Social innovations in and with the welfare state

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Abstract

This report presents six case studies on social innovations that address labour market integration and empowerment of marginalised groups in the welfare state in the context of varied welfare states and regimes. Cases address the labour market inclusion of people with disabilities or mental health challenges, an innovative rehab programme for burnout sufferers, the support and empowerment of women in a rural area in Serbia by an ensemble of modular and tailored services, and advocacy for regularising the employment of migrant live-in carers and against the use of payment cards to deliver benefit payments to asylum seekers. Cases are located in Poland, Italy, Belgium, Serbia, Austria and Germany, and thus in Eastern, Southern and Continental European welfare and growth regimes. The comparative chapter explores the ways in which social innovations articulate and process the megatrends of globalisation, digitalisation, demographic change and climate change, and how social innovations themselves achieve impacts in the contexts of the labour market, the welfare state, and society at large. It concludes that social innovations can be distinguished along their aspirations that range from "repairing" or filling gaps in welfare states to systemic or transformational change. However, in their actual strategy and practice, navigating the institutional and political environment, the different types share a considerable middle ground of incremental progress, providing immediate support to target groups or constituencies, building knowledge and ecosystems, negotiating and debating with policy, and raising societal awareness.

1. Introduction

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This report presents six case studies on social innovations that address labour market integration and empowerment of marginalised groups in the welfare state in the context of varied welfare states and regimes. Cases address the labour market inclusion of people with disabilities or mental health challenges in Poland and Italy (sections 2 and 3), an innovative rehab programme for burnout sufferers in Belgium (section 4), the support and empowerment of women in a rural area in Serbia by an ensemble of modular and tailored services (section 5), and advocacy for regularising the employment of migrant live-in carers in Austria (section 6) and against the use of payment cards to deliver benefit payments to asylum seekers in Germany (section 7).

We choose a wide definition of social innovation and include initiatives that work to fill gaps in and improve access to the welfare state and labour markets, one that facilitates labour market reintegration through unconventional means and three that address wider and more systemic challenges, such as gendered divisions of labour and care work, or social policies that try to solve ageing and immigration challenges by further marginalising specific groups of immigrants. The latter examples might also be studied with a focus on social movements or social justice (Turner & Scheepers, 2023) – but these aspects do already play a part in driving social innovations. Indeed, looking at transformative aspirations of social innovation shows that social inclusion is not a self-evident objective of social policy but also an area of conflict and political contestation in which outcomes that further exclude or marginalise particular groups require intervention.

In section 8, we compare the six cases with regard to the ways in which social innovations articulate and process the megatrends of globalisation, digitalisation, demographic change and climate change, and how social innovations themselves achieve impacts in the contexts of the labour market, the welfare state, and society at large. Section 9 contains the reporting guideline, the central document for coordinating the comparative case study research.

1.1. Social innovation in the welfare state and labour market[1]

Welfare systems need to adapt themselves to render societies more resilient, reduce inequalities and offer citizens and inhabitants of the country effective protection from ever-changing risks (such as job losses and needs to reskill due to technological change, the Green transition with its related structural changes within and among sectors, the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, risks related to population ageing). In this context, not just institutional change and social policies, but also social innovations play a part.

A frequently used definition of social innovation has been developed by the FP7-SI-DRIVE project:

> "a new combination or figuration of practices in areas of social action, prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors with the goal of better coping with needs and problems than is possible by using existing practices. An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it varies social action and is socially accepted and diffused in society" (quoted from TEPSIE, 2014, p. 40).[2]

The scope of social innovations is somewhat contested in the literature. Empirically, the majority of social innovations have been found to remain small, localised, and modest in terms of their aspirations for upscaling and systemic change (Howaldt, 2019; Howaldt *et al.*, 2016; Millard, Holtgrewe & Hochgerner, 2017). Critics of the concept note that the concept of social innovation itself remains

> „typically interested in individual- and organizational-level social value creation, which leaves systemic change that may be necessary for social justice oriented objectives to be achieved, underdeveloped in the theory and practice literature." (Turner & Scheepers, 2023, p. 290).

Yet, other authors do explore the potential of social innovations in alliance with social movements, to bring about transformative changes (Avelino et al., 2019; Kemp & Pel, 2023):

> "Social innovation […] is considered transformative to the extent that it challenges, alters and/or replaces dominant institutional arrangements" (Avelino et al., 2023, p. 141).

[1] This outline is a revised and updated version of (Thil et al., 2022, pp. 111–115).

[2] Compact introductions to various aspects of the subject are found at socialinnovationatlas.net and, recently, in (Howaldt et al., 2023).

In between, we find several typologies that aim to systematise social innovations' aspirations. Howaldt, based on the stocktaking of the SI-DRIVE project, groups these aspirations from 'repairing' unintended and disadvantageous consequences of societal or economic change (cf. Schubert, 2023), through the 'modernising' of social practices, to 'transformation' of social systems. However, social innovation may also simply 'coexist' with other social practices (Howaldt, 2017a). In a similar vein, Ewert distinguishes three types of welfare innovations:

> „First, welfare innovations may lead by example and kick off a process of reshaping welfare policy at large; second, in sharp contrast, welfare innovations could be also exploited as mere 'implementation vehicles' (ibid.) to translate conventional welfare policy paradigms to local communities and 'hard to reach' groups. Third, welfare innovations may be utilized as welcome 'gap fillers' temporarily covering major deficits of the welfare system" (Ewert, 2023, p. 298).

This report concludes that these types of social innovation can well be distinguished along their aspirations but in their actual strategy and practice, navigating the institutional and political environment, the different types, from gap-filling or "repairing" to transformative social innovations share a considerable middle ground of incremental progress, providing immediate support to target groups or constituencies, building knowledge and ecosystems, negotiating and debating with policy, and raising societal awareness.

The subject of social innovation gained specific political and scientific interest from the 2000s onwards as the belief of the political mainstream in the power of markets and liberalisation slowly waned. Especially with the economic crises of 2008ff., the reconfiguration of the interplay of markets, the state, civil society – and, not least, gendered unpaid care work - became an issue. Such reconfigurations can occur in different directions between the varied societal spheres:

> "it is important to look, for example, at how marketized relations are imported into publicly financed social services or the ways that labour markets are structured by the activities of community-based agencies (from the social economy, for example), as well as by the demands of firms" (Jenson, 2015, p. 92).

In this perspective, the exploration of social innovation with roots in innovation theory and varied theories of practice, ties in with interdisciplinary developments in the social and economic sciences. There as well, markets, companies and innovations emerge as multifaceted, social and political phenomena embedded in social relations: economic sociology (Fligstein, 2002), neo-institutionalism in its various branches (Avlijaš et al., 2020; Friedland & Alford, 1991), Polanyian socio-economic theory on the embeddedness of markets and organisations in, power relations, normative ensembles, institutions and

conventions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Novy, 2024), and the increasing emphasis on institutions and governance within economics (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2023).

However, social innovation is not just a scientific concept. Jenson aptly described it as a "quasi-concept" that

> "benefits from relying on academics' research but is simultaneously indeterminate enough to make it adaptable to a variety of situations and flexible enough to follow the twists and turns of policy and ideology that everyday politics sometimes makes necessary" (2015, p. 91).

Arguably, it gained political traction exactly due to this indeterminacy that made it usable in varied political paradigms: simplistically, with a focus on social entrepreneurship in market-liberal policies, social investment in more social-democratic views, subsidiarity in conservative approaches, and sustainability and participation for a Green angle – and in various combinations for political compromise. As far as we know, no connections with non-liberal agendas on the political right have emerged.

Social innovations are initiated and developed by various alliances of innovators: municipalities or regions, labour market services, social entrepreneurs, established or new NGOs, social movements and groups of people with a particular need or challenge and their advocates, social entrepreneurs, and so on. However, not all social innovations identify themselves with this label. Achieving social impacts is the very point of social innovation (Howaldt, 2019). Indeed, there has been considerable professionalisation and institutionalisation of social innovation during the 2010s up to the development of 'ecosystems' of social innovation and social entrepreneurship (Anheier et al., 2019; Domanski et al., 2023). This takes shape in in a heterogeneous landscape of programmes and projects on the European and national level (Milotay, 2023). Yet not all social innovations follow a trajectory borrowed from innovation theory, of piloting, institutionalisation or mainstreaming (Pel, 2023), and scaling up or out in various directions (Gabriel, 2014). A dedicated local focus, lack of capacity or resources, political adversity, competing initiatives or ideas in the ecosystem, and the very limitations of the logic of projects and their timescales may get in the way of expansion.

Hence, social innovations interact with their social and institutional environments. In the welfare state and social policy context, this interaction goes beyond the question of top-down or bottom-up social innovation. Martinelli (2013) points out that these are not simply alternatives but should complement one another. Established welfare state institutions ensure universal, rights-based access to benefits and services, whereas social innovations accommodate more specific needs, invent more adaptable services,

give voice to more marginal groups or democratise governance (Martinelli, 2013, p. 347). She concludes that

> "'creative' policy thinking is thus needed, capable of conjoining social innovation with social citizenship; top-down state engagement (in terms of funding, regulation and coordination) with bottom-up action and empowerment." (p. 356).

Much research on social innovations, either large-scale mapping exercises (such as socialinnovationatlas.net), case studies or comparative analyses are restricted to snapshots at one particular point in time. Case studies generally describe the genesis and history of the case in question, but observations over a longer period of time are rare in the field of social innovation where research often is driven by specific programmes and projects (Milotay, 2023). For this reason, in this volume we choose documented and somewhat established social innovations and explore their development in the light of changing labour market and social policy conditions.

1.2. The cases

Case study selection initially aimed to cover three fields of social innovation related to the labour market and the welfare state: labour market (re-)integration, social security for precarious forms of work, and the interest representation and participations of marginalised groups. Each subject was to be covered in at least two different welfare state regimes.

Table 1. Case studies distribution by subjects and welfare state regime

	Eastern Europe	**Southern Europe**	**Continental Europe**
LM (re-)integration	PL: **Aktywizacja:** Job crafting for people w/disabilities	IT: Restaurant **Numero Zero** staffed by psychiatric patients	BE: **Care farms** project: rehab for people w/ mental health conditions
Social security for precarious forms of work			AT: **IG 24** interest representation of precariously self-employed live-in carers
Interest representation / participation of marginalised groups	RS: **Hobotnica (Octopus)** modular services for women in a rural area		DE: initiatives opposing asylum seekers' **payment cards** AT: **IG 24** (prerequisite for social security)

In deciding on case studies, an even distribution could not be achieved. "Social security for precarious workers" is addressed by the Austrian case study only, and it turned out that in the Austrian welfare state context, voice for the particular group of live-in elderly carers is a necessary (but not sufficient) prerequisite of improving their social security and a central field of the initiative's activity. For this reason, in the presentation of cases we now distinguish between the labour market inclusion cases (section 2 – 4) and those with a focus on interest representation, advocacy and empowerment (section 5 – 7).

It is no coincidence that these two types also have different types of aspirations: the labour market inclusion cases are chiefly concerned with filling gaps or repairing labour markets that, left on their own, fail to deliver jobs for people with special needs even when labour shortages occur. Interest representation cases have more transformative aspirations, since the marginalisation of their constituencies is the outcome of social structures, processes and also of social policies that reiterate or exacerbate the social inequality or exclusion of women and/or groups of migrants.

1.2.1. Labour market inclusion

Three cases directly address the inclusion of specific and disadvantaged groups in the labour market and in addition, the Serbian "Hobotnica" projects support labour market or economic inclusion of rural women in the context of a wider portfolio of services to this group (see section 1.2.2).

- The "Job Crafting" initiative of the Polish Aktywizacja Foundation, a well-established NGO facilitating the employment for people with disabilities, is a new, comprehensive and highly individualised career counselling solution for persons with disabilities. It accompanies jobseekers with disabilities and potential employers, seeks out job offers, supports candidates in job interviews and employers in creating accessible and inclusive work environments, and monitors mutual satisfaction and retention of clients in their jobs. The initiative also advocates for the inclusive employment of people with disabilities.
- The inclusive restaurant "Numero Zero" in Perugia offers tailored work in hospitality to people with mental health conditions supported by professionals. Work is shaped to accommodate their needs through varying working hours and creative design of the working environment. The restaurant is embedded in a foundation and social enterprise cluster that provides health and social care services to psychiatric patients and involves them in a range of cultural activities. Through a focus on high quality food and regional produce, it attracts both locals and tourists and contributes to the urban regeneration of a formerly neglected but currently lively part of the city centre of Perugia.

- The Care Farms in Belgium do not directly integrate their clients or "guests" into the labour market but offer people recovering from burnout a different work experience in farming, caring for animals and working with nature, rebuilding self-efficacy and confidence to prepare labour market re-entry. Farms in this way diversify their activities and income, connect with social services and creating more social value.

All the "labour market inclusion" initiatives in our sample address people with disabilities or mental health conditions. They have their origins in established NGOs or in networks of NGOs, professional and regional institutions. These NGOs and networks develop new services that complement or extend existing ones. They take an individualised and to some extent holistic approach, that is, they combine their service offers in ways that can be tailored to the respective client and accommodate their needs. For people with various disabilities and conditions to be able to work, this is essential. Beyond this, the approach reflects and validates elements of work that in conventional employment relationships remain within the informal sphere: consideration for individual situations, capabilities and needs, recognition of workers as human beings, and mutual help beyond formal work roles and skills profiles. Conventional labour market services and policies that are chiefly concerned with job placement – outside of dedicated projects for specific target groups – are at risk of neglecting this "social aspect of work", of mutual accommodation of workers and workplaces known in workplace studies (Holtgrewe & Hohnen, 2015), or shift it to the social skills of case managers or advisors who are often under pressure from set targets and lack the resources for holistic needs assessment (Penz et al., 2017).

1.2.2. Advocacy, Interest representation and empowerment of marginalised groups

The other three cases address the representation of marginalised groups in the welfare state, especially those that are being disadvantaged or excluded by current social policies.

- The Serbian case of "Hobotnica" has ended as a project in 2024. It provided a bundle of support services to women in a rural area that cover mental and physical health care, legal advice, digital skills training and equipment, transport, support for associations and opportunities for socialising, and homework and study support to children. It grew from a project-based collaboration of regional associations, national and international organisations and experts with a regional development interest. The aim was to reduce their burden of unpaid household and care work, help women find new opportunities also for generating income, and finally to overcome the unequal division of care work between genders. Funded by a series of international projects, Hobotnica also compensated the limitations of the Serbian

welfare state that generally is restricted to providing modest cash benefits to the very poor. It may contribute to more proactive and social-investment-oriented policies.

