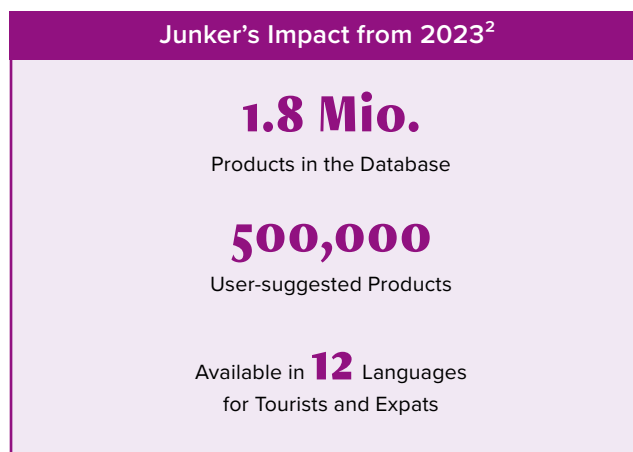
The app was established during the spare time of the co-founders, who worked on it in the evenings and weekends alongside their main job. The developers did not get any public grants or attract capital investments. Winning a prize in a Microsoft competition gave them free access to a powerful AI platform and the company wings to make it really fly.

Junker's success stems from its collaborative model, connecting citizens, municipalities and waste companies. The app is free for users, with municipalities and waste-disposal companies paying a subscription fee, the amount of which depends on the number of inhabitants in the municipality. By 2022, 1500 municipalities (including the cities of Florence and Turin) subscribed, with a 98% renewal rate.²

Municipalities provide detailed information on local sorting rules, while citizens can suggest new products. This participatory approach for waste management has driven recycling rates from 20-30 % up to 60-70 % in some areas.² This more efficient sorting saves municipalities money – up to €34 per citizen² per year – by reducing the volume of mixed waste which is more costly to dispose. They also might get higher revenues from higher quality second life materials. With over 60 million searches to date¹, Junker is now expanding internationally to countries like Greece and Chile.



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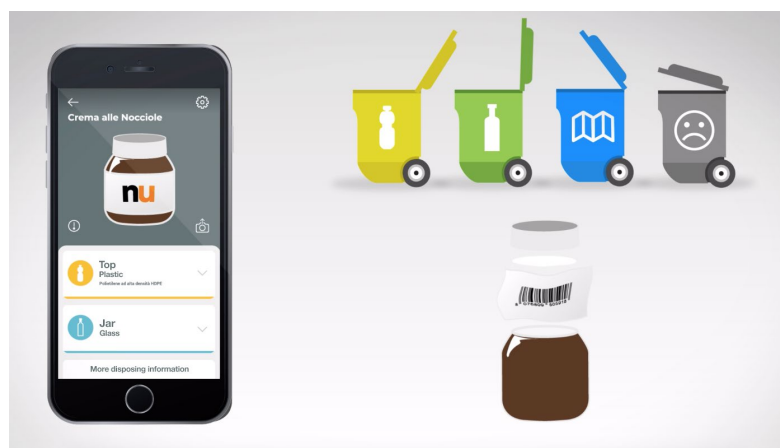


Social Benefits

About 30% of households with access to Junker actively use it, creating a strong community of responsible recyclers who, in turn, encourage their municipalities to get on board.² According to Noemi De Santis (interview 4th of December 2024), these active citizens see others chat about the app on online platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn) and wonder why the app is not used by their own municipality. They then contact the responsible person for environmental issues in their municipality, either in person or online. At the same time, Junker sends information to the municipality regarding the implementation and benefits. This collective involvement strengthens local recycling efforts, empowering citizens to make a difference in their environment.

By giving citizens real-time sorting information, Junker fosters a deeper understanding of recycling and builds a sense of responsibility. This engagement not only improves individual waste sorting habits but strengthens local recycling efforts, as citizens encourage municipalities to adopt the app, helping everyone do their part for a cleaner environment.

Furthermore, the Junker app enhances social inclusion by breaking language barriers and by ensuring accessibility for visually impaired users.



