



SIRENE



INTEGGER

INTERCONNECTING 4 HELIX INNOVATION
ECOSYSTEMS IN EUROPEAN REGIONS

Towards the social innovation lighthouse: European ecosystems addressing the innovation divide



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Abstract

The new European Innovation Agenda foresees as one of its flagships the aim of “Accelerating and strengthening innovation in European Innovation Ecosystems across the EU and addressing the innovation divide”. Two European Innovation Ecosystems funded Actions, SIRENE and INTEGER, are working towards this goal: SIRENE works to improve wellbeing and housing conditions by empowering social and private entrepreneurs, while INTEGER is focused on developing more robust, sustainable, and inclusive ecosystems for healthy living and wellbeing.

SIRENE | Social Innovation Responsive Environments NETWORK is a Horizon Europe-funded project that started in November 2022 to support the growth of social innovation ecosystems delivering eco-friendly and sustainable community-based services for Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments (SHAFE) implementation in Europe (Dantas, Staalduinen, Illario, & Spiru, 2021). Until October 2024 the consortium is developing a workable framework for investment and the broad adoption of high-quality smart living solutions, combining the housing sector and ICT infrastructure.

Several initiatives aim to promote innovation and support stakeholders to increase investments in relevant societal areas, often providing support measures to different actors such as webinars, training, workshops, and twinnings. However, their impact usually runs shorter than desirable in the mid- and long-term. When looking at the interaction between stakeholders in the social innovation ecosystems for SHAFE in Europe, one of the highlighted challenges is the knowledge exchange between ecosystems. Moreover, not all stakeholder groups are voiced equally in these ecosystems, with academia and research centers dominating the panorama and the private sector being underrepresented (Dantas et al., 2023).

SIRENE seeks an original approach: connect stakeholders by having them work together towards a Social Innovation framework and supporting tools, claiming that this joint collaborative and co-creative work will increase awareness of innovation actors on social innovation concepts, methods and the skills to leverage them. It also intends to make social entrepreneurs aware of potential business opportunities, funding and investment around SHAFE and ensure that business actors have access to social innovation and entrepreneurial knowledge, by creating alliances and synergies between different stakeholders within ecosystems and between ecosystems.



To achieve these strategic aims, SIRENE works around three main pillars:

1. Social innovation framework and tools

SIRENE is developing a new robust Social Innovation (SI) framework, expert-proven and validated by different stakeholders in all countries of the European Union, for the implementation of responsive, inclusive and eco-friendly environments, including new construction, as well as retrofitting the older housing stock to meet the present-day needs. This framework will be aimed at social entrepreneurs and innovation actors and support the development of ecosystems that nourish new strategies for investments in housing for independent living and ageing well in-place that promote green behaviours and sustainable practices, such as the circular economy and local production.

The framework will be built on social innovation methods combining an ecosystem approach with a quintuple-helix method - with citizens, policy-makers, designers, builders, and the providers, sellers or managers of housing and smart living solutions whether with the private, public or third sector and acknowledging the environment as a relevant actor in the ecosystem.

It will include 5 main features: a) a manual for innovation actors on SI methods and concepts, especially focused on those that can be used to promote responsive, inclusive, eco-friendly environments; b) a capacity-building framework for social entrepreneurs especially focused on funding opportunities and securing investment; c) a hands-on toolkit of networking and learning exchange initiatives; d) a sustainability strategy that includes examples of SHAFE business models and practical ideas for SI investments on SHAFE; e) a blueprint of good practices and SI initiatives in the area of SHAFE for benchmark and future twinnings.





2. Co-creation network



Experts and end-users (citizens, local and regional authorities, housing and ICT providers, builders, procurers and other investors, European networks and large-scale projects) are invited to join a co-creation network. This will be active throughout the project period and will both (a) enable the identification and validation of requirements, needs and contents for the social innovation framework; and (b) facilitate testing, validation, endorsement and adoption of the framework by stakeholders throughout the EU.

It includes the Expert Hub and SIRENE ecosystems, built on the network of 51 countries and 540+ participants of the COST Action NET4Age-Friendly, combined with the ECHAlliance network of 70 Geographic Health Ecosystems and the F6S network that caters to more than 4M founders & start-ups, links to investors and digital health SMEs, among others.



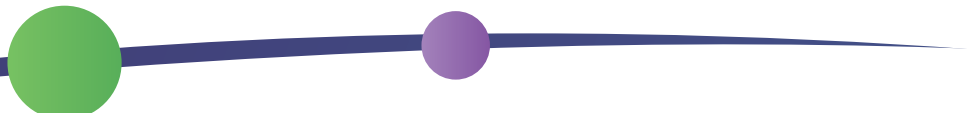
3. Sustainability strategy

SIRENE is investing in developing and delivering a sustainability strategy, including an exploitation plan that will underpin the further implementation of the framework after the end of SIRENE funding. This Strategy will include a plan to support social entrepreneurs in access to information on funding opportunities, capacity-building for proposing projects for funding and private investment through the use and broad adoption of the SI framework and tools. The overall goal of this axis of SIRENE is to promote the right conditions for large-scale investment in building, retrofitting and adaptation of the housing market aligned with the available ICT solutions and a green approach to the market segment, enabling the potential of the Digital Single Market and the Green Deal, towards more inclusive and resilient societies. It offers a quality benchmark that is relevant to those investing in social innovation for the physical design of products, homes and the IT infrastructure within it. It will respond to the changing needs of an ageing population and the associated imperatives that call for people to play a greater part in maintaining their wellbeing and managing their health.