- The Austrian IG 24 supports migrant live-in carers for the elderly in Austria, a group that is largely excluded from regular employment and marginalised in the institutionalised representation of the self-employed. Live-in carers often find themselves in poorly paid, isolated and dependent positions in which they have difficulty claiming their rights. Austrian social policy, subsidising live-in care for households, prioritises affordability of care for both recipients and public finance over the rights of these carers and their inclusion into the regular labour market. IG 24 demands a regularisation of employment in live-in care which is hardly likely in the current political context, provides advice and support to carers, and in collaboration with both research and practice actors explores alternative arrangements of long-term care.
- The German payment card initiatives ensure access of asylum seekers to cash and combat the payment cards (re-)introduced recently for delivery of benefits to this group in Germany. By delivering benefits through payment cards, policy aims to make payments more efficient for the administration and by limiting asylum seekers' access to cash and to specific goods to disincentivise irregular immigration and payments to traffickers: in effect, this reduces asylum seekers' entitlements to using the money they receive as they see fit. Initiatives provide possibilities to exchange these cards for cash, and in the process, meet local people and receive some advice and support as well.

All these cases have a clearly transformational agenda and push back against existing labour market and social policies that marginalise vulnerable groups. IG 24 and the payment card initiatives are bottom-up initiatives founded by activists and volunteers, and (in the case of IG 24) working live-in carers. They also provide immediate help to mitigate the effects of these policies and become part of an ecosystem of support to their target group that provides immediate help and explores alternative ways of organising social services.

1.2.3. Intersecting dimensions of inclusion and inequality

Beyond their varying missions, the initiatives address particular dimensions of inclusion and inequality: Job Crafting, Numero Zero and Care Farms support the labour market inclusion of people with disabilities or mental health conditions that face disadvantages in the labour market due to both their own capacities and to discrimination and stigma.

Care Farms, Hobotnica and partly, IG 24 address rural areas specifically. Farms offer social services, rural women are supported, and live-in carers often provide elderly care in rural areas where fewer mobile

services or residential facilities are available and potential family carers may have left the region. Work in rural areas, especially care and domestic work, can thus be isolated and lonely. These cases are of interest in the light of rural social innovation as well as innovation of social services and the welfare state.

Hobotnica and IG 24 both explicitly address gender inequality that intersects with regional disadvantage and outward or inward migration. Migration, in the case of asylum seekers largely outside the labour market and thus related to poverty, is addressed by the German payment cards initiatives.

1.3. The methodology

The collection of case studies and their comparative analysis was a genuinely transdisciplinary exercise, involving sociologists, economists and other social scientists in empirical work with social innovators and initiatives. It drew on the experience of a similar study conducted in the UNTANGLED project (Holtgrewe et al., 2024) where some of the contributors had already conducted case studies on the impact of globalisation, digitalisation and demographic change on various sectors and individual companies.

The partners agreed on the fields of activity in which cases were to be selected, and on selecting social innovations with a certain degree of maturity. In some of the cases, case study authors had already conducted research on and with the initiatives. Cases were then discussed and final decisions taken in such a way that each field of activity was covered in at least two welfare regimes. Before data collection, a reporting guideline was drafted by the task leaders, discussed among contributors and then revised, to cover the "megatrends" and "impacts" in the general approach of the WeLaR project (see Figure 7) as well as the relevant aspects of social innovation in the case. The finalised guideline is documented in section 9. However, investigating social innovation in the welfare state required more attention to the institutional and political context of the respective cases than we anticipated in the reporting guidelines. The complex institutional configurations of ever-changing welfare state regimes needed to be understood and explained for both researchers and readers to make sense of the aspirations and strategies of social innovations in this context.

Six case studies were conducted through desk research and document analysis of public and scientific sources as well as documents generated by the initiatives, expert interviews with 4-10 innovators and stakeholders per case (in sum, 34 interviews). In addition, researchers participated in some public presentations of the initiatives. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative data analysis software. Quotes from interviews in the case studies were translated into English by the authors. Case-specific analysis was conducted by contributors and drew on their specific theoretical backgrounds and

contextual knowledge.[3] To compare cases and draw joint conclusions, all contributors joined a workshop to discuss case studies and explore their interplay with megatrends and their impacts on the labour market and welfare states respectively. Jointly developed insights were gathered in a comparative matrix and then written up in section 8 by the task leader.

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2. Turning dreams into careers. "Job Crafting" for people with disabilities

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2.1. The “story” of the case

Poland is currently grappling with labour shortages driven by demographic changes, including an aging population and a shrinking workforce. To address these challenges, there is a growing need to tap into underutilised segments of the labour market, including people with disabilities. Despite being a significant potential labour pool, individuals with disabilities often face considerable barriers to employment, such as workplace discrimination, limited job opportunities, and inadequate support systems.

Public and private institutions are stepping up to tackle this issue, with the Aktywizacja Foundation emerging as a prominent leader in these efforts. Founded in 1990, the Foundation has evolved from its initial focus on supporting mathematicians and computer scientists with physical disabilities to become a nationwide advocate for the professional activation of people with disabilities across all sectors. Their most innovative initiative is the job crafting service, which is a comprehensive and highly individualised career counselling solution for people with disabilities. It aims not only at job placements but also long-term job retention and workplace satisfaction.

The story of the Aktywizacja Foundation can be metaphorically described as a "forest that provides shelter, growth, and sustenance to a diverse ecosystem." Just as a forest thrives under favourable conditions and struggles during adverse times, the Foundation grows and expands when resources are available and perseveres through challenges, always remaining a refuge for those in need. This metaphor reflects the Foundation's resilience, adaptability, and commitment to nurturing the potential of persons with disabilities.

2.1.1. What is the case, what is its context

The Activation Foundation is a non-governmental organisation that was established in 1990, initially under the name "Foundation for Assistance to Mathematicians and Computer Scientists with Physical Disabilities." Over the years, the Foundation has evolved, expanding its scope and refining its mission to become a prominent advocate and facilitator of employment for people with disabilities.

The Foundation operates on a substantial scale, with a network of 13 locations across Poland, including 7 branches and 6 outposts. These facilities provide the necessary infrastructure to deliver services like Job crafting to a wide audience. The Foundation’s activities are primarily funded through national and

European Union (EU) project grants. These funds are often secured through competitive processes, which present both opportunities and challenges in terms of sustainability and expansion. The Foundation also engages in business activities to generate additional revenue, particularly to cover the required co-funding for many of its projects.

The governance structure of Aktywizacja Foundation is hierarchical, with decisions made at various levels—from the non-governmental organization (NGO) board to the directors of individual branches, down to local coordinators. This structured approach ensures that the Foundation's operations are aligned with its strategic objectives while allowing flexibility at the local level to address specific challenges. Over time, the governance model has adapted to the growing complexity of the Foundation's activities, particularly with the expansion of services like Job crafting.

Job crafting service, launched in 2017, is a pioneering initiative by the Aktywizacja Foundation, specifically tailored to address the multifaceted challenges faced by people with disabilities in securing and retaining meaningful employment. The primary challenge this service responds to is the significant barrier that individuals with disabilities often encounter in the labour market. These barriers include a lack of suitable job opportunities, workplace discrimination, and inadequate support systems. Job crafting service offers a comprehensive solution by bridging the gap between job seekers with disabilities and potential employers, ensuring not only job placement but also long-term job retention. It is significant in this evolution and shows the Foundation's accumulated knowledge and expertise in vocational activation

Job crafting service is the result of collaborative efforts involving various actors within and outside Aktywizacja Foundation. At its core, the service is managed by Job Crafters—specialists who work directly with job seekers and employers to craft suitable job roles. These Job Crafters are supported by a multidisciplinary team, including career counsellors, psychologists, and other experts. The Foundation's alliances extend to public authorities, private sector employers, and civil society organizations, forming a robust network that enhances the service's reach and impact. Notably, the Foundation is an active participant in the Inclu(vi)sion Partnership, a broad coalition aimed at improving the employment landscape for people with disabilities in Poland.

The primary target group for Job crafting services is people with disabilities seeking employment. This group is diverse, encompassing individuals with various types and degrees of disability, excluding only those with certain severe intellectual disabilities unless accompanied by other disabilities. The service is designed to be intersectional, considering the unique vulnerabilities and needs of each client. This

personalized approach is crucial in crafting job roles that not only match the qualifications and abilities of the job seekers but also align with their personal aspirations and workplace preferences.

> "It's not just an organization that helps you find a job; this is where my dreams actually came true." (Beneficiary 2)

Box 1.

Job crafting – how does it work?

The tasks of a Job Crafter include presenting suitable job offers, discussing specific role expectations, and organizing meetings between the potential employer and the job seeker to help assess mutual compatibility. Job Crafters prepare candidates for job interviews and sometimes accompany them, focusing on empowerment and fostering independence.

Job Crafters also support employers in creating accessible work environments, advising on adaptations that enable inclusive practices. To track the effectiveness of these placements, they monitor job satisfaction through an "employment barometer" at intervals of 6, 12, and 18 months, allowing them to adjust approaches based on feedback and changing market needs.

An important part of the Job Crafter's role is quick, direct communication with hiring managers to address emerging needs. However, they encourage clients to take responsibility for their employment journey, as lasting professional success requires personal initiative. While Job Crafters offer guidance, the candidate's openness and willingness to work with available tools are critical to success.

> "Focusing on the ideal client can lead us astray, but on the other hand, if we were to look at what kind of client is most promising, i.e. the one who is able to gain the most from this approach, from the opportunities we create, I would say that it is very important to have a certain approach and to be open to what this person can get from us. Because it's not a question of professional skills or experience, it's just a question of whether this person will be open enough to let us in, to trust us and to finally also work with these techniques, these approaches that we give as tools." (Job Crafter)

Job crafting focuses on three main areas:

- Task Transformation: Adjusting and restructuring job tasks and responsibilities to better align with the abilities and needs of the individual, allowing them to perform their duties more effectively.

- Relationship Shaping: Enhancing and reviewing the interactions between the employee and their work environment, including their relationships with coworkers, to create a more supportive and inclusive workplace.
- Meaningful Work: Helping individuals find a deeper sense of purpose in their work by understanding how their role fits into the larger organizational structure, which fosters greater responsibility, creativity, and engagement.

The job crafting service operates at multiple levels of intervention. Locally, it directly engages with job seekers and employers to create customized employment solutions. Regionally and nationally, the Foundation's advocacy efforts influence policy and labour market standards, promoting more inclusive employment practices across Poland. While the service is primarily focused on the national context, the Foundation also engages in transnational activities, including research exchanges and collaborations with international partners. These activities help the Foundation stay informed about global best practices in disability employment and contribute to the broader European dialogue on inclusive labour markets.

2.1.2. How does it fit into the WeLaR square of "megatrends"?

The Aktywizacja Foundation's work is deeply intertwined with the trend of the demographic change and digitalization. As Poland faces the dual pressures of an ageing population and labour shortages, integrating people with disabilities into the workforce becomes increasingly important. The Foundation directly addresses this demographic shift by unlocking the potential of individuals with disabilities, a group often excluded from the labour market. Additionally, digitalization plays a significant role in the Foundation's strategy. With Poland ranking low in digital skills, especially among vulnerable groups, the Foundation focuses on enhancing the digital competencies of people with disabilities, thereby improving their employability in a rapidly evolving labour market.

2.1.3. Key impacts and ways these are being addressed or shaped

The Aktywizacja Foundation has had an impact on the labour market and welfare systems in Poland, particularly in advancing the professional activation of people with disabilities. Over the years, the Foundation has expanded its reach, moving from a narrow focus on IT professionals to assisting thousands of individuals with disabilities across various sectors. By creating employment opportunities and collaborating with major employers, such as the Polish Post Office, the Foundation has successfully challenged negative perceptions about the employability of people with disabilities. Additionally, the

Foundation's efforts help alleviate pressure on the welfare state by reducing reliance on public assistance through employment, demonstrating a significant social return on investment.

2.1.4. Methodology

The case was selected based on previous experience and eight years long implementation of Incorpora Programme of Foundation 'la Caixa' by IBS in Poland. Aktywizacja Foundation (AF), one of the implementing partners of the Programme, was selected as innovation implementer with "job crafting" as its flagship methodology of supporting Aktywizacja's Foundation clients, persons with disabilities (PwDs). For the sake of the interview, we have selected four persons: the general director of one of the AF branches located in Bydgoszcz, Poland; the person in charge of day-to-day job crafting services; and two clients – beneficiaries of the Programme who were able to get a job after being unemployed for a significant amount of time.

2.2. Megatrends

2.2.1. Demographic change

In Poland, demographic changes, particularly ageing populations and declining birth rates are leading to significant labour shortages. As the workforce shrinks, there is a pressing need to mobilise all available talent, including individuals who have been inactive due to disabilities.

According to Statistics Poland, Poland has been observing a systematic ageing of its population for several decades. The number of births is decreasing, while life expectancy is lengthening. It is estimated that by 2050 people aged 60 and older will make up as much as 37.4% of the population[4]. Within a decade, the number of employees aged 25-44, i.e. those who are most flexible in terms of adapting to new technologies and on whom companies' recruitment efforts have so far focused, will decrease by 1.9 million[5]. The demographic recession will mean that the inflow of new knowledge and competencies into the economy will be much slower than before.

[4] Sytuacja osób starszych w Polsce (Situation of the elderly in Poland), Statistics Poland, Warszawa 2023

[5] *Od kompetencji przemysłowych do technologicznych Jak Europa Środkowa może wygrać swoją przyszłość w erze AI. (From industrial to technological competence How Central Europe can win its future in the AI era).* Report prepared by IBS and Spotdata for the Impact Conferece. Warsaw, 2024

A smaller number of people of working age means fewer workers, which can lead to labour market shortages and reduced economic growth. In addition, an increase in the number of retirees increases the burden on the pension system. The increased spending on pension benefits could lead to a larger budget deficit and the need for reforms in the public finance system.

The situation of people with disabilities in Poland

People with disabilities (PwDs) are a large reservoir of the labour force, though several institutional changes are necessary to help them enter and remain in employment.

As of 2022, Poland had 1,120,000 people with disabilities (PwDs) aged 16-64 who were economically inactive[6]. A large portion of PwDs experiences exclusion from the workforce, evident in their high inactivity rate of 68%, which is 43 percentage points higher than that of the general population. PwDs in Poland are much more likely to be excluded from the labour force than their counterparts in other EU countries.

In Poland, economically inactive persons with disabilities are generally older than the broader inactive population, with nearly 60% of inactive PwDs aged 50-64, compared to less than 40% in the general inactive population. Among those with severe disabilities, 40% are also in this age range. Gender distribution among inactive PwDs differs from the general population; men make up 55% of inactive PwDs, contrasting with women who represent over 62% of the overall inactive population.

Education levels among inactive PwDs are low, with most having only primary or basic vocational education. Higher educational attainment significantly boosts employment chances for PwDs. For instance, having secondary education increases employment probability by nearly 27 percentage points, and tertiary education boosts it by 58 percentage points compared to those with primary education. This educational impact is notably larger in Poland compared to the EU average[7].

In Poland, increasing the professional activation of people with disabilities is not only a matter of the shrinking labour force but also a fulfilment of human rights and EU commitments to equality and non-

[6] Unless otherwise stated, figures in this section are compiled by the Institute for Structural Research from Labour Force Survey data from 2022.