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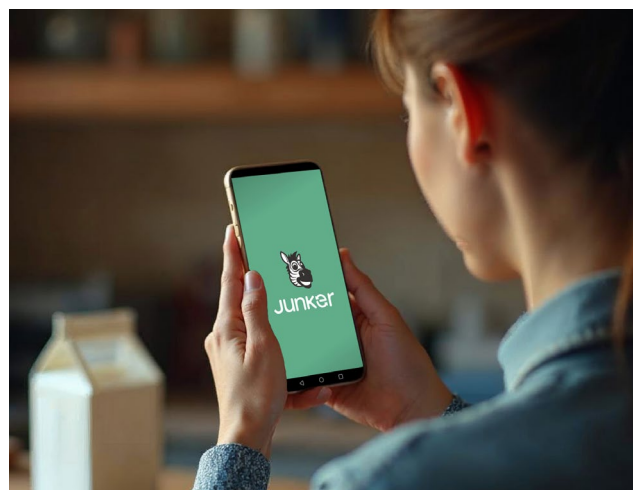
Environmental Benefits

By improving waste sorting accuracy, Junker helps building a cleaner world. With high-quality sorting instructions tailored to local recycling rules, Junker makes recycling more efficient, which benefits both the environment and local communities.

As citizens sort more accurately, less waste ends up in landfills, preserving land and reducing pollution risks. Properly sorted waste means fewer emissions from waste processing, as recyclable materials are correctly separated and reused.

Replicability Potential

Junker's model is highly adaptable, making it easy to expand into new regions. Since it is fully translatable, language is not a barrier for Junker. However, for successful rollout, Junker relies on partnerships with local municipalities to keep sorting rules and collection schedules up to date. With ambitious EU recycling targets ahead, the demand for clear and accessible waste-sorting tools like Junker is growing. Now looking towards expanding in countries like Greece, Slovenia, Hungary, and Chile, Junker is ready to help more communities make recycling simpler and more effective.



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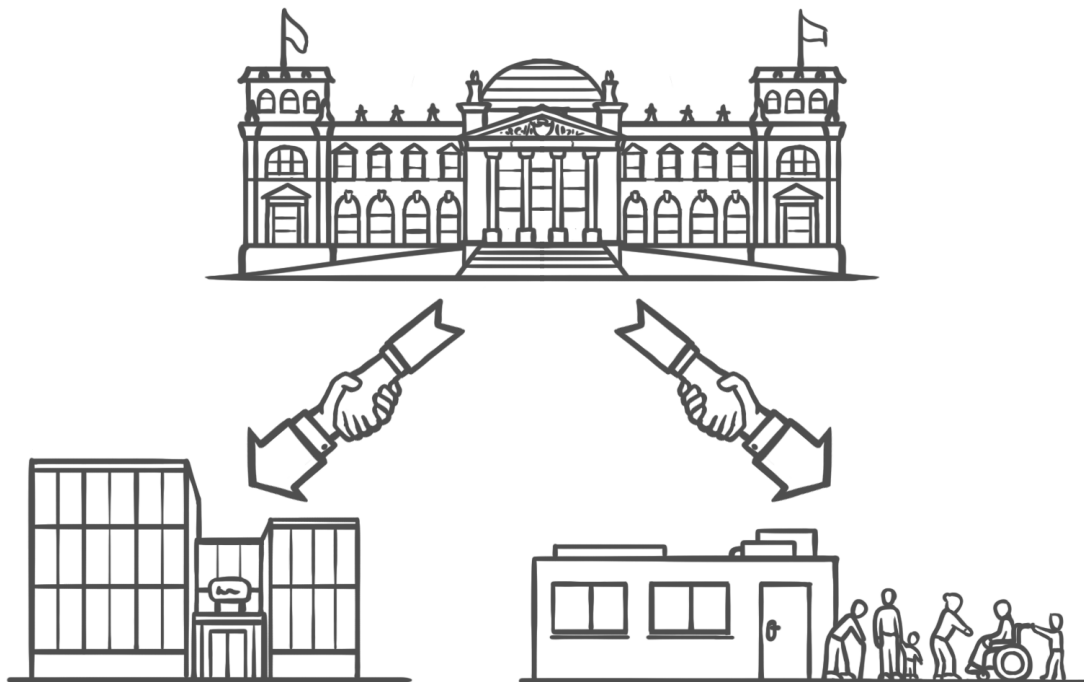
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Platform for Social Innovations and Social Enterprises (SIGU-Platform)

“The SIGU Strategy and the SIGU Platform represent key milestones on the way to improved framework condition for social innovations in Germany.”

