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# EXPLORING IMPACTS OF COLLECTIVE AWARENESS PLATFORMS FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION



political



social



economic



environmental

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## How to foster uptake of DSI in Europe: recommendations\*

The activities illustrated in the previous chapters – the study of the CAPS and of the Digital Social Innovation domain, the development of the impact assessment methodology and its dissemination, the analysis of the assessment results – allowed the CAPS team to build an in-depth working knowledge of this domain and its performances, outputs, outcomes and impacts.

In the light of the main observations that have emerged from the CAPS impact assessment results, it has been possible to develop recommendations aimed at preventing the emergence of major constraints identified by IA4SI while analysing the data provided by the projects. These constraints are mainly concerned with the appropriate valorisation of the projects' most relevant leverage: thematic communities and their needs; the development of a business plan oriented to guaranteeing the projects' economic sustainability beyond the funding period as well as pursuing channels that are consistent with their goals and values; the importance of keeping a constant focus on user engagement and preferences; and finally, the need to stimulate and reinforce project efforts towards assessment tasks, thanks to appropriate planning.

The two paragraphs below will illustrate the following contents:

- 6.1 presents opportunities and risks concerning the DSI domain and the CAPS in particular, developing consistent policy recommendations for future projects;
- 6.2 highlights some areas of investigation, which can be crucial for the full understanding and effectiveness of future activities.

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## 6.1 Opportunities and constraints: policy recommendations

The activities analysed by IA4SI involving projects, users and citizens confirmed that DSI processes revolve, first of all, around the needs of thematic communities of citizens. Citizen and user involvement (especially the latter) proved to be the most challenging task to fulfil and it was also a significant source of experience for policy recommendations and of inspiration for further investigation in this field of research. This means that on one hand the projects' ability to involve interested citizens is a key factor for the effective development of the tools whilst, on the other hand, the pre-existing characteristics of such communities and often of local environments are equally relevant for the kind of activity to be implemented. In this perspective, CAPS projects positively reflect the diversity of communities active within the European Union and represent an opportunity to explore how to adapt social innovation practices from one context to another, with the support of ICT technologies.

At the same time, the actual capacity of these projects to expand user communities is hindered by factors such as the digital divide and the fragmentation of local dynamics and regulations. The assessment, however, highlighted a limited attention towards these barriers, and no attention at all towards the digital divide issue. Moreover, the sustainability of most of the platforms beyond the EU funding period is yet to be determined and currently not guaranteed. Finally, the projects need to be encouraged to pursue overall assessment and evaluation tasks in a regular and planned way, in order to guarantee an appropriate data gathering and reporting process.

The recommendations below reflect the constraints that emerged from the IA4SI experience, with the aim of preventing them and easing the implementation of future CAPS and DSI projects in general. They deal with four macro-areas of engagement: 1. the pro-

jects' role at a local societal level and the valorisation of grassroots communities; 2. the projects' financial sustainability; 3. user involvement; 4. the assessment role and planning.

- 1 In the light of the central role played by grassroots participation for an effective implementation of a collective awareness platform:
  - a) CAPS projects should be encouraged to avoid technological determinism, since the tools they develop are not the final purpose of their activities. On the contrary, the focus should remain on the needs of the target communities, which have to be clearly identified from the very beginning. In addition to this, the technology needed to support the activities should be defined. The projects generally managed to keep the balance and maintain the centrality of the targeted communities and, for the future, this effort should be more explicitly required and supported.
  - b) More emphasis could be given to process or organisational innovation in the future. In fact, while some projects have an impact on product innovation, the assessment process clearly highlighted that they are most effective when addressing and producing changes in societal dynamics, working processes, relationships between actors. CAPS should be able to appropriately value these types of generated impacts.
  - c) In order to support the dissemination of good practices and new models proposed by the CAPS community, it is desirable that the EU proceeds towards the harmonisation of legislations that regulate topics such as data management and services and products markets.
- 2 Two main recommendations emerged from IA4SI observations to address the issue of financial sustainability:
  - a) Consistently with the point above, CAPS projects should be encouraged to put more attention on drafting business plans and on developing clear trajectories for their activi-

ties from a business point of view as well. This includes: clearly identifying new market opportunities for partners, increasing the number of business collaborations, creating new businesses through the project outputs, valuing their research results and stimulating the creation of new services.