[7] Albinowski, M., Magda, I., & Rozszczypała, A. (2024). The employment effects of the disability education gap in Europe. Education Economics, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2024.2395564

discrimination. The European Union strongly advocates for inclusive labour markets, supporting the rights of people with disabilities to fully participate in society and achieve economic independence. The right to work is a fundamental human right, and ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to employment aligns with both the EU's non-discrimination directives and Poland's own commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[8]. Furthermore, activating the potential of people with disabilities enhances diversity in the workforce, which is known to foster innovation, resilience, and productivity. Providing equal opportunities not only empowers individuals but strengthens society as a whole by challenging stereotypes, reducing dependency on social benefits, and creating a more equitable and dynamic labour market. For Poland, aligning with EU policies on inclusion by reducing employment barriers for people with disabilities is not merely beneficial—it is essential for creating a fair, just, and prosperous society.

Moreover, integrating PwDs into the labour market could alleviate the burden on caregivers, who are themselves a shrinking part of the workforce. Effective support systems are needed to offer income security while encouraging economic activity. Additionally, increasing digital education and leveraging technology, such as remote work, can enhance job opportunities for PwDs and benefit their families by potentially increasing overall labour force participation.

2.2.2. Digitalisation and Globalisation

Digitalisation and globalisation are breaking down barriers and creating new opportunities for remote and flexible work arrangements, which can be particularly beneficial for people with disabilities.

Poland ranks sixth from the bottom among OECD countries in terms of basic digital skills of the population[9]. In other types of skills, such as reading comprehension or mathematical skills, adults in Poland are not far behind OECD countries. However, adults' digital skills are below the level to be expected given mathematical skills or reading with understanding.

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[8] UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol

[9] *Od kompetencji przemysłowych do technologicznych Jak Europa Środkowa może wygrać swoją przyszłość w erze AI*. *(From industrial to technological competence How Central Europe can win its future in the AI era).* Report prepared by IBS and Spotdata for the Impact Conferece. Warsaw, 2024

Similarly, Poland ranks 24th of 27 EU Member States in the 2022 edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI).[10] Only 43% of people between 16 and 74 years old have at least basic digital skills, which %, is significantly below the EU average (58%). The DESI index also shows that ICT professionals and female ICT specialists make up a lower percentage of the workforce in Poland than the EU average.

To enable people with disabilities to become professionally active, it is essential to teach them digital skills. Institutions offering training programs for individuals with disabilities must prioritise comprehensive digital education.

2.2.3. Climate change

Climate change is poised to significantly impact the labour market, creating both challenges and opportunities. As economies strive to mitigate the effects of global warming and transition to sustainable economies, there will be a substantial shift towards green jobs. These are roles focused on reducing environmental impact, enhancing energy efficiency, and promoting renewable energy sources. This green transformation will necessitate a workforce skilled in new technologies and sustainable practices.

The demand for green jobs is expected to surge across various sectors, including renewable energy, energy efficiency, waste management, and sustainable agriculture. Governments and businesses worldwide are investing in green infrastructure and technologies to meet climate targets, creating a wide array of new employment opportunities. In Poland, the need for a workforce proficient in green skills will be critical to achieving its climate goals and ensuring a sustainable future.

The professional activation of people with disabilities (PwDs) should align with the growing demand for green jobs. However, we found no evidence that the Activation Foundation considers this trend.

2.3. Impacts

Aktywizacja Foundation (AF) has evolved significantly over its 34-year history, shifting from a narrow focus on supporting IT professionals with physical disabilities to a broader mandate of professional activation for persons with disabilities across various sectors. This expansion reflects the organization's growing impact and its ability to adapt to changing societal needs and political contexts. This chapter will

[10] https://akademiacyfryzacji.gs1.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/desi_2022__poland__eng.pdf

explore the impacts of this organization on the labour market, welfare state, and public finance, based on the insights gained from an in-depth interview with the organization's representative, Mateusz Kotnowski.

2.3.1. Labour market

Aktywizacja Foundation operates within a Polish national context, with branches in Bydgoszcz, Bialystok, Lodz, Poznan, Rzeszow, Opole, and Warsaw (HQ). It targets individuals with disabilities, a group historically marginalized in the labour market. The focus has expanded from urban centres to include rural areas and small towns, demonstrating an increasing reach and ambition.

Initially, the organization catered to a smaller number of individuals, primarily within IT. Today, it facilitates the entry of over a thousand persons into the labour market annually. AF has established itself as a key player in labour supply, particularly for persons with disabilities. It has also successfully influenced labour demand by working closely with employers, including large entities like the Polish Post Office, to create employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This collaboration alone has led to the employment of over 600 individuals, challenging preconceived notions about the employability of disabled individuals and setting a precedent for other employers.

The NGO's impact on the labour market is also evident in the improved skills and digital competencies of the individuals it supports. It has played a critical role in changing employer perspectives, fostering an inclusive work environment, and increasing the retention rates of employed individuals with disabilities. The data shows a high level of job satisfaction and stability, with 90% of employees reporting satisfaction and 95% working on employment contracts.

AF has experienced both challenges and emerging opportunities. Notably, its collaboration with the Polish Post Office revealed the potential for large-scale employment of persons with disabilities, even in companies with established management systems resistant to change. This success has opened new avenues for the organization to influence strategic thinking at the management level in other companies.

> "Because, in reality, there is no effective vocational activation if we overlook the crucial link that is the employers. Therefore, we strive to create development opportunities not only for our clients, who are people with disabilities but also for employers. We create opportunities where we can exchange experiences and seek solutions." (Foundation representative 2)

2.3.2. Welfare state and public finance

AF complements the welfare state by filling gaps in social services, particularly in the professional activation of persons with disabilities. It has not only provided services that were otherwise unavailable

but has also contributed to the reform of social services by setting new standards for the employment of persons with disabilities. It also has demonstrated an ability to adapt to changing political contexts and societal needs. Despite the shifting political landscape, the organization has maintained a centrist approach, collaborating with various political factions and decision-makers to continue its mission of professional activation for persons with disabilities.

The NGO has played a preventive role by mitigating the adverse impacts of societal trends, such as the marginalization of disabled individuals in the labour market. By providing employment opportunities and enhancing digital competencies, the organization helps reduce unemployment among persons with disabilities, thereby alleviating potential strains on public welfare systems.

The organization's approach to governance involves close cooperation with public authorities, private sector entities, and civil society organizations (CSOs). This collaboration has enabled it to secure funding from diverse sources, including EU funds, which have been effectively utilized for professional activation programs. The organization's work demonstrates a significant social return on investment, evidenced by high employment retention rates and job satisfaction among its beneficiaries. Moreover, the organization collaborates extensively with traditional labour market institutions, including municipal and provincial labour offices, healthcare institutions, and city offices. This cooperation covers a broad range of activities, from consulting and training to organizing events and creating employment standards.

Box 2. Measuring impact: the "Labour Activation Barometer"

Aktywizacja Foundation has a system for monitoring the outcomes and impacts of its programs. It conducts a "labour activation barometer" to track the progress of individuals who have found employment through its programs. The barometer provides data on job satisfaction, employment retention, and workplace conditions, indicating the long-term success of the organization's efforts.

The evaluation data from February 2022 to June 2024 shows that:

- 90% of employees express job satisfaction.
- Employment retention rates are high, with 80% retention after 6-12 months and 74% after 18 months.
- 95% of the employed individuals work on stable employment contracts.
- 88% believe that employers adequately address their health-related needs, and 85% report good relations with coworkers.

Beyond problem-solving, the organization has contributed to the empowerment of persons with disabilities by promoting their inclusion in the labour market. This empowerment extends to fostering a more democratic workplace culture in companies that have historically been resistant to hiring individuals with disabilities.

2.4. Social innovation

Aktywizacja Foundation exemplifies social innovation in action, addressing the complex challenges faced by persons with disabilities through a combination of direct services, advocacy, and collaboration. On the one hand, the organization benefits from its established reputation, which attracts persons with disabilities who seek professional support. The evolving technological landscape also presents opportunities for the Foundation to innovate and improve its services, such as using AI to reach clients more effectively.

On the other hand, the organization is constrained by its dependency on project-based funding, primarily from national and EU sources. The short-term nature of these funds creates financial uncertainty, making it challenging to sustain long-term projects or expand operations. Additionally, the formalization of funding processes, including the need for own contributions and the delays in fund disbursement, poses significant risks to the Foundation's operations. The challenge of maintaining quality services while managing the scale of the organization also adds to the complexity of its operations.

2.4.1. Success factors

Success for AF hinges on several key factors**. Effective communication and recruitment strategies are vital for reaching diverse groups within the disabled community.** The organization's ability to adapt to technological advancements and legal changes also plays a crucial role in maintaining its relevance and effectiveness.

The NGO places significant emphasis on **knowledge mobilization, collaboration, and support networks.** The organization engages in research projects to diagnose the labour market and the situation of persons with disabilities, using these insights to inform their activities and advocacy efforts. Collaborations with local and international organizations, including universities and training facilities, are integral to their work. These partnerships allow for the exchange of best practices and the development of innovative solutions tailored to the Polish context.

The key element in the Foundation's strategy is participation. The organization actively seeks input from its beneficiaries and partners, recognizing that successful social innovation requires the involvement of all stakeholders. However, reaching diverse groups within the disabled community presents challenges,

necessitating tailored communication and recruitment strategies. The organization uses various channels, including social media, publications, and advocacy efforts, to communicate its goals and ensure visibility. Their communication strategy is twofold: targeting persons with disabilities to provide them with the necessary support and engaging with stakeholders such as employers, policymakers, and the broader public to advocate for systemic changes in the labour market

Aktywizacja Foundation maintains strong relationships with public authorities, the private sector, and civil society. These interactions are facilitated through advocacy work, participation in monitoring committees, and involvement in public benefit councils at various levels. The Foundation also plays a significant role in the Inclu(vi)sion Partnership, a broad coalition aimed at improving the vocational activation of persons with disabilities. This partnership includes NGOs, employer networks, and decision-makers, reflecting the Foundation's commitment to collaborative problem-solving. At the European level, the Foundation participates in exchanges and cooperation with other countries to adopt and share effective practices. This international collaboration is crucial for staying updated with global trends and ensuring that their approaches are informed by the latest developments in social innovation.

2.4.2. Transferability and scalability

Aktywizacja Foundation's model of social innovation has the potential for transferability and scalability. While many of their initiatives are tailored to local contexts, the principles of professional activation and inclusive employment can be adapted to other regions or countries. The Foundation's approach of combining advocacy with direct service provision and collaboration with a broad network of partners offers a blueprint for similar organizations aiming to address the needs of persons with disabilities.

However, scalability is not without challenges. The organization must balance growth with the quality of services, ensuring that expansion does not compromise the effectiveness of its programs. Additionally, securing long-term funding and managing financial risks are critical to scaling their operations successfully. Finally, the success of job crafting is limited by the clients' approach and environment:

> "Sometimes we are powerless, and the biggest limitation is that this limitation is the freedom of the other individual. And it is the other person who has to decide that this is the moment when he or she wants to fight together with us for themselves. Very often, this fight for oneself is also a fight with the person's immediate environment. Sometimes, the family does not necessarily want this employment to happen, any mental limits that have appeared, or systemic issues, for example, those related to the foreseeable loss of social security benefits." (Job Crafter)

2.5. Conclusions

The Aktywizacja Foundation represents a compelling example of social innovation that not only addresses the significant challenges faced by people with disabilities but also offers a holistic and sustainable model for professional activation. What's new and surprising about this case is the Foundation's ability to evolve from a niche organization supporting IT professionals with physical disabilities to one of the national leaders advocating for inclusive employment across various sectors.

Its flagship service, Job crafting service exemplifies a holistic approach to solving the employment challenges faced by people with disabilities. By leveraging its historical expertise, robust governance, and extensive networks, Aktywizacja Foundation has created a model that not only facilitates job placement but also ensures long-term job retention and satisfaction. As the service continues to evolve, it remains a critical component of the Foundation's broader mission to empower people with disabilities through meaningful employment.

Aktywizacja Foundation has ambitious aspirations for the future, aiming to expand its reach and improve the quality of its services. However, expansion is approached with caution due to the financial risks involved. The Foundation prioritizes internal quality improvements and aims to be a leader in vocational activation for persons with disabilities in Poland. Strategic plans include increasing the number of beneficiaries and enhancing partnerships with employers and other organizations to create more employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

In the bigger picture, the Aktywizacja Foundation's work aligns with broader societal trends, such as demographic changes and the increasing demand for digital skills. By tapping into the underutilized potential of people with disabilities, the Foundation addresses critical labour shortages in Poland, demonstrating how inclusive employment strategies can contribute to the country's economic resilience. Moreover, the Foundation's focus on enhancing digital competencies highlights its forward-thinking approach in preparing people with disabilities for a rapidly digitalizing job market.

3. Inclusive employment, regional food supply chain, and urban renewal: Restaurant Numero Zero

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3.1. The "story" of the case

3.1.1. What is the case, what is its context

In 1998, the **La Città del Sole** Foundation was established in Perugia to develop innovative interventions in the field of psychiatry, specifically through 24-hour projects for psychiatric patients that focus on self-determination, autonomy, and social inclusion. The Foundation was primarily created to launch the **Prisma project** (Mental Health and Autonomy Research and Intervention Program), which aims to develop pathways that address all aspects of a patient's life: from housing, work, and training to leisure, social interaction, holidays, family relationships, and therapy.

The first challenge tackled by the project is housing, which remains a defining feature of this initiative on an international scale. The starting premise is highly original: the organisation of living as a "care pact." Each patient in the project lives in their own home, an apartment rented by the Foundation, alongside other individuals in need of housing. They are offered free accommodation and condominium fees[11] in exchange for sharing the space. Several homes were opened quickly, each housing a limited number of patients, generally paired with two to four university students who committed to living together and being present, particularly in the evening.

Once the project was up and running, however, other needs emerged. One of the most pressing issues was employment. In Italy, while placement of disabled individuals in companies with more than 15 employees is mandatory, there is no distinction made between mental disabilities and other types of disabilities. This system, rather than encouraging the employment of people with cognitive disabilities, implicitly incentivises companies to hire individuals with less severe physical impairments, who are more likely to ensure higher productivity levels. As one of the people interviewed for this report explains,

[11]It is standard in an Italian town to live in a residential unit, part of a complex of more units where all residents share common spaces, amenities, and other resources (i.e., a condominium). Maintenance costs, amenities, and the upkeep of common spaces are usually charged to the owners or tenants of the apartments.

> "This dynamic is understandable because the job placement of psychiatric patients is highly problematic. A psychiatric patient rarely meets the exacting demands of the workplace. Their sense of time often differs from what is expected in a productive environment. These individuals frequently go through periods of crisis, which not only interrupt their performance but can also affect the productivity of their colleagues. Therefore, job placement for psychiatric patients only makes sense if it is carefully planned, constructed, and supervised by a team of skilled professionals who continuously monitor the progress of the experience" [R1].