Florian Birk, Social Impact gGmbH



History and Political Context

In September 2023, the German Federal Cabinet adopted the National Strategy for Social Innovations and Social Enterprises (SIGU) developed under the leadership of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK). This strategy aims to strengthen social innovations and socially oriented enterprises by reducing disadvantages and improving framework conditions to address major societal challenges.

A specific measure called for by the SIGU Strategy was the establishment of a platform for social innovations and social enterprises, which should serve as “the first point of contact for those who develop, research and support the implementation of social innovations” (BMWK & BMBF, 2023).

Aim and Approach

The Platform for Social Innovations and Social Enterprises (SIGU Platform) is a collaborative initiative by Social Impact gGmbH, the Social Entrepreneurship Network Germany (SEND) e.V., and TU Dortmund University.

It serves as a central hub offering information, practical guidance, support and networking opportunities for social innovators, funding and financial partners, as well as academic institutions and research projects.

The key objectives of the Platform are:

- To improve transparency and facilitate access to relevant funding schemes.
- To enhance the capacities of social innovators and foster better networking among them.
- To increase the overall visibility of the social innovation sector in Germany.
- To raise awareness of the SIGU Strategy and promote it among relevant stakeholders.

The SIGU Platform offers a number of tools which help innovators and relevant stakeholders to screen available funding schemes, to measure the impacts of social innovations, and to network in the frame of targeted events:

1. The **funding finder** provides a structured overview of consulting, coaching and qualification offers, as well as funding and financing opportunities across Germany for social innovators and social enterprises. As of December 2024, a total of 178 offers were included in the underlying database. The available offers can be filtered by types of applicants (e.g. startup, foundation, research centre), types of support (financial support or consultancy services), implementation phase of the initiative (pre-founding phase, start-up phase or growth phase), themes (e.g. bioeconomy, infrastructure, tourism) and location.
2. Measuring the impact of social innovations can be challenging. To help researchers impact investors, intermediaries and enterprises to tackle this challenge, the SIGU Platform provides an overview of available **impact tools** that include a selection of proven methods, instruments and tools for impact measurement and management.
3. To support networking and exchange among relevant stakeholders, the SIGU Platform provides an overview of relevant thematic events. These include events organised by the Platform, as well as **events** organised by other relevant actors across Germany. Event organisers may contact the Platform to have announcement of their public events listed on the Platform.

A key feature of the Platform is that it specifically also targets practitioners and experts from the finance sector with the aim to develop impact-oriented funding and financing approaches for social innovations and social enterprises.

In this context, a **Taskforce on Financing Social Innovations (FSI)** has been established, bringing together key stakeholders from relevant sectors to develop innovative solutions in the frame of a participatory multi-stakeholder process. The ultimate goal of the FSI Taskforce is to make a significant contribution to the sustainable transformation of the financing ecosystem for social innovations in Germany.

Replicability

The SIGU strategy and the SIGU platform can be seen as important milestones for strengthening the social innovation sector in Germany. The SIGU Platform has filled an important gap when it comes to providing a structured overview of the various funding and support schemes for social innovations that are available in the country. EU Member States with similar, multi-level funding and support structures might greatly benefit by following the German approach of developing a cross-sectorial national strategy for social innovations, aiming to streamline national efforts in strengthening the sector. Furthermore, the establishment of a dedicated platform which supports social innovators and other relevant stakeholders in the implementation of their initiatives, can serve as a key tool when it comes to providing effective guidance and support.

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Reflection and Outlook

As the good practice examples included in this brochure seek to illustrate, social innovation does not refer to any sector of the (bio)economy, but to innovation in the creation of social outputs, regardless of where they emanate. Social innovation can take place in all sectors or as a combination of them: the non-profit sector, the public sector, the private sector and the informal sector. All 17 factsheets discussed in the 3-CO brochures illustrate a diversity of environmental and social benefits.