SIRENE will thus develop and sustain a social innovation framework and tools for the creation and nurturing of ecosystems in the area of Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments, with a special focus on eco-friendly smart housing, that supports social entrepreneurs to gain awareness on the topic, access to the relevant constellation of actors and funding opportunities, enabling innovation investments that meet the changing needs of citizens across their lifetime.

However, this ambitious vision can only be fulfilled with the contributions of as many stakeholders as possible Europe-wide, to ensure all necessary systemic, cultural and societal differences are addressed correctly and that the final tools and processes are adjusted for wide implementation and upscale. The co-creation and validation methods of SIRENE are their secret weapon and the wide discussions in multiple forums are essential for it to be consequent and useful in the future.



Focused on the challenge-driven promotion of healthy living and wellbeing, INTEGER - Interconnecting 4 Helix Innovation Ecosystems in European Regions, will bring forward three important innovations for the development of more robust, sustainable, inclusive, and integrative EU innovation ecosystems:

- a. **The INTEGER 4 Helix Col-laboratory¹ model**, to implement the next generation of living labs, the 'Col-laboratories'
- b. **An EU Healthy Living Col-laboratory** a true network of networks' communities with capacity to work on real social, tech and business-driven projects.
- c. **A new professional profile**, the 'col-laber' or 'col-laboratory manager', as a multiplying agent of change of these integrated innovation ecosystems.



INTEGER is also a Horizon Europe project, that started in February 2023 and during its 2 years duration it will mainly address the following objectives:

1. Boost win-win games between business and social-oriented innovations addressing common challenges.

¹ The Col-laboratory is a neologism to express the next generation of quadruple or n-helix living labs (a lab of labs). This expression is borrowed from the Col-laboratori initiative in the Catalanian region, existing prior to the project submission. This Col-laboratori is a local initiative promoted by the Catalanian Government and executed by I2Cat Foundation. The INTEGER Col-laboratory revolves around the field of health and wellbeing with the participation of 4 helix organisations with a digital platform as a lever.

2. Transform co-creation dynamics into disruptive and tangible new products, services or competencies.
3. Co-designing jointly public innovation policies.
4. Develop capacity-building of the new generation of socio-digital entrepreneurs and ecosystems' enablers, the col-labers; and
5. Devise funding and investment mechanisms for social innovation start-ups and SMEs to develop and scale up game-changing innovations.

For accelerating the integration of social innovation in European innovation ecosystems, INTEGER will focus on the Healthy Living challenge. Given the specificity of social innovations, novel methods and tools for designing such interventions that boost social changes in real life situations are needed. The project recognizes the urgent necessity for intergenerational collaboration, uncovering the potential of 'senior innovators' and seeks to be a high potential for economic and emerging and breakthrough technological services and business.

In that sense, col-laboratories and col-labers aim to embrace economic and social-driven innovation communities across EU, responding, besides others, to the third flagship of the New European Innovation Agenda: the col-laborations will be held in 3 EU Regions (Catalonia, Hamburg and Krakow), as mechanisms to testbed the integration of social innovation actors in the regional innovation ecosystems with INTEGER 4H Model, aiming to foster social innovation Minimum Viable Products and Services in the field of Healthy Living and Wellbeing to upscale it throughout Europe.

The three regional ecosystems will exchange best practices and challenges, this will give way to the co-design of a first draft of a novel workable 4H innovation integration model. Also, to facilitate the process, there will be a deployment of an integrative digital interface, a cohesive digital space that will facilitate the integration and coordination of stakeholders. In the end, the project will constitute European INTEGER 4H Healthy Living Collaboratory, through a wider communication, dissemination, and sustainability plan, engaging with other existing successful initiatives.

That way, the project will contribute to ensuring that regions of the EU can benefit from innovation, regardless of their level of development or location. This can help to promote inclusive growth and ensure that innovation benefits all citizens, regardless of where they live or their age.



SIRENE and INTEGER fully align with the aims of the new European Innovation Agenda and the concerns of European bodies when addressing the deep innovation divides and the European paradox of innovation.

The novelty of their work comes from the multi-dimensional approach to social innovation. Through different deployments in projects and initiatives, the authors are testing the alignment of social innovation with:

a. A firm and courageous EU encompassing the triple transition: the 'one for all, all for one' social, green and digital transition as a twin transition is not possible without a deep transformation on how things are done (Caro-González et al., 2023). Testing the role of social innovation in this triple transition is crucial.

b. An ambitious and urgent global agenda (e. g. the 2030 SDGs targets).

c. A top-down approach with social innovation strategies and policies being brought to the fore more decisively. It has been included as one policy priority by the Ecosystem unit of the European Innovation Council and it is becoming more prominent in other policies and calls for proposals.

d. A bottom-up approach as social innovations have emerged traditionally from the response of different actors, entities, and more recently, living labs in the form of projects, solutions, services, initiatives and minimum viable products and services to address unmet socio-economic and environmental needs.

e. An interdisciplinary, international and intersectoral collaborative approach, in line with the framework and practices envisioned and tested by the Eoh-for-Good Multi-I co-creating vortexes of innovation (Caro-Gonzalez, in press).

These two sister projects team-up to exchange visions and lessons learned towards tackling the needs and challenges of local and regional communities, as a social innovation lighthouse to boost co-creation and generate long-term sustainable and inclusive ecosystems.



Key words

European Innovation Agenda, Social Innovation, ecosystem, SHAFE, stakeholder engagement

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