For a long time, the Foundation's patients could only obtain occasional work through temporary work grants. This led to a growing realisation that a new approach was needed—one that involved developing self-entrepreneurship.

> "After twenty years, it became obvious to us that the only way to secure employment for psychiatric patients was to create it ourselves – that is, to establish a social enterprise" [R1].

The opportunity to continue down this path of innovation arose in 2016, driven by two key factors: the need to adapt the Prisma project to the regional regulatory framework and the need to separate the Foundation's social-health activities from its cultural initiatives. The significant growth in scale signalled the success of these initiatives. This also had a notable impact on the Foundation's budget and led to public authorities questioning the Foundation as a non-profit organisation (Onlus).

In the first instance, the **Prisma project** had been approved by the regional health system only in 2002 as an innovative experimental project, classified under the "cohabitation unit" model. This arrangement resulted from an agreement between the **La Città del Sole** foundation and the **Umbria Region**, which placed the Prisma project outside the formal accreditation system, treating it as an experimental initiative. This allowed the regional health service to refer patients to the Foundation. While the project was successful, as evidenced by its annual extensions and the increasing number of patients referred (from two in 2002 to ten in 2016), political steps to integrate this model into regional legislation have never been taken.

> "As is often the case in Italy, unfortunately, experimentation never ends" [R1].

In 2016, the regional government authority imposed the Prisma project to comply with one of the legally mandated forms that similar organisations must have. The psychiatric day centre was the only organisational structure compatible with continuing the Prisma project and in agreement with the local psychiatric services that wanted to continue the ongoing activities. As a result, the *Fuori Porta Day Centre*

was opened in the historic centre of Perugia in 2016, where the Foundation's patients continue to carry out therapeutic and recreational activities.

The *RealMente APS* association was established in the same year to manage the socio-cultural activities previously developed by the Foundation[12]. These activities include the *Perso Film Festival*, which has gained an international reputation, and the *Stazione Panzana radio station*; together, these two activities generated a significant budget. RealMente APS was, therefore, a sort of spin-off dedicated to profit activities; it prevented the original Foundation, "Città del Sole", from losing its non-profit organisation status.

The establishment of the day centre and the creation of a separate entity for socio-cultural activities presented the long-awaited opportunity to embark on an innovative, entrepreneurial venture that would also ensure job opportunities for psychiatric patients while maintaining continuity with their therapeutic path:

> "When we had to open a psychiatric day centre – because until 2019, there was no such facility – we first searched for a location. The Foundation wanted it to be in the historic centre because there was a desire not to create the typical 'ugly' psychiatric centre on the outskirts, isolated from city life. Fortunately, we found this space and decided: 'Let's establish the psychiatric centre here.' Then, as we looked around, we thought: 'This place is beautiful, right in the historic centre, and there's already a kitchen, though it needs some refurbishment.' So, we asked ourselves: do we only keep it open from Monday to Saturday until 6:00 pm? Or do we take this opportunity to realise an idea we have been thinking about for so long? We knew that opening a healthcare centre was not enough from the beginning. All the work for the psychiatric day centre was done with the idea that, in the evening, the space would transform into something else, specifically a restaurant. So, from the start, we tried to design the rooms to serve both functions – a psychiatric day centre during the day and, in the evening, a restaurant where psychiatric patients could work, managed by the RealMente Association" [R2].

On November 28, 2019, the *Numero Zero* restaurant opened in Perugia. Twenty-one years had passed since the establishment of the *La Città del Sole Foundation* and the launch of the Prisma project, and a second critical area of intervention – employment – was finally addressed. *Numero Zero* became an

[12] Please see here for further information on the Association RealMente (https://www.associazionerealmente.it).

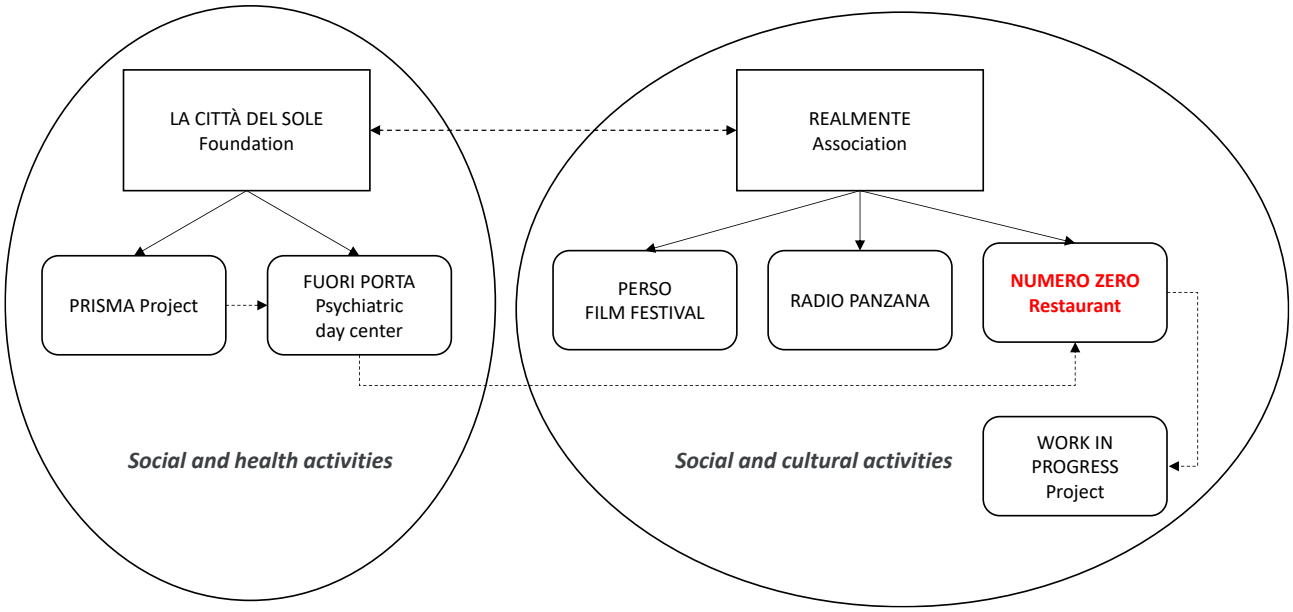
inclusive place where psychiatric patients could enter the workforce, receive specific training, engage directly with society, take on professional roles, and undertake a process of personal growth and self-affirmation.

Four years after its opening, *Numero Zero* has developed its own identity. It occupies a specific functional and organisational position within the broader universe of social health and socio-cultural activities by the *La Città del Sole Foundation* and *the RealMente APS Association* (Fig. 1).

To date (as of October 2024), *Numero Zero* employs nine psychiatric patients, five of whom have paid work placements, and four hold regular permanent employment contracts. These individuals are supported by five catering professionals, making for a total of 14 staff members.

> "The project's initial goal was for at least 50% of the staff to be made up of psychiatric patients. We realised we had gone well beyond this goal" [R2].

Figure 1. The organisational and functional position of the *Numero Zero Project*



However, it is essential to highlight a characteristic of the workforce composition that reflects the solid ties *Numero Zero* has established with other actors within the regional context. La Città del Sole Foundation currently cares for ten psychiatric patients who, in addition to living independently in apartments managed by the foundation, attend the psychiatric centre daily. Of these, only two work at *Numero Zero*. The remaining seven patients are referred through the regional psychiatric services or from public actors with whom a solid collaborative relationship has been developed in recent years.

Regarding the initiative's governance, *Numero Zero* is managed collectively by the RealMente APS Association's board of directors. This board comprises five people who, in different roles, also belong to the La Città del Sole Foundation's management team.

> "The key people are shared across both entities. However, compared to the beginning, when we were the same group of people, the association has gained more autonomy with its staff and employees" [R2].

It is a small group where distinct and complementary professional skills coexist: from the health manager to the administrative manager, the planning and fundraising manager to the commercial manager, and the general manager. The spirit with which the restaurant and all the socio-cultural activities are managed remains that of a tightly-knit team, transforming their passion into their work.

> "We all collaborate, but everyone has their area of expertise. Our strength is that it's a team where each person has clear skills and proper training. The place doesn't belong to a classic entrepreneur but to a group of people who share the same values. We know that we must achieve financial results and have an entrepreneurial mindset for the project to survive and thrive, but we are not driven by personal gain. We continue to be a third-sector organisation, so we remain personally committed, here on-site, managing all the activities and doing everything we can, despite our limitations, to solve any challenges that arise" [R2].

This shared approach informs strategic decisions—such as developing new projects, establishing new partnerships, or determining the initiative's scalability—and also shapes operational decisions. Regular meetings with the chef and head waiter are becoming more frequent, covering a wide range of topics: the restaurant's overall progress, customer feedback, the well-being of psychiatric patients, potential menu changes, or the possibility of changing suppliers.

> "In reality, decisions are made together with the restaurant staff. At least once every fortnight, we take a couple of hours to sit down together and discuss the restaurant's progress and what we could do better" [R1].

The market responded well to *Numero Zero*, thanks to the restaurant's collaborative approach to managing activities and interacting with customers. While initially, the customer base was primarily local, composed of people familiar with the initiative, the restaurant has since seen the arrival of tourists and visitors from outside the city and companies choosing to host their events there. This was driven

by the high standards of the products supplied and the strategic approach to closely link whole service (food, beverages, atmosphere) to the local/regional context[13].

> "I didn't believe it at first, but I've realised there's a niche of customers—both tourists and companies—that come to us. I'm not sure how much of it is driven by an ethical motivation, but it's there. It's still a small portion of the market, but all things being equal, if people in Perugia know about this project and have to choose between restaurants, they decide to come here and leave happy" [R2].

3.1.2. How does it fit into the WeLaR square of "megatrends"?

The impact of megatrends on *Numero Zero*'s activities is complex and multifaceted. Different phenomena, each containing contrasting values, vary in degree. This section provides a general overview; further details can be found in section 3.2.

Two significant, ambivalent aspects stand out: Finding qualified labour is challenging, exacerbated by the growing trend of young people pursuing professional careers abroad for better contractual conditions. On the other hand, the increase in tourist flows offers an opportunity which could lead to the development of new market segments. As mentioned above, responsible tourism looking for local specificities and authentic traditional food could be a niche market supported by the positive aspects of globalisation. Digitalisation also presents opposing effects. While advanced technological solutions have not yet matured to the point where they can improve the working conditions of psychiatric patients, many of the supportive innovations currently available are primarily designed for people with physical disabilities. The development of new digital technologies for mental health is still in an experimental phase. As a result, *Numero Zero* will shortly be implementing "traditional" technological solutions to improve internal business processes, such as management software for dining room-kitchen orders, inventory control, and payment automation. However, the situation is different for social networks, which play a strategic role in market visibility, enhancing both the project's commercial appeal and fundraising capacity. Social networks also provide visibility and empowerment for mentally disabled individuals. These

[13] Online advertisements supported by the websites of qualified food companies working on special and traditional foods, such as truffles, highlight the importance placed by Numero Zero on the attractiveness of international tourism. (https://www.tectartufi.it/en/truffle-inclusive-the-numero-zero-restaurant-project/)

communication methods are expected to become more systematic and central to the organisation's operations.

Demographic change, on the other hand, has the most significant impact. It is not only a social welfare issue tied to ensuring continuous and adequate care for psychiatric patients even after the loss of their families, but it also presents a commercial opportunity. Given the project's competitive positioning, which targets an older clientele with high spending power, the growing average age of the population could lead to an expansion of the market, even though we cannot take for granted that middle-class pensioners will retain adequate spending power in the near future.

Additionally, *Numero Zero*'s location in the historic centre, increasingly affected by depopulation, positions it as both a draw and an animator of the urban context.

Finally, the effects of climate change are considered by adopting low-emission logistics. This is evident from Numero Zero's commitment to supporting local supply chains, which helps reduce environmental impacts and promotes the region's local product traditions.

3.1.3. Key impacts and ways these are being addressed or shaped

As will be explored in section 3.3, the activities of the *Numero Zero* restaurant have thus far generated at least three key impacts.

Firstly, this project has contributed to a cultural shift in the local context. Visitors to the restaurant interact directly with people with mental disabilities, confront their own beliefs and prejudices, and, as often happens, change their attitudes towards such issues due to this experience. Employment integration for those with mental disabilities was, in the past, the area where the first pioneering experiences of social cooperation in Italy emerged and developed. Over the years, however, for reasons previously mentioned, inclusive policies primarily addressed issues concerning barriers and facilitators for people with physical disabilities, while how to favour well-being and decent living standards for persons with mental disabilities was much less considered. In this regard, due to the specific nature of the service provided, which is essentially characterised by direct and personal interaction (service in a business setting), it can be argued that *Numero Zero* has helped to reaffirm the issue of employment integration for those with mental disabilities both in local public opinion and on the political agenda of public actors.

Secondly, opening a restaurant with these characteristics, managed by a highly cohesive and motivated group of people, positively impacts urban regeneration. Thanks to the vibrancy of the association, the initiative and entrepreneurial capabilities of its members, and the collaboration with local businesses and other non-profit organisations in the area, the establishment of this project in the heart of the historic

centre, in a district that had been experiencing a marked trend of depopulation, is generating a dynamic of social aggregation and revitalisation.

Finally, *Numero Zero* has also significantly innovated the regional legal framework on mental health services. As will be examined later, the opening of this project has compelled the Umbria Region to amend existing regulations on psychiatric services, setting a precedent that could potentially lay the foundation for replicating such an initiative in other parts of the regional context or even across the national territory in the future.

3.1.4. Methodology

Research design

Based on what we discussed above, the single-case study approach (Yin, 2014) emerges as an appropriate method to be used in this qualitative research. The choice of this method stems from the need to obtain detailed and in-depth information on the subject under investigation, and it appears to be highly consistent with management studies that aim to analyse complex experiences (Stake, 1995). Especially when the knowledge of a particular phenomenon and the ability to provide adequate explanations are limited, the case study is the primary approach (Eisenhardt, 1989). Further, this methodology allows for the study of the organisation's behaviour in a real-world setting, capturing all possible dimensions (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010) and addressing research questions relating to paths of social innovation.

The reasons behind the choice of *Numero Zero* are various and followed the criteria defined by the literature (Eisenhardt, 1989): firstly, the decision to employ disadvantaged people exclusively within the field of psychiatry; secondly, the nature of the activity carried out; which involves employing disabled individuals in roles with a high degree of relational intensity (front-office); thirdly, the integration of this entrepreneurial initiative within a context enriched by socio-cultural activities that further engage disabled people; and finally, the various national-level recognitions awarded for the originality, effectiveness of the project, and its high potential for replication.

Data gathering

The information collected was of various types and drawn from different primary and secondary sources. The main source was the in-depth interviews, which were conducted both with members of the company and with external stakeholders to obtain a holistic perspective of the case. In detail, the number of interviews, their duration, and the respective interviewees are as follows (Table 2).