From the Factsheets in Cluster A: Citizens & Communities the Following can be Observed:

- In this cluster, all good practice examples share an aspect of community fostering/strengthening).
- Urban community gardening creates green spaces that improve microclimate and air quality, reducing the urban heat island effect, and support biodiversity.
- Communities are also key in the conservation and cleaning-up of the environment. Such communities can find their base in the local environment or be the result of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI). The initiative from the Caribbean helps save surf ecosystems. The citizen science campaign, originated in Chile and transferred to Europe, promotes the clean-up of plastic waste.
- Collaboration, as volunteers or as paid workers, can help to address social isolation, promote personal creativity, offer recreational opportunities, enrich community experience, foster connections across generations and support mental health. It allows citizens to connect, collaborate and build supportive relationships and brings communities closer together.
- Lending, sharing and/or repairing products, and extending their lifecycle use, instead of buying new products, reduces the need for new production and the resources associated (materials, energy, water, etc.), promotes a circular economy, decreases waste generated, and lowers the carbon footprint of production. Resource-sharing in a group helps strengthen a communal spirit and the feeling of connection. It promotes social equity, helps save money and encourages a mindset shift towards valuing quality over quantity.
- Finally, the listed social innovation examples illustrate how they can serve as educational hubs, teaching sustainable practices and helping transform residents into environmental advocates.

From the Factsheets in Cluster B: Private Businesses the Following can be Observed:

- In all cases a private company that needs to generate operational profits but at the same time seeks to generate social benefits is at the centre (social enterprise).
- Several cases focus on improved use of raw materials and/or waste. Using underutilised agricultural waste and/or compost provides Greek farmers with an additional income, reduce the demand for virgin materials, and offer sustainable alternatives to plastic products.
- Other good practices seek to valorise food and other products that are threatens to be wasted. The food “waste” can concern unprocessed food (non-conforming vegetables that are perfectly good and edible) as well as deliciously prepared / cooked food, from supermarkets or the hospitality sector. Other types of waste being valorised (recycled) include damaged children’s toys pre-loved blue jeans, and cosmetic packaging materials. The toys are refurbished and sold at a discounted price. The jeans are upcycled to new fabrics and sustainable fashion items. The packaging of body cosmetics is cleaned and recycled.
- The social innovations may benefit all people (getting access to affordable toys or healthy food) but in particular disadvantaged people, such as the elderly (benefiting from reduced loneliness and from fun activities where they are put in the spotlight), the needy (benefiting from remaining, unsold food or from discounted toys), the underemployed (benefitting isolated mothers and people with functional diversity), refugees and other vulnerable groups.
- The showcased apps illustrate how to facilitate easy connections between business offering sustainable solutions and consumers seeking sustainable solutions. Product groups covered in the example apps range from food to fashion. Offering consumers trusted information on fashion brands, Good On You and similar apps empower consumers to make sustainable buying decisions and push even larger fashion brands to change their unsustainable practices. A social benefit of the app is that it offers increased visibility also to small sustainable fashion brands.

From the Factsheets in Cluster C: Public Sector the Following can be Observed:

- The first good practice example illustrates the repair and recycling of mattresses by disadvantaged groups that experience barriers to work. The social enterprise creates jobs that care for people and planet, for people including people who have been in contact with the justice system and the long-term unemployed.
- An Italian app for the efficient sorting of household (packaging) waste is promoting recycling and helps fostering a deeper understanding of the public and building a sense of responsibility. The use of the app is paid for by public waste management operators that can benefit financially from the improved sorting.
- The final case does not cover an individual good practice example of social innovation but rather a national strategy and programme promoting social innovation as a chance to respond to multiple social, economic and environmental crises. The example that is being set in Germany can serve as a good practice example of co-creation between multiple national ministries for replication in other EC Member States.

The success and scale-up of social innovations often depends on strong support from policymakers, businesses, and civil society. Especially, governments play a crucial role in creating enabling regulatory environments, providing financial incentives, and integrating sustainability principles into policy frameworks.