- b) Access to alternative financial channels should be encouraged and facilitated. Crowdfunding, equity funds, impact investing are new and appropriate solutions for projects such as CAPS. Awareness about these channels, which are looking for new areas of engagement, should be raised and their identification should be strongly supported, possibly even implementing a specific support action for this task.
- 3 Some relevant recommendations also emerged with regards to the role and the involvement of users:
    - a) CAPS case histories proved that, for a successful involvement of users, transparent data management rules and practices should be encouraged, and tools for direct control of the privacy and data should be provided to users. In fact, the assessment showed how while highly supportive of information accessibility and dissemination, users appreciated the many projects taking into account privacy preservation and transparency.
    - b) Regardless of the project topic, citizen engagement is one of the most challenging activities for CAPS and for digital social innovation in general. In this regard, the most successful projects were those that built their entire strategy around this task. Future projects should be encouraged to clearly plan channels to involve and activate a community and to identify concrete goals in this perspective.
  - 4 Evaluation tasks and impact assessment should be mandatory in all CAPS projects - and in the Digital Social Innovation domain as a whole - as they support projects and users

full comprehension and exploitation of the project outputs and impacts. Therefore, IA4SI recommendation for the EC is to:

- a) define a minimum set of impact assessment indicators (already in the calls) for which all the projects should gather data at regular intervals during their activities;
- b) require from the project to explicitly define a budget for impact assessment activities and, more generally, for collaboration activities with the support actions.

## 6.2 Next challenges: open issues

The reflections on the impact assessment process and results also highlighted relevant open issues worth further investigating. These issues emerged directly from the same constraints that generated the policy recommendations, and are therefore complementary to the previous paragraph. Moreover, the scope of these issues goes beyond the CAPS domain and aims to look at the entire DSI field. IA4SI identified three main areas of investigation, each of them articulated as follows:

- 1 Economic sustainability: dedicated and specific research should deal with the constraints and opportunities relating to the partially unresolved topic of projects sustainability beyond EU funding. In particular:
  - a) What are the characteristics that make some DSI projects more sustainable than other DSI projects? How can they be spread across European countries?
  - b) Which, among the new financial and sustainable models emerging in recent years, are most suitable for DSI projects?
  - c) How much does economic sustainability impact on the transferability and replicability of DSI models?

- 2 Project users: project user behaviours and preferences are key for a successful implementation and dissemination of practices and services proposed by CAPS, yet user themselves are often difficult to clearly identify and analyse:
  - a) Who are DSI users? What are their profiles and what makes them suitable targets for the projects? How diverse or homogeneous are they?
  - b) How can user communities be expanded and, in particular, how can DSI projects overcome the digital divide and engage groups at risk of social exclusion, a factor that still represents one of the main constraints for projects like CAPS?
  - c) In the light of the divides mentioned above, in order to be really inclusive and to tackle the society as a whole, which technologies should be preferred? Which engagement models?
  - d) How does engagement lead to potential behavioural change? Which kinds of models are needed? Are there social limits to adaptation?
- 3 Local context: EU citizens involved in DSI see it as an effective channel to take advantage of services otherwise not provided or to participate to public life in their countries/regions (i.e. eGovernance is one of field of application where DSI is proving to have the higher potential):
  - a) How strong is the link with the local context and the development of DSI or the implementation of emerging practices of DSI? To what extent is the same model transferable from context to context? Can we talk of DSI in general or are we already able to observe substantial differences in different EU countries in the way DSI is understood, supported and implemented?
  - b) Even in presence of similar needs, are some models implementable only in context where local communities are to some extent ready to fully exploit the opportunities offered by DSI? What does “ready” mean?

- c) How can we strengthen evidence-based knowledge of various social innovations in policy-making and reforms, including legislation? How can we strengthen social innovations for sustainable development?

### At a glance: Policy Recommendations and Open Issues

CAPS projects offered a privileged insight into understanding opportunities and constraints in Digital Social Innovation identifying four main areas of engagement:

- 1 The central role of the communities to which such projects are addressed, which should be valued and further investigated;
- 2 The need to strengthen the projects' financial sustainability when EU funding has ended, as well as exploring innovative financial channels;
- 3 The attention towards user characteristics, preferences and involvement, which require more in depth analysis;
- 4 The importance of the evaluation and impact assessment tasks for projects.