Table 2. Key informants and interviews

Respondent	Position	No. of interviews	Total duration of interviews
R1	Co-Founder, General Manager and Head of Institutional Relations	1	2 hours and 30 minutes
R2	Co-founder, Director of Planning and Fundraising	1	2 hours and 15 minutes
R3	Waitress (worker with mental disability)	1	30 minutes
R4	Waiter (worker with mental disability)	1	30 minutes
R5	Head of the Third Sector and Social Economy Section, Umbria Region	1	1 hour and 30 minutes
R6	President Legacoop Sociali Umbria	1	1 hour and 15 minutes

Given the specificity and complexity of the case related to the dynamics of social innovation, open-ended questions were asked. A specific research protocol was used for conducting the interviews, developed by the research team based on knowledge and evidence from the literature, following a deductive approach. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to preserve all the information gathered. During the meetings, the authors took notes to capture ideas and impressions that emerged during the discussions. After each interview, all the authors (not just the interviewers) discussed the information obtained and integrated aspects that had not been previously considered but emerged during the meetings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Secondary data, including reports and corporate information materials such as brochures, catalogues, and presentations, information from the company's website and social media, and articles about the company published in the local and national press, were also collected for the research. These secondary sources were helpful as they provided an essential background for understanding the initiative and the changes during the observation period. The information obtained helped identify topics that required further exploration, supporting the authors in conducting the direct interviews.

Data analysis

This activity made it possible to proceed with a conceptual systematisation of the data, identifying, based on empirical evidence and insights from the literature, the key elements and main impacts generated by the social innovation experience. Operationally, the information was reworked with the support of the Nvivo software, which allowed for the coding of the collected data (William and Moser, 2019). Specifically,

starting from the questionnaire used and its structure in specific themes, three distinct levels/types of codes were defined (Table 3):

a) *Selective codes*, which represent the general themes, consisting of the phenomena to be explored and related to the effects that mega-trends could have on the organisation, the main impacts the initiative was able to generate, and the dynamics of social innovation;

b) *Axial codes*, which are the categories also defined in the questionnaire, that specify the content of each theme (for example, in the case of social innovation, where determinants, methods, and positive/adverse effects are explored);

c) *Open codes provide content summarising the organisation's specific experiences in each of the previous dimensions of analysis.*

The open codes are the themes that emerge from the interviews and are re-used and aggregated in the other higher codes. The columns indicate how many times (in absolute and percentage terms) those specific themes recur in the interviews.

Table 3. The coding of interviews

Selective: Themes	Axial Codes: Categories	Opens Codes		N.	%
Megatrends	2.1 Globalisation	2.1.1 Marginal effect by segment/market	3	**7**	**5,3**
		2.1.2 New community leadership	1		
		2.1.3 Emigration of workers	1		
		2.1.4 Attracting new tourism flow	2		
	2.2 Digitalisation	2.2.1 Previous negative experiences	2	**8**	**6,1**
		2.2.2 Upcoming introduction of management tools	3		
		2.2.3 Amplifying effect of social media	3		
	2.3 Demographic change	2.3.1 Positive effect by segment	4	**7**	**5,3**
		2.3.2 Positive effect on the urban context	3		
	2.4 Climate change	2.4.1 Marginal effect by type of activity	1	**4**	**3,0**
		2.4.2 Local supplies from short supply chains	3		
Impacts	3.1 Key impacts of the organisation	3.1.1 Better living conditions for disabled people	10	**16**	**12,1**
		3.1.2 Cultural change in local society	4		
		3.1.3 Changing urban context	2		
	3.2 Changes in policy contexts and societal needs	3.2.1 Change in public policies	5	**7**	**5,3**
		3.2.2 Regulatory innovation	2		
	3.3 Interaction with the labour market	3.3.1 Career upgrading of disabled people	7	**10**	**7,6**
		3.3.2 Creation of new jobs	1		
		3.3.3 Customization of employment contracts	2		
	3.4 Changes in both supply and demand in the labour market	3.4.1 Expansion and strengthening of the initial project (WIP)	2	**4**	**3,0**
		3.4.2 Direct relationship with institutional backers	2		
	3.5 Contribution to the welfare state and public finance	3.5.1 Saving financial resources	4	**7**	**5,3**
		3.5.2 Breaking traditional patterns	3		
Social Innovation	4.1 Prerequisites of success (ex-ante)	4.1.1 Role/need of work for disabled people	1	**8**	**6,1**
		4.1.2 Features of the building/location	2		

	4.1.3 Integration of new skills	5		
4.2 Collaborations/Process dynamics	4.2.1 The meaning of collaboration	3	**19**	**14,4**
	4.2.2 Collaboration with entrepreneurial association	2		
	4.2.3 Collaboration with public actors	4		
	4.2.4 Collaboration with other NPO	5		
	4.2.5 Collaboration with profit companies	1		
	4.2.6 Relations with local community	4		
4.3 Communications and visibility	4.3.1 Use and role of social media	1	**2**	**1,5**
	4.3.2 Nature and content of communication activities	1		
4.4 Opportunities (ex-post)	4.4.1 New and greater market attractiveness	2	**4**	**3,0**
	4.4.2 The greatest success	2		
4.5 Constraints	4.5.1 Governance constraints	1	**22**	**16,7**
	4.5.2 Financial constraints	8		
	4.5.3 Institutional constraints	7		
	4.5.4 Organizational constraints	1		
	4.5.5 Cultural constraints	1		
	4.5.6 The biggest failure	2		
4.6 Transferability and scalability	4.6.1 Essential (basic) elements	1	**3**	**2,3**
	4.6.2 Territorial network	2		
4.7 Aspirations and strategic outlook	4.7.1 Creation of a national network	3	**4**	**3,0**
	4.7.2 Building an internal continuity	1		

3.2. Megatrends

As mentioned, megatrends have specific effects on the restaurant *Numero Zero*. However, these phenomena have no singular directionality: some have a positive impact, others generate adverse effects, and some produce virtually no impact. Furthermore, the scope/extent of these effects varies significantly. Finally, it is possible to highlight that a single megatrend can simultaneously generate contrasting effects, both positive and negative.

A summary map (Fig. 2) summarises these dynamics. Within it, the individual mega-trends are positioned based on two dimensions: the nature of the impact (negative, neutral, or positive) and the extent of the impact (low, intermediate, or high). Below, a detailed description of each phenomenon is provided.

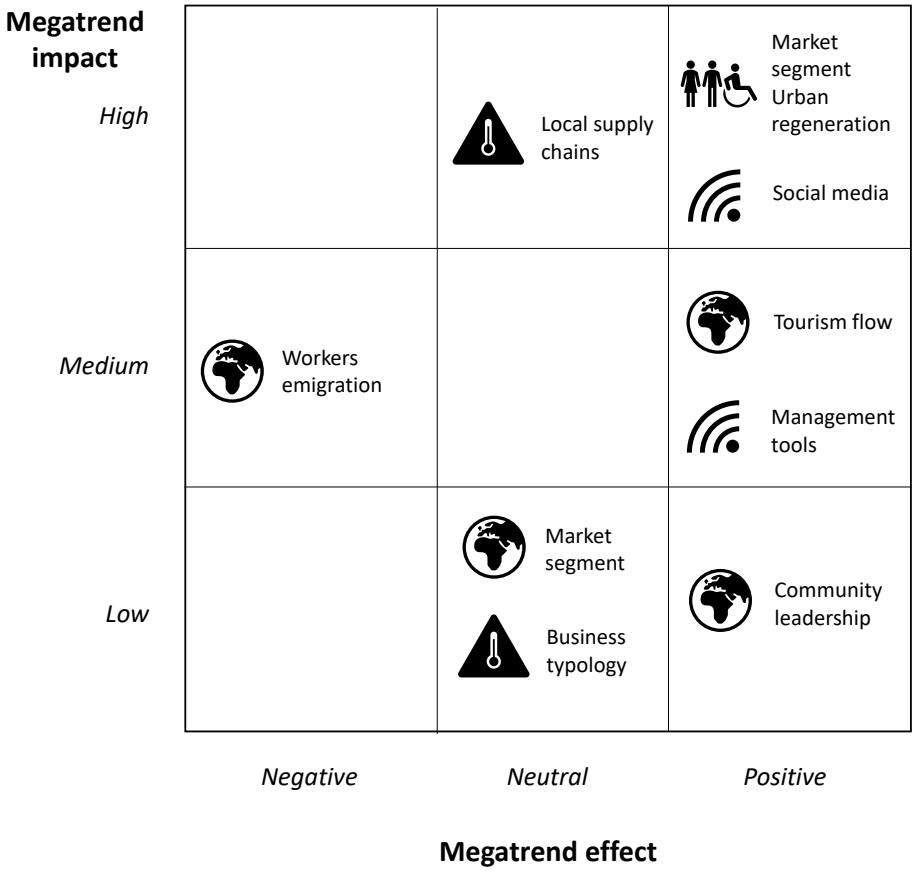
3.2.1. Globalisation

Globalisation generally represents the mega-trend with negligible impact on *Numero Zero*'s activities. This is due to the nature of the business (hospitality), which typically targets a local market, and its positioning (customer segment), which caters to a stable and higher-end niche market due to the choices made and the quality of the offering. This choice has strengthened the project, successfully combining economic and social value for the customer.

> "We live in a world where everyone wants to eat out, a trend that started in the 1960s. At the same time, however, Italians are generally poor, especially compared to the European average. This has

led to the proliferation of businesses for low-budget people, from discount outlets to various eateries. We, on the other hand, made the opposite choice. When we opened *Numero Zero*, we decided it had to be where people feel good, have fun, and eat well. We could have created an inexpensive place, but people would have come once or twice to support the project but never returned. So, we decided to give it a quality twist" [R1].

Figure 2. The impact of megatrends on the *Project Numero Zero*



One adverse effect of globalisation that emerged during this research is the progressive emigration of young people wanting to work in the catering sector, attracted by better contractual conditions and higher wages offered elsewhere. This leads to difficulty in finding skilled labour with the appropriate professional competencies.

"We've lost at least three or four people who went to France or the Netherlands, where they earn €4,000 a month, while in Italy, the chef, our second tier, earns €1,800. This is, of course, a result of globalisation." [R1].

However, there are also several advantages that globalisation generates for *Numero Zero*. On the one hand, some stakeholders argue that the growing tendency to interconnect markets leads to a recovery and

valorisation of localism. In this view, the ties an enterprise has maintained with its local area will become not only a point of distinction from global and standardised offerings but also a value-added benefit, recognised by both consumers and public authorities.

> "Globalisation has also introduced the theme of community protagonism. There is a new protagonism of smaller entities in this very distant relationship between the state and the territories. This is a counter-trend, in my opinion, that will consolidate over time. We already see it in public tenders or large concessions, where the evaluation returns to those with local knowledge and expertise. We're not talking about fast food but about activities and services where local resources, "chilometro zero" [14] and neighbourhood associations become central. So, it's a new way of being and doing together. In the end, it will return to the community of places." [R5].

The most significant effect, however, is the possibility of attracting future tourist flows passing through Perugia and increasing the restaurant's clientele. Currently, this market segment is still marginal, but the management is developing collaborations with other local entities and participating in regional initiatives to strengthen its visibility on an international scale.

> "Several tourists already come for dinner, but now we're trying to position ourselves better. We will have an initiative with *Quinto Sapore*, an organic farming company from Città delle Pieve (Umbria Region), which is very oriented towards the American market, hoping to attract both tourists and, above all, the community of Americans living in Umbria. Now, in addition, the Region has launched a new portal for tourism. We've signed up and uploaded our information. We'll see if we get any results straight away." [R1].

3.2.2. Digitalisation

Overall, digitalisation positively impacts *Numero Zero*'s activities, although, within this mega-trend, there can be contrasting dynamics. On the one hand, there is a tendency to introduce new technological solutions capable of supporting routine activities; on the other hand, the significant role played by social networks is explicitly recognised.

[14] The Italian term "chilometro zero" means local sourcing.

Regarding the first dimension, the one most closely related to technological innovation, *Numero Zero* has had some experiences in the past but has yet to achieve particular success or benefits. The reason for this outcome can be traced to the fact that a large part of the technologies currently available on the market are developed to assist people with physical disabilities, while solutions that are appropriate for mental health disabilities are either still in the experimental stage or do not exist at all. Given these conditions, the company's current approach is to introduce well-established technologies to improve the restaurant's management in the short term. Think, for example, of the use of virtual reality for training activities. At present, these technologies can be used by able-bodied individuals but are not yet suitable (or adaptable) for those with mental disabilities. For this reason, the only technologies that could be implemented immediately are traditional ones, which disabled individuals can partially use. "We would like to implement digitalisation in service management, so adopting a management system that connects the till with the stock, constantly records inflows and outflows, and allows orders to be taken via handheld devices linked to the till and the kitchen. We're not entirely convinced that this will be useful for the work of the psychiatric patients, but it will enhance the overall management of the restaurant" [R1].

A different story applies to social media. *Numero Zero* has been working on this front for some time, producing digital and multimedia content and participating in many social campaigns that receive considerable public engagement. One aspect worth highlighting is the purpose of these activities: promoting the business and, more importantly, raising awareness of mental health issues. It's no coincidence that much of this activity features the same mentally disabled individuals who work at the restaurant and other socio-cultural initiatives of the organisation.

> "We work a lot on this front, communicating and producing multimedia content. Our extended staff, including patients, is gradually acquiring relevant skills. We've already produced many videos, podcasts, and nice, well-done advertising campaigns" [R1].

"In my opinion, digital communication is the area that requires the most focus. *Numero Zero*, for example, has a strong presence on Instagram because the images and videos telling the stories of the young people who, in some way, tell their own stories inside the restaurant, inside the day centre, have a powerful impact" [R5].

3.2.3. Demographic change

Demographic change undoubtedly has the most significant positive impact on *Numero Zero*'s activities of all the megatrends. This happens for two main reasons: one entrepreneurial and the other socially oriented.

Considering the first dimension, the economic and entrepreneurial aspect, the progressive ageing of the population benefits *Numero Zero*, as the business primarily targets an adult middle-class audience that is culturally sophisticated and possesses significant spending power. As previously highlighted, the restaurant's positioning indeed focuses on a quality offering in terms of the ingredients used, the dishes proposed, and the service provided at a price that is not exceptionally high but still significant. This means that the stereotype of the person typically associated with the phenomenon of demographic change corresponds to the profile of *Numero Zero*'s clientele, with evident positive effects.

> "The clientele of *Numero Zero* is not very young because dining with us comes at a cost. It's not a trattoria, even though now going out for a pizza costs over €20, you spend €40 here. Students generally only dine out like this a few times a year when celebrating a special occasion. So, we can say that the average customer belongs to a fairly old age group. This is also quite in line with the neighbourhood, as young people do not populate the area. Compared to other parts of the historic centre, there isn't a high concentration of students, and rents are fairly high" [R1].

> "Demographic change has a positive impact due to simple market segmentation. I believe the average age of our clientele is fairly high, as is the price, consistent with the quality of the offering. This attracts a certain type of customer, and this will likely increase" [R6].