Another result from the 3-CO project’s work on social innovations will be a report on policy recommendations how to promote and support social innovation initiatives.

Annex

– Further Reading

I. General Publications

EU CAP Network Brochure (2023), Social innovation – Solutions leading to thriving agriculture, forestry and rural areas.
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Eva Fabry (2024), Social Innovation Brokers (BIS) project – Guidebook for Trainers & Trainees.
https://socialinnovationbrokers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/n_Guidebook-for-trainers-trainees.pdf

TEPSIE project (2015), Growing Social Innovation – A Guide for Policy Makers.
<https://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/publications/growing-social-innovation-a-guide-for-policy-makers/>

II. Publications from EU-funded Projects and Initiatives

Horizon Europe MainstreamBio project – MAINSTREAMing small-scale BIO-based solutions across rural Europe via regional Multi-actor Innovation Platforms and tailored innovation support. mainstreambio-project.eu

- Bert Annevelink, Martien van den Oever, Iñigo Rodilla Ojeda, Ana Casillas González, Beatriz Deltoro, Anastasios Galatsopoulos and Sofia Michopoulou (2024), Catalogues of technologies, business models and social innovations for small-scale biobased solutions. <https://mainstreambio-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/D2.1.pdf>

Horizon Europe SCALE-UP project – Concepts, tools and applications for community-driven bioeconomy development in European rural areas. scaleup-bioeconomy.eu

- Duygu Celik, Silva Caneva and Chuan Ma (2025), Handbook of social innovation in rural bioeconomies. https://www.scaleup-bioeconomy.eu/Publications/SCALE-UP_D5.1_Handbook_of_social_innovation.pdf

Horizon 2020 SocialRES project – “Fostering socially innovative and inclusive strategies for empowering citizens in the renewable energy market of the future”. socialres.eu

- Andreas Schneller, Carolin Grüning, Jakob Hoffmann, Johanna Doerpinghaus, Kathrin Kohl (2022), White Paper on Good Policy Practice – An analysis of enablers and barriers for social innovations in the energy sector. https://socialres.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/D5.2_SocialRES-Toolkit-for-Policy-Assessment_adelphi.pdf

Horizon 2020 project SIMRA – “Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas”. simra-h2020.eu

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Erasmus+ project Social Innovation Academy. Online training platform and programme focusing exclusively on social innovation. socialinnovationacademy.eu

- Limitless SARL, Introduction to Social Innovation <https://www.socialinnovationacademy.eu/introduction-to-social-innovation/>

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III. 3-CO Note

The Power of Social Innovation: Bridging Technology and Humanity

In today's rapidly evolving world, innovation is often synonymous with technological advancements and cutting-edge products. However, there is a crucial aspect of innovation that focuses on societal impact and human well-being and that can significantly foster the uptake of innovative products and processes: social innovation.

Defined as the development and implementation of new solutions to address pressing social needs and challenges, social innovation can transform the way societies tackle issues ranging from healthcare and education to environmental sustainability and social equity.

What is Social Innovation?

Social innovation is broadly defined as “the process of developing and deploying effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress”.¹ The EU funded research project 3-CO defines Social Innovations (SI) as new ideas (products, services, new organisations and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives), create new social relationships or collaborations, and foster sustainable consumption and production patterns. These solutions can take various forms, including new products, services, initiatives, and organisational models that fundamentally change how societal needs are met.

According to the European Commission, SI is about “finding new ways to meet social needs which are more effective, efficient, sustainable or just than existing solutions, and that result in better social outcomes”.² This concept extends beyond the realm of technological breakthroughs, emphasising the importance of human-centric and community-focused approaches.



The Importance of Social Innovation

Social innovation plays a critical role alongside technological and product innovation for several reasons:

Addressing Complex Societal Challenges

While technological innovations often focus on enhancing efficiency and productivity, social innovation targets complex societal issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. These challenges require holistic solutions that consider social dynamics, ethics and human behaviour.

Fostering Inclusive Growth

Social innovations aim to create more inclusive and equitable systems. By prioritising the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups, social innovation ensures that the benefits of progress are distributed more evenly across the broad society.