Concerning the second dimension, the social aspect, the neighbourhood where the restaurant is located has been experiencing a gradual population decline, though to a lesser degree than other areas of the historic centre. This dynamic was due to many citizens, especially families, moving to city areas closer to road links and with more available services. Most of the housing was occupied by elderly people and university students, who moved into homes vacated by the former residents. In this context, the *Fuori Porta day centre* first and then *Numero Zero* brought fresh air.

In the neighbourhood, there had already been experiences of urban regeneration with the establishment of other associations, the recovery of residential buildings, and the organization of events. Therefore, in this context, social innovation ecosystems have played and will continue to play a role in social animation, mobilising community resources and activating collaborative and participatory processes.

Relationships were established with other organisations in the area, and numerous meetings, events, and activities were organised. Over the years, this has not only retained existing residents, in contrast to gentrification trends but has also increased the neighbourhood's attractiveness for new residents, particularly young ones. This work of reconstructing the social fabric is still ongoing, and the path will

undoubtedly be complicated; however, even today, after a few years, the first results of this counter-trend choice in response to socio-demographic change are visible.

> "*Numero Zero*'s presence has affected, for me, the population density. If I were to find a house today, I would choose that neighbourhood because it has been redeveloped thanks, among other things, to the presence of Numero Zero, the Borgobello association, and numerous other social and commercial activities. This attracts the population, including younger people" [R5].

> "*Numero Zero* and the Foundation *La Città del Sole* have become development engines in that neighbourhood. They are the ones promoting the most initiatives and creating opportunities, and this is linked to the restaurant's characteristics. Many other restaurants are in the same area, but they've never created networking actions; they've always just been restaurants. *Numero Zero*, instead, however, has managed to do something different" [R6].

3.2.4. Climate change

Finally, considering climate change, we can say that restaurant managers' shared awareness of this serious issue led to the establishment of best practices to counteract its negative impacts, particularly in procurement. Most of the raw materials used in dish preparation are sourced from local producers. This improves the quality of the offering, promotes local production, and simultaneously reduces environmental impacts.

> "We have decided to use high-quality ingredients locally sourced as much as possible. We've even mapped our suppliers in the area, and currently, we buy everything we can from local producers. We have a range of suppliers for meat, vegetables, etc. that are exclusively local. By following this approach, local supplies account for around 70% of our total procurement. Now, we're even growing our herb garden. On this front, we're aiming to become self-sufficient!" [R1].

3.3. Impacts

Numero Zero's activities, objectives, and relationships in the local area have generated significant impacts, which can be classified into three main types.

First, *Numero Zero* has had an impact on individuals with mental disabilities, profoundly altering and improving their quality of life.

> "There are people who have gone through incredible journeys. Take A., for example: when he first came to us, he kept his head down, and when you started talking to him, he would immediately

> turn red, start sweating, and mumble something. Now, A. is the 'joker' of the dining room; he brings balance to everyone working there and sets the pace. The real head of the dining room is him. A. does radio work for us and impersonates Giuseppe Conte, he's a great impersonator, sings, has a girlfriend, has a driving license, goes to Greece with his girlfriend, and takes her to see Ligabue concerts. It's been a complete transformation of a person" [R1].

This transformation is also confirmed by the disabled people who work at *Numero Zero*.

> "At the beginning, I felt very awkward. I remember the first day I started working here: I was told to carry a tray with ten glasses of water and I dropped them. I was clumsy, anxious, and made mistakes. Now, I'm more responsible. Sometimes I forget to do certain things, but if I look around, I immediately know where to go" [R3].

> "I'm a waiter, and now I've started taking orders. I've been here almost three years, and I've felt very comfortable from the start. I'm delighted because I've had the chance to learn. A few years ago, I had a month-long experience at another restaurant, but they didn't give me the time to learn, and I didn't feel well there. Here, instead, I have fun. The best thing about this job is the chance to meet people" [R4].

Second, *Numero Zero* has brought about a cultural change, placing the issue of mental disability back in the public spotlight.

> "At some point, we had an explosion of visibility, in the sense that our practice and the way we do things could no longer be ignored from any perspective" [R2].

> "When customers go to dine there, the fact that there are people with visible disabilities working there sends a strong cultural message; thus, it contributes to change" [R6].

Finally, as previously highlighted, the urban context has benefited from the reconstruction of social ties and the establishment of a new logic of inclusion within the local community.

> "*Numero Zero* is a socio-health activity promoting social inclusion, but it is also about local development because it addresses another need: ensuring that the community engages with welfare services in the traditional sense. In practice, there's entrepreneurial activity, but around it, a community is created, represented by other businesses and the entire neighbourhood. This also contributes to developing that part of the city" [R5].

3.3.1. Labour market

The Numero Zero's practice has affected the labour market, both internally within the business, in terms of qualifications and prospects, and external relations in terms of supply and demand in the labour market.

From an internal perspective (qualifications and prospects), *Numero Zero* has enabled individuals with mental health conditions to gain employment, transforming some internships into permanent contracts and increasing overall employment for this group of people. Furthermore, it has ensured that these contracts are tailored to the specific needs of each psychiatric patient.

> "There are many differentiated contracts built around the patient's needs. If a patient is doing well and the job makes sense for her life project but cannot manage 40 hours a week, we give them a 20-hour contract. If they can't manage even 20 hours, we make a 16-hour or 12-hour contract. So, we have many contracts, which significantly increases costs" [R2].

Finally, the patients' work activities are constantly supported, and career progression opportunities, including expanding their roles, are encouraged. Every aspect is carefully monitored and followed through in great detail, such as the placemat, a simple yet valuable support tool that helps patients set the tables (Fig. 3).

> "It's purely functional, to help with table setting and make the patients more independent in their work. After their training and internship, all the patients who work here are always accompanied so they can fully set the tables. But this place must be experienced as much as possible, like a workplace that gives them the tools to be independent, so they don't even have doubts about how to do something. So, if I can develop a simple tool, like a printed placemat that shows exactly where the wine glass, water glass, etc. should be placed, this is something positive and useful" [R2].

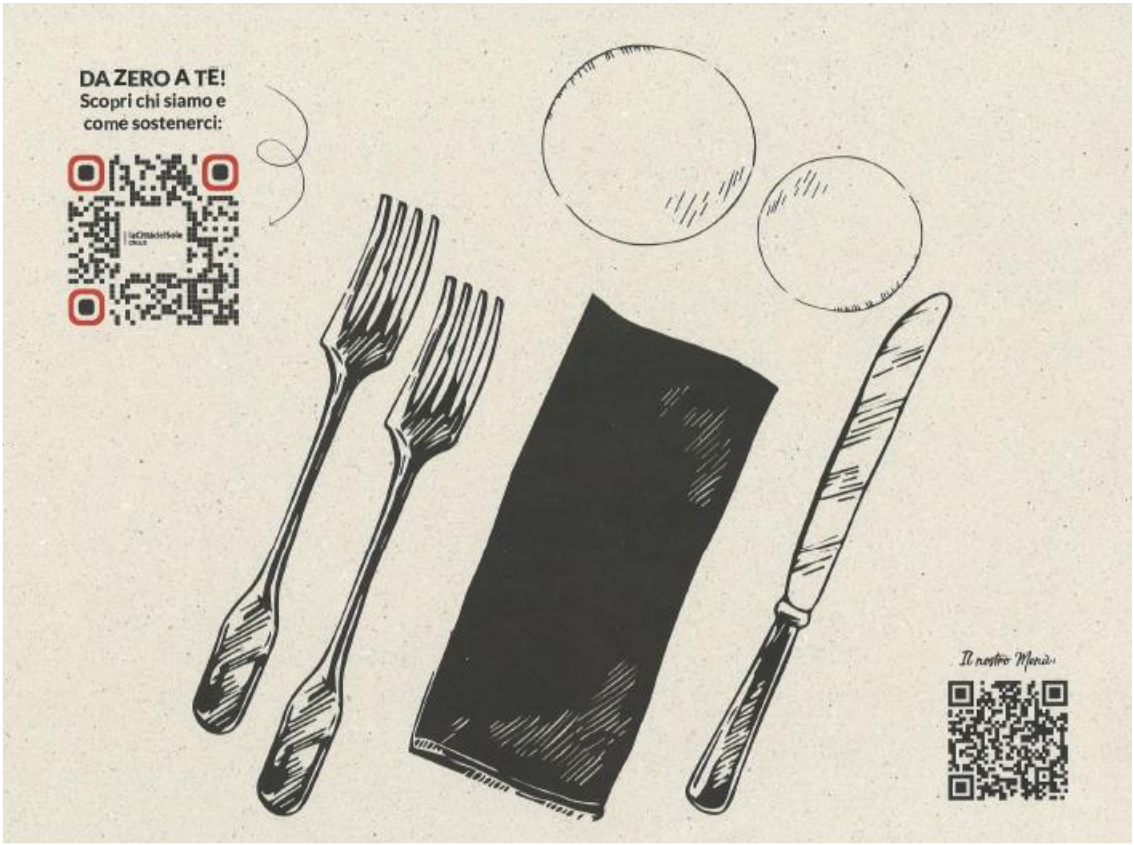
Moreover, this focus on well-being and personal development is also reflected in supporting the career progression of psychiatric patients. In some instances, after gaining new experiences, patients have expanded their professional knowledge and enriched their job responsibilities.

> "I'm both a waitress and a sommelier. I became a sommelier. I did the exam, got the certificate, and entered a new career phase. It all started when we had the chance to produce wine with *Numero Zero* and the day centre. After this experience, I developed a passion for wine and decided to take the course. I embarked on this path and became a sommelier. Now, I'm building my career and continuing to work as a sommelier. In September, I was back in school, assisting one of the

sommeliers during lessons at the University of Flavours. This way, I do something extra and keep learning more about the skills of a sommelier" [R3].

The most significant innovations can be found in external relations, such as the attempt to allocate trained people with mental disability to the labour market. Four years after the establishment of Numero Zero, the founders had to cope with a severe issue: the future of the psychiatric patients who, following a simple internship, found their work experience interrupted. This could cause irreparable harm to people with mental disabilities, who cannot be sent back to their families without undoing all the efforts made, and frustration for the social entrepreneurs themselves who, due to blatant financial constraints, cannot expand the restaurant's workforce.

Figure 3. The tablecloth set up for table setting



To address this problem, the *Work in Progress Project* was born. This project outlines, over three years: i) the initiation of three new 12-month internships each year, in addition to those already in place; ii) the strengthening of skills within the *Numero Zero* staff so that the most experienced individuals, the chef and the restaurant manager, can dedicate more time to training the interns; and, iii) simultaneously, the creation of a team to build a network of restaurants potentially willing to employ a psychiatric patient

after 12 months of training, with support for employment integration that can last into the following year. During this additional year, the extended staff of *Numero Zero* continue to monitor the external job placement of the individual and provide assistance to the new work units.

The benefits for the restaurants that decide to join this project are numerous. On the one hand, hiring a patient registered in the employment integration programmes for disabled people (Law No. 68 of 1999) allows for tax breaks of 70% of the total cost of the employee for five years; on the other hand, the restaurant gains entry into a network of businesses that will be identified by a certification mark or sticker certifying the ethical nature of the initiative.

> "It's quite an ambitious project, but we needed to ensure that the experience of *Numero Zero* didn't just stay within our premises but also spread outside." [R2].

Moreover, this project was funded by the Perugia Foundation, which, for the first time in its history, decided to intervene outside of its usual competitive funding process. Based on a two-year agreement with the option of extending it for a third year of experimentation, the foundation provided financial resources non-competitively.

> "Some organisations have started to adopt a different approach. The Perugia Foundation has fully engaged with the city's context and understands how we operate. They know that we promote inclusion through innovation. For this reason, after presenting the project to them, they decided to fund us outside the usual competitive process, opening up a completely different dialogue than in the past" [R2].

3.3.2. Welfare state and public finance

The impact of *Numero Zero* extends beyond the labour market, generating innovative effects in public policy decisions as well. In particular, in 2020, the Umbria Region received a request to increase the number of places at the psychiatric day centre *Fuori Porta*, asking to reach the maximum allowed by law (12 units). However, in response to this need, the public health and hygiene service of the Region communicated that the activity was not compliant with existing rules, as there was a restaurant on the same premises, managed by a different entity from the psychiatric day centre, and claiming that no other activity could exist within a healthcare facility. This led to a discussion that eventually created a public task force to resolve the issue. After about a year of study, in-depth analysis, and interpretation of national and regional legislation, it was found that the only requirement imposed by existing laws was that the facility must be designated as a psychiatric day centre. As a result, the Umbria Region approved a specific

regulation allowing a three-year trial for the opening of a different, even economic, activity within a healthcare facility, provided it was in line with the purposes of the facility itself.

> "This is an innovation that sets a precedent. We are also unique in this being a restaurant inside a psychiatric day centre. Anyone who wanted to replicate such an experience could refer to this regional law. Therefore, I would say we've changed something" [R1].

> "Now, there are various work inclusion experiences in the restaurant industry. In Umbria, there wasn't even a law that allowed running a restaurant within a healthcare facility. And we didn't even know that. We started without knowing it. Now, thanks to our experience, this regulation exists. We've even made regulatory innovation!" [R2].

In these terms, *Numero Zero* helps to break established patterns that impose a strict separation between social healthcare services and entrepreneurial initiatives and enables the support of patients to connect various parts of their lives.

> "That place has a particularity: it is a day centre, fundamentally related to mental health, and closely tied to the healthcare economic system (in terms of costs and local health authority/responsibility). But the same place transforms into a restaurant, a commercial activity, a socio-work inclusion activity whose proceeds contribute to the overall budget. So, this experience breaks the chain of services, reassembles it, and requalifies it. From the public entity's point of view, it's a model that should be looked at closely" [R5].

Beyond its innovative drive, *Numero Zero* also generates other advantages for the regional welfare system, resulting in significant financial savings.

> "The patients who work at Numero Zero and live in our houses gradually disappear from the services. The services no longer see them because, in some way, they have different support. There's a significant saving in public spending, which also impacts [patients'] families in a positive domino effect" [R1].

> "Even with all of this, we only make the public pay the fee for a day centre, which is a semi-residential service. We cover the patient's 24-hour life because we have the day centre, the Prisma project apartments, we allow working at Numero Zero, we carry out other activities that aren't the classic craft workshops but a radio that allows the disabled to go around and do interviews at events like Umbria Jazz or the International Journalism Festival. The fee for a semi-residential service covers the patient's 24-hour life, where they're not in an institution but have their own

> life. The most important aspect is that we lead the public sector to saving so much that the public should invest more in these activities" [R2].

3.4. Social innovation

Considering the aspects highlighted thus far, *Numero Zero's* experience can be regarded as a social innovation case. It combines welfare services with commercial activities to facilitate the job placement of people with mental disabilities. It establishes organisational structures supporting collaboration with various local entities (public and private) and diverse institutional purposes (profit and non-profit). Its generative impact on public policy further illustrates the innovative reach of *Numero Zero*.

Several factors favoured the development of this initiative. Firstly, the employment needs of psychiatric patients who, though often lacking a clear understanding of the nature of work, expressed a desire for self-fulfilment and inclusion in society. Secondly, the opportunity to occupy a space in the historic centre, in one of the few remaining neighbourhoods still inhabited by Perugians (mainly elderly residents). This location has always had substantial historical and architectural significance, previously serving as a hospital that welcomed pilgrims from Assisi and, in recent years, has consistently operated as a restaurant venue. Finally, the initiative was supported by the ability to integrate diverse expertise in both catering and psychiatric fields, achieved through the inclusion of new professionals and the careful selection of personnel with complementary skills and competencies.

> "We have included individuals with catering expertise who had previously been involved in this type of work in the team. This was a skill set we initially lacked. Moreover, those managing the restaurant—such as the kitchen and dining room managers—must possess professional skills and know how to engage effectively with individuals with disabilities. When difficulties arise, the dining room manager steps in and consults the psychiatrist if unable to resolve the issue. There is always a clinical point of reference. This is why I mentioned that integrating psychiatric patients into the workplace is challenging, as it requires the involvement of specially trained personnel. The presence of clinical staff and dedicated times for discussion are essential." [R1]

Based on these elements, Numero Zero initiates and conducts its activities with a robust collaborative approach, engaging numerous stakeholders and mobilising local resources and expertise. The nature of these actors and the relationships established with them are highly varied (Fig. 4). Specifically, relationships are fostered with:

a) public entities (the Region and Municipality), which both regulate health and social care services and refer psychiatric patients for treatment while also gathering innovative insights emerging from this initiative;

b) the trade association (Legacoop), which provides support in expanding services (such as facilitating voluntary civil service), consultancy (including defining tariffs for public services), training (for improving the restaurant business and aspects of business management), and representation and advocacy with public and private stakeholders;

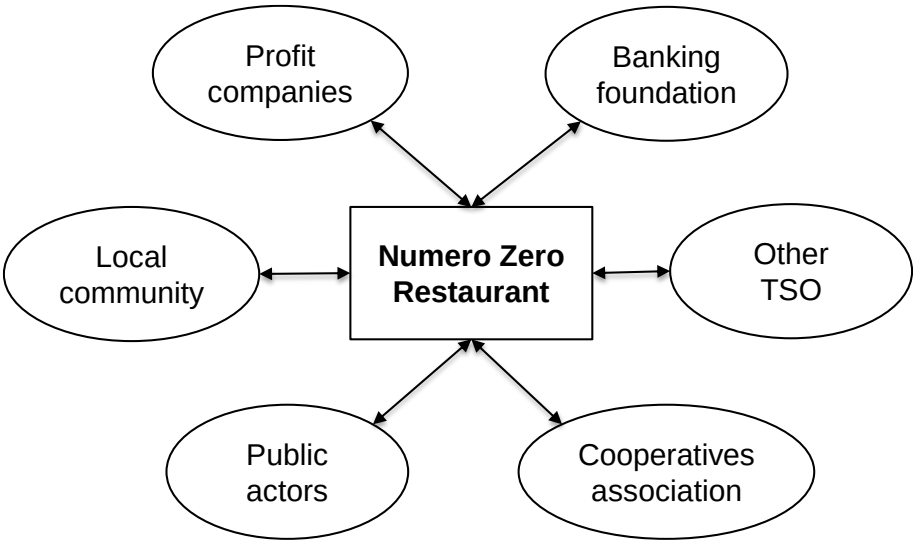
c) other third sector organisations, with which activities are regularly carried out to design new initiatives, apply for public funding for developing and implementing new services, and collaborate on joint events. Numerous projects in this area have evolved to become established practices for experimenting with innovative approaches that address existing needs or explore new ways of meeting emerging needs;

d) private sector companies that, aligned with the initiative's spirit, support *Numero Zero* through donations or by supplying materials and equipment essential for running the restaurant;

e) the local banking foundation, which is committed to evaluating and financially supporting proposed interventions;

f) the local community initially approached the day centre and restaurant opening with curiosity and some hesitation but has since responded enthusiastically, continually showing its support through numerous events and initiatives.

Figure 4. The actors involved and the inter-organizational relations of Numero Zero



This collaborative approach has enabled the initiative to capitalise on various opportunities, though certain constraints to its full realisation remain. Concerning these opportunities, *Numero Zero* has successfully bridged the conventional divide between a socio-culturally engaged space and a trendy venue, blending these two dimensions. In doing so, it has not only garnered an increasing market response but also drawn attention to the issue of disability, engaging individuals who previously viewed it as irrelevant or distant. For this reason, the restaurant's opening is regarded as the most significant opportunity:

> "The result I am most proud of is that we succeeded in opening it and in creating the political and social conditions necessary for this activity to launch. An immense amount of work was involved, not only in securing financial resources but, above all, in rallying support. We successfully engaged the Municipality, the Region, the healthcare local system (ASL), the citizens, and the local community network. In essence, we achieved a level of collaboration that led to a shared belief that this initiative was truly worthwhile." [R1]

Several emerging issues will require further intervention regarding the second aspect, constraints and challenges, which represent a continuum of factors that directly influence the organization's activities. Some of these are internal, relating to the operational mechanisms of the project, while others are external. Key constraints include:

a) a governance constraint: the potential need to change the initiative's legal status from an association to a social enterprise, which would make it more suitable for managing a commercial operation;

b) an economic constraint: the high labour costs associated with running the restaurant, which conflict with the desire to expand employment opportunities for disabled individuals as much as possible;

c) finally, an institutional constraint arises from the fact that, despite its evident successes, marked by its influence on changing regional legislation, Numero Zero is still viewed by public authorities as an experimental initiative that lacks the support of a robust welfare services programming policy.

> "Numero Zero began as a pilot project and remains one because it has not been replicated. The issue is that although this project has completed its experimental phase, it has not been formally evaluated by the Region. As a result, the regulatory framework has not been adapted to support it. The policy should transform an experiment into a sustainable innovation. Instead, this initiative has remained a one-off experiment, highlighting a limitation in the administrative culture surrounding welfare services in Umbria and across Italy." [R6]

However, the main challenges the organisation continues to face are the following:

a) A cultural challenge: the persistent stigma surrounding mental disability, which, despite significant achievements, continues to be a barrier. Initially, this aspect posed a problem, a limitation, or a constraint. However, the company proactively addressed it, turning it into a challenge. Significant progress has been made, but there is still more work to be done to expand the number of people involved in these interventions and to achieve their full social integration.

> "The psychiatric patient often provokes a kind of fear in people. I believe this stems from a certain recognisability; it's a vulnerability in which people see aspects of themselves, creating discomfort and even aversion. One of our guiding principles across all projects is to work with the psychiatric patient and engage the wider community. Why a restaurant? Why a film festival? Why a radio station? Why situate them in the historic centre? Because we have to work with the community; otherwise, it's pointless. Psychiatric patients have abilities and skills that need encouragement and development. Our goal, however, is not to 'cure' anyone. If anything needs healing, it's society itself. So we need to work tirelessly with this in mind." [R2]

b) An organisational challenge: the need to establish connections with other regional and national initiatives to shift away from a "neighbourhood-based" approach and enhance the project's scalability potential.

Regarding this last aspect, the initiative's scalability is crucial. Objective difficulties arise from the organisation's specificities, including its incubation and development within a psychiatric day centre, a mix of health and professional skills, the coexistence of various activities and services, collaborative relationships with numerous third-sector entities, and its links to the urban fabric. However, several attempts are currently underway to address these challenges.

On the one hand, the launch of the Work in Progress project could catalyse a significant growth process within the local context, extending beyond the confines of the third sector. On the other hand, there is an effort to build a national network of initiatives that share the same values and objectives.

In this regard, an exploratory phase focuses on mapping and establishing contact with other entities that provide job placement in the catering sector and operate nationally. This preliminary work aims to define an intervention model, test it nationally, and produce a guide that identifies and showcases all the initiatives in the network.

Forecasts for the future appear quite optimistic; however, initial reflections on the need to ensure internal organisational continuity are beginning to emerge.

> "Our aspiration for the future is to establish continuity. Unfortunately, I have not yet succeeded in creating a succession plan that facilitates the entry and development of a new managerial class. This could become one of the key challenges in the years ahead." [R1]

In any case, as previously mentioned, ongoing projects could consolidate this experience. Moreover, the management is committed to extending its reach beyond local boundaries, not to pursue a growth paradigm but to facilitate the transmission and replication of a similar experience in other contexts.

> "With all the networking efforts we have begun to undertake, even on a national level, our aim is to become a model that doesn't necessarily need to expand, as we have already achieved growth; instead, we aspire to share our experience with others." [R1]

> "Our initial thought was this: if Numero Zero is successful, why isn't there a Numero Zero in every part of Italy? This is how we approach all our projects. If it works, why isn't everyone implementing similar initiatives for psychiatric patients? We would love to see our project replicated numerous times. Perhaps we are a bit megalomaniacal, but we constantly feel the urge to think bigger and strive to expand beyond our local territory." [R2]

3.5. Conclusions

The social, economic, and managerial implications of Numero Zero's experience are multifaceted, and merely listing them generically would fail to capture the initiative's complexity. At least three critical areas of significance can be identified.

First, a strong connection with the local community emerges, which is evident in two main aspects. On the one hand, there is the ability to engage with an urban context undergoing profound transformations—such as an ageing population, depopulation of the historic centre, and a decline in social relationships—while fostering a new capacity for connection through participation and the rebuilding of social ties. On the other hand, there is a commitment to supporting economic growth through sustainable practices, establishing supply relationships with local producers and promoting the region's distinctive products.

Secondly, Numero Zero demonstrates a significant proactive capacity to generate regulatory innovation. The initiative to transform a traditional welfare service by launching and operating a new commercial activity, framed as complementarity of existing interventions, has created a ripple effect, prompting public authorities to amend and adapt regional legislation. This introduces innovation into a typically static

bureaucratic context and lays the groundwork for the future development of new activities inspired by similar principles.

Finally, it is increasingly evident that Numero Zero is keen to move beyond the experimental phase, imposed and prolonged by institutional and regulatory requirements, and position itself as an incubator capable of amplifying its actions and innovative potential. The proposal to replicate the job placement of individuals with mental disabilities on a larger, albeit local, scale—through creating a network involving public institutions, banking foundations, and for-profit companies—reflects a desire to initiate a meaningful dynamic of change. This change is not based solely on "simple" growth in size but on the dissemination of experiences and the sharing of values.

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4. Working with nature to recover from burnout: Care Farms in Belgium

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4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a case study on **care farming for people suffering from burnout in Belgium**, as an example of **local and regional social innovation in social policy** with a focus on **labour market (re-)integration** and **social entrepreneurship**. The study is part of a **series of case studies** documenting social innovation practices, which together feed into a **synthesis report**. This synthesis report, in turn, aims to offer a comparative perspective on lessons that can be drawn from social innovation experiments, contrasting cases within and across thematic fields and integrating findings.

Care farming, also known as social farming, refers to the use of agricultural places and practices to provide care, therapy and rehabilitation and to promote physical and mental health of care recipients (Cacciatore et al., 2020; Elsey et al., 2014). Care farming is embedded in 'green care' or 'nature-assisted therapy', which are umbrella terms enveloping all kinds of therapeutic interventions that aim at treating, curing or rehabilitating persons with a disease or condition, with the fundamental therapeutic principle being that the therapy uses plants, animals, natural materials and/or the outdoor environment (Sempik et al., 2010; Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011; Elings, 2012). This includes physical, psychological, social and educational interventions (Haubenhofer et al., 2010). With care farming in particular, the idea is that care recipients are **involved in work**, or that activities go beyond pure educational purposes.

Across Europe, **care farming is one the rise** (CAP Network, 2023; Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009). Some European countries, such as Belgium, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway, have a long tradition in green care and well-established care farming sectors, while in other countries, care farming has gained ground more recently. According to the collective 'Soins Verts – Groene Zorg' (see below for further details), in Belgium there are over 100 networks offering green care, connected with *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* in Flanders and *Social Farming* in Wallonia.[15]

In care farming, **care recipients** – or **'care guests'** as they are referred to in Belgium – come from a variety of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (e.g., persons with learning disabilities, persons with physical

[15] More information, including the collective's memorandum, can be found on: https://www.soinsverts-groenezorg.be/

disabilities, persons experiencing mental illnesses, school leavers, elderly persons with dementia, persons dealing with trauma or grief (Elings, 2012)). This also applies in the Belgian case, where care farms have traditionally served a broad audience of both minors and adults.

The use of **care farming to support persons with a burnout** is, however, relatively novel. In Belgium, this is currently being advocated for by a group brought together by the Terre de Vie Foundation, which comprises experts, practitioners and private and public foundations including civil society organisations (e.g., King Baudouin Foundation, Steunpunt Groene Zorg, Nos Oignons, Vaches et bourrache, Royal Forestry Society of Belgium), who all support the development and promotion of green care for persons with mild to moderate mental disorders (including persons with burnout). Their efforts are united under a collective called 'Soins Verts – Groene Zorg'. The initiatives launched by this collective are increasingly getting media attention, notably in the Spring of 2024.[16]

It is important to note here, however, that **care farmers** are generally not licenced care professionals, although some are 'experts by experience'. In the fieldwork conducted for this study, it became clear that some of the farmers working with persons with burnout have had burnout themselves and can thus speak from their own experience. Similarly, **care farms** are not care facilities. The farm work itself may have therapeutic value but cannot be seen as a therapy on its own. Rather, it must be completed by therapy and is followed up on by a medical professional. It thus serves as a **first step to reconnect with work, with people and with nature**, which can contribute to labour market reintegration later on.

In this light, care farming and its use in the context of burnout is part of a broad trend towards the '**socialisation of care**' in which care recipients take up a meaningful place in society and are supported to do so, and in which the provision of care is integrated into society to the maximum extent possible. The socialisation of care relies on the engagement from a wide range of actors and often involves bottom-up initiatives. This makes care farming highly interesting to investigate from a **social innovation lens**. As explained by Portales (2019), social innovation comprises four key elements: (i) the satisfaction of a need, (ii) innovation of the solution, (iii) the change of social structures and relationships, and (iv) an increased societal capacity to act. As is shown below, all these elements emerge in the present case study.

[16] https://www.tijd.be/ondernemen/algemeen/de-boer-op-met-een-burn-out-de-wekelijkse-gesprekken-met-mijn-psycholoog-maakten-te-weinig-verschil/10537945.html (example of an article published in De Tijd on 5 April 2024).

Against this background, the aim of this case study is to examine the growing use of care farming to support people with a burnout in Belgium, in a context where the **labour market and welfare state are both under significant pressure** due to the aging population, a high share of persons who are inactive due to long-term illnesses and chronic conditions, and the persistent labour and skills shortages that many sectors and companies record. The interplay with **existing institutional actors and regulatory frameworks** will, therefore, also be assessed.