Enhancing Community Resilience

Social innovation often involves the active participation of communities in designing and implementing solutions. This participatory approach strengthens community bonds and resilience, empowering individuals to take ownership of their development while also allowing them to consider factors specific to their individual community and environment and supporting human relationships.

Driving Sustainable Development

Many social innovations align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing global challenges in a sustainable manner. These innovations promote environmental sustainability, social justice, and economic development simultaneously.



Famous Examples of Social Innovation

Several notable examples illustrate the impact of social innovation and have made their way into our daily lives, often supported by digital technology tools:

Open-Source Software Projects

Open-source software projects (e.g. Wikipedia) rely on community collaboration to develop software that is freely available to the public. These projects promote innovation, knowledge sharing, and equitable access to technology.

Shared Mobility Services

Services like bike-sharing and car-sharing have become common in many cities. These services reduce the need for private car ownership, decrease traffic congestion, and lower carbon emissions, contributing to more sustainable urban living.

Second Hand Charities

Second hand systems and stores provide affordable clothing and other goods while creating job opportunities, particularly for those who might face barriers to employment. These shops, such as those run by organisations like Goodwill and The Salvation Army, offer affordable clothing, home supplies and furniture while also promoting sustainable consumption and giving new life to pre-owned items. This not only reduces waste but also supports social inclusion and community development.

Upcycling/Recycling Initiatives

Not-for-profit projects that focus on upcycling and recycling can help reduce waste and promote sustainable consumption. By transforming waste materials into new products, these initiatives reduce environmental impact and create economic opportunities.

Repair Initiatives

These initiatives often held in the form of cafés are community events where skilled volunteers help people fix broken items, such as electronics, clothing, bikes and furniture. These initiatives promote a culture of repair rather than disposal, reducing waste and extending the life of products. Repair Cafés also foster community connections and skill-sharing, empowering individuals to tackle repairs themselves.

Food Sharing Programs:

Organisations and community groups that facilitate the sharing or donation of food help reduce food waste and address hunger. These programs connect surplus food from businesses and individuals with those in need, ensuring that food resources are used efficiently.

Fair Trade Movement:

The fair-trade movement promotes better trading conditions and sustainability for producers in developing countries. By ensuring fair prices, decent working conditions, and sustainable practices, fair trade has improved the livelihoods of millions of farmers and workers globally.³

Clothing Swapping Platforms:

Swapping platforms and local community swap events enable people to exchange clothing they no longer need for items they want. This reduces waste, promotes sustainable fashion, and provides an affordable way for individuals to refresh their wardrobes. Such initiatives encourage a circular economy and reduce the environmental impact of the fashion industry.

Mutual Aid Programs:

Mutual aid programs involve community members coming together to support each other, sharing resources such as food, supplies, and services. These grassroots initiatives strengthen community ties and provide a safety net for vulnerable individuals.



But also lesser known social innovations show deep impact on the societal and economic landscape:

Microfinance

Pioneered by Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank, micro-finance provides small loans to entrepreneurs in developing countries, empowering them to start businesses and lift themselves out of poverty. This model has transformed lives and communities worldwide.⁴

Social Impact Bonds

These financial instruments fund social programs by raising investment capital from private investors. If the program achieves its goals, the investors receive a return. This innovative financing model has been used to address issues like recidivism, homelessness, and early childhood education.⁵

Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA)

CSA is a system where consumers purchase shares of a farm's harvest in advance. This model supports local farmers by providing them with a stable income and ensures that consumers have access to fresh, locally grown products. This approach fosters community engagement and sustainable agriculture.

Time Banks

Time banks are community programs where members trade services using time as currency. One hour of work earns one-time credit, which can be exchanged for an hour of another member's services. This system promotes mutual support and builds social capital within communities.

Conclusion

Social innovation is a vital complement to technological and product innovation, addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time. By focusing on human-centric solutions and fostering inclusive and sustainable development, social innovation has the potential to transform societies for the better. Engage with initiatives like the 3-CO project to be part of this transformative journey and contribute to a more just and equitable world.

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