The case study focuses specifically on an **ongoing experiment**, launched by the Soins Verts – Groene Zorg collective mentioned above. The aim of this experiment is to test out whether the provision of green care to persons suffering from a burnout or depression could be used as a successful preparatory step in their labour market reintegration process and to understand what would be required to introduce this option formally into the existing regulatory framework. By contributing to the labour market reintegration of individuals who are inactive due to mental health reasons, the provision of green care could help increase labour market participation and help reduce social security costs, especially in the long run. For the present case study, the focus is on care farming initiatives aimed at persons with a burnout. Although the experiment and the accompanying impact evaluation was still ongoing at the time of writing, the research team was able to speak with a diversity of actors involved in the experiment, including care farmers, care recipients, intermediary organisations, policy-makers, as well as other stakeholders, and the implementation of the experiment was already sufficiently advanced to explore it from a social innovation perspective.

The **structure** of this case study report is as follows. Section 4.2 provides an overview of the key aspects and impacts of the case study that was analysed and the methodological approach that was used to do so, and it explains how it relates to the wider WeLaR project. Section 4.3 discusses how the four megatrends at the heart of the WeLaR project emerge in the case study on care farming, each time highlighting their effects on care recipients and care farmers, as drivers or consequences of change. Section 4.4 follows a similar logic but emphasises the impacts on the labour market and social security system. In Section 4.5, the social innovation aspects of the case study are presented. Section 4.6 concludes this case study report.

4.2. The “story” of the case

4.2.1. What is the case, what is its context

This section outlines the case study under investigation and the background against which it is set. To this end, it recalls what care farming is about, provides details on the development of care farming in Belgium,

and sketches the current context in terms of the labour market and welfare state. The section then explains how it is linked to the global megatrends such as digitalisation, demographic change, climate change and globalisation and assesses their key impacts and how these relate to the case study. The section ends with a brief description of the methodology used.

An alarming fact: one in four Belgian citizens suffers from anxiety or depressive disorders

The number of people suffering from anxiety or depressive disorders has soared in Belgium, **from 10% in 2018 to 25% in 2022**.[17] In addition, according to a recent study, almost one in three Belgian manual workers (**32.9%**) and one in four office workers (**25.5%**) is at risk of burnout in the country in 2024.[18] This negative spiral, driven in part by successive crises such as COVID-19, the energy crisis, and inflation, has accelerated and is having a significant impact on public finances. This **cost is estimated to be around 5% of Belgium's annual GDP**.[19] The increase in mental health disorders is also affecting the working population. Burnout and depression in the workplace have notably risen, with 118,000 people on long-term sick leave for such reasons in 2021.

According to several experts who were consulted on this matter as part of the fieldwork, this surge is due to both **an actual increase** in the number of workers being faced with psychosocial risks and mental health issues in the workplace, as well as to an **increasing awareness** about the importance of ensuring good mental health and paying attention to the prevention and management of psychosocial risks in the workplace (e.g., as evidenced by the broad regulatory framework surrounding this issue and recent attention for it among policy-makers and social partners).

This represents a major public health issue, costing the federal government €1.6 billion per year.[20] In light of this growing problem, action and innovation are urgently needed. Within this context, a collective of field practitioners, health experts, and private and public interest foundations is proposing the

[17] https://www.belgiqueenbonnesante.be/fr/etat-de-sante/sante-mentale/anxiete-et-depression#def-anxiety-dis

[18] According to a study by HR service provider Securex based on KU Leuven's Burnout Assessment Tool. For more information, see https://press.securex.be/burn-out--un-ouvrier-belge-sur-trois-dans-la-zone-a-risque.

[19] https://www.plan.be/publications/article-2079-fr-sante_mentale_en_belgique_les_couts_caches_de_la_covid_19#:~:text=L'évolution à long terme,est de 5%2C1 %25.

[20] https://www.rtbf.be/article/le-cout-lie-aux-problemes-de-sante-mentale-represente-5-du-pib-11175491

introduction of a legal framework in Belgium that would allow for the support of individuals with mild to moderate mental health issues through **"Green Care" prescriptions**, involving activities related to agriculture or forest management. By adopting a "Green Care" system, they argue, Belgium could implement an innovative public health tool. This approach would help prepare affected individuals to reintegrate into the workforce, thereby easing the burden on social security and enabling substantial budgetary savings.

The concept of care farming

What is care farming or social farming and what kind of work does it involve?

As indicated above, care farming involves performing **farm work**, such as feeding and taking care of animals, sowing and harvesting crops, cooking, selling produce, maintaining gardens and fields, etc. as a form of care provision that supports care recipients' mental and physical health. The **nature** of the work itself is seen as healing – the contact and bonding with nature, working in the soil, literally 'grounding' were mentioned several times as key aspects of the farm work in interviews and focus group discussions.

While there is a **wide variety in the tasks** that can be carried out and in how the work is organised across care farms, the interviews and focus groups highlighted the importance of **structure** (e.g., coming to the farm on a fixed day; doing a similar set of activities when working at the farm; always starting the day by feeding the animals) that the farm work provides. At the same time, there is some flexibility and **activities can easily be tailored** to someone's interests, abilities, etc., which can help with the development of skills and attitudes. Some focus group participants (please see below for details on the methodology) noted that personal development often is not seen as a priority among care recipients at first, but it emerges as one as their condition improves and more attention goes to their reintegration.

Although doing the farm work does not count as formal labour market reintegration, the fact that it does involve **actual, useful or meaningful work**, is important to reinstate the **connection to work and the labour market**, on the one hand, and the **connection with people** (social contact, interpersonal relationships), on the other hand. Working on a care farm can help care recipients **feel useful and appreciated again**, and it helps with (re)building a **status** or a **professional identity** of which one can be proud. As one participant in a focus group indicated:

> "Doing farm work gives meaning, it provides direction and it is useful; care guests get a status again, they say 'I am a farmer now'." [care farmer][21]

The point of farm work providing both **physical and mental care** was also emphasised in the interviews:

> "I really benefited a lot from talking to the farmer. I needed someone who understood what I was going through mentally … so for me what helped is the combination of the physical work and being able to talk to someone." [care recipient – own translation from Dutch into English]

> "It's more motivating to say to yourself that you've got little activities, that you've got something to do during the day, that you're going to move around a bit more physically, yes. [...] And it's true that it's really good to be able to get out and stay in the open air all day, especially when the weather's good and there's sunshine outside in the summer'. [care recipient – own translation from French into English]

What is the state of play concerning care farming in Belgium?

Care farming, also known as social farming, is gaining traction in Belgium as a form of therapy and social support for vulnerable groups, including individuals with disabilities, mental health conditions, or those in long-term unemployment. The practice involves using agricultural activities, such as horticulture or animal care, to offer therapeutic benefits, skill-building, and social inclusion.

Regional approaches

In Belgium, the development of care farming varies by region. Care farming is particularly developed in Flanders, where it is known as *zorgboerderij* (care farm). Flanders has a structured approach with governmental support through subsidies, legal frameworks, and recognition of care farms as part of social services. The Flemish government collaborates with local organisations to provide certification and support for care farms. *Boerenbond*, a major farmers' organisation, promotes care farming in the region. The development of care farming in Wallonia is less structured than in Flanders but it is gaining momentum. Initiatives are being taken by individual farms or local organisations that combine farming with social care activities. There is growing interest in establishing more formal networks and frameworks to support this practice.

[21]All interview quotes were translated into English by the authors.

Types of care farms

Care farms in Belgium cater to a range of populations, including people with disabilities, mental health issues, the elderly, at-risk youth, and those undergoing rehabilitation. The therapeutic and social benefits provided by these farms are an integral part of their mission. Activities vary depending on the type of farm, fluctuating with the seasons and the abilities of the participants. These tasks may include helping in the garden, caring for animals, maintaining agricultural spaces, learning to use tools, and mastering farming techniques, among others. These activities provide participants with various benefits, such as reestablishing a work routine and rhythm, rebuilding social connections with farmers and fellow participants, fostering a sense of purpose, and offering the chance to step back and reconnect with nature through outdoor work.

Legal and financial support

In Flanders, care farms benefit from public subsidies under specific care programmes. Farmers can apply for financial aid to support both infrastructure and care activities, and care farms are recognised as part of the formal therapeutic landscape. Health care services often refer individuals to care farms as part of rehabilitation or social inclusion programs. In contrast, Wallonia is still developing its funding and support mechanisms. While some farms receive project-based funding from social services, NGOs, or local government initiatives, a more robust financial support system is still needed.

Partnerships and networks

Partnerships and networks play an important role in supporting care farming in Belgium. In Flanders, organisations like *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* offer training, certification, and resources to match care seekers with appropriate farms. Wallonia, while less structured, is seeing increased interest from organisations focused on sustainable agriculture and social inclusion, which are helping to promote care farming projects.

Challenges

However, challenges remain. Funding in Wallonia is less stable compared to Flanders, where care farms have access to more structured financial support. Additionally, the formal recognition and standardisation of care farming is still developing, particularly in Wallonia, where further efforts are needed to integrate care farming into existing social services. While Flanders has made significant strides in integrating care farms with health and social care sectors, more needs to be done to extend this integration across Belgium.

Looking ahead, care farming in Belgium has strong potential for growth, particularly as awareness of its benefits continues to increase. Both Flanders and Wallonia are working towards expanding the number

of care farms and formalising their place within social services. Policy development will play a crucial role, especially in Wallonia, where discussions are ongoing about how to better integrate care farming with public health, education, and employment services. The future outlook for care farming in Belgium is positive, with further expansion and professionalisation expected as the sector gains more recognition and support.

Joining a care farm in Flanders

Belgium already has some existing networks,[22] with practices inspired by green care being implemented in various contexts. Examples include social farming initiatives in Wallonia and the *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* program in Flanders, some of which are integrated into the rollout of the federally supported 107 networks.

In care farming, both the farm and the care recipient play important roles in the process:

From the farm or farmer's side, care farms are regular farms that open their doors to individuals in need of therapeutic or social support. Farms can apply for subsidies to help support their care activities, and *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* facilitates this process by providing financial assistance and managing the administrative side. It also helps new care farms with their setup and launch, offering guidance throughout the early stages. For those already in operation, *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* provides ongoing support through training sessions and meetings aimed at enhancing their services. The organisation's main goal is to ensure that care farms offer a high-quality supplement to professional health and wellness services.

The farmer applies for support from *Steunpunt Groene Zorg*, which helps cover the costs associated with hosting care recipients. This includes ensuring that the farm has the necessary infrastructure and capacity to provide care. The organisation also arranges the legal contracts, ensuring that everything is in place for a formal and structured collaboration.

[22] This intersectoral mental health network for adults in Walloon Brabant was set up as part of the adult mental health care reform. It brings together professionals from different sectors (mental health and non-mental health involved in the recovery of people with a mental health problem), people concerned and relatives who want to improve mental health care. https://reseau107bw.be/

Once the farm is registered, care recipients are referred[23] by *Steunpunt Groene Zorg*. Some farms, such as *Dierenweelde*, have multiple care recipients at a time. These individuals might come with different needs – for example, one guest might be dealing with burnout, while others could have disabilities or mental health issues. Farms can also be approached directly by potential care recipients, in which case the farm reaches out to *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* to formalise the arrangement and secure the necessary support. In the fieldwork conducted for this study, both examples were identified among the farms.

In some farms, different family members take on specific roles. For instance, on certain farms, the husband might focus on the farming activities while the wife dedicates her time to caring for the guests (or vice versa). This division of labour allows the farm to maintain its agricultural operations while also providing a safe and supportive environment for the care recipients.

From the care recipient's side, care recipients are individuals referred to care farms for various reasons, such as mental health challenges, physical disabilities, social isolation, or recovery from burnout.

The process begins when a care recipient expresses a need for therapeutic support. Health care services or social organisations may identify a care farm as a beneficial environment for rehabilitation. In Flanders, *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* plays a central role in this process, receiving care requests and matching individuals with suitable care farms based on their needs and the farm's capacity.

Once placed on a farm, the care recipient engages in various farm activities during the day, such as working with animals, tending to crops, or helping with day-to-day tasks. These activities are designed to be therapeutic, providing structure, physical exercise, and social interaction. The care farm environment fosters a sense of inclusion, purpose, and well-being, helping the individual on their path to recovery or social reintegration. Most participants also receive more "traditional" treatment or care in parallel, such as psychotherapy, but not on the farm.

Care is personalised based on the recipient's needs. Some might require more focused attention, especially in cases of mental health recovery, such as burnout, while others may participate more fully in farm work.

[23] *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* collaborates closely with GPs and psychologists to assess whether care farms are a suitable solution for the patient and to identify the most appropriate farm. Once all parties—the healthcare professional, the *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* representative, and the patient—reach an agreement, the patient can begin participating in activities at the selected farm. Each decision is made on a case-by-case basis.

The flexibility and individualised attention provided by the farm help ensure that each person receives the level of support they need.

Overall, the system is designed so that the care recipient benefits from a structured, supportive environment while the farm receives the necessary resources and guidance to host them effectively. *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* acts as the intermediary, managing both the financial aspects and the care matching process, making it easier for farms to focus on providing meaningful experiences for the care recipients. However, interviewees from both Wallonia and Flanders emphasised that, in many cases, participants **joined these programmes by chance rather than through structured referral pathways**.

> I: "Can you tell me how you came into contact with the system for these types of farms?"
>
> R: "Through Facebook, there was a publication on the town group."
>
> I: "So it was on your own initiative, not through your General Practitioner?"
>
> R: "No, it wasn't. When I suggested it, the doctor didn't know what it was."
>
> [Extract from an interview with a "Green Care" participant in Wallonia]

The Green Care programme[24]

The programme

The collective led by the Terre de Vie Foundation is pushing for the introduction of "Green Care" prescriptions in Belgium to support individuals suffering from burnout or depression. This approach would involve nature-based recovery activities, such as agricultural or forestry work, as part of the reintegration process into the workforce. **A Green Care prescription**, issued by a doctor, would allow patients to engage in these therapeutic activities, helping to prevent short-term disability from becoming long-term incapacity, which is more costly.

Inspired by successful models in the Netherlands and the UK, where farms host individuals with mild to moderate mental health issues, the proposal aims to apply these benefits to Belgian patients. To explore

[24] For more details on the project, see its dedicated webpage (in English and Dutch): https://www.soinsverts-groenezorg.be/memorandum/

the potential of Green Care, the collective has launched an **Experimental Programme (EP)** involving 6 to 8 social farming structures. It will assess the impact of Green Care over a three-year period (2023-2025).

The typical protocol for a Green Care intervention for patients on sick leave involves the following steps:

- A doctor recommends that the patient participate in a Green Care programme for a specific duration, with ongoing medical follow-up.
- The identified structures distribute the patients among participating farmers or forest managers.
- The patient is welcomed into an agricultural or forestry setting, engaging in various activities such as tending to vegetable gardens, caring for animals, maintaining young forests, assisting with silage or calving, milking, promoting biodiversity, cleaning facilities, cooking, tool maintenance, etc.

The "burnout support" offered by the "Soins Verts — Groene Zorg" programme is designed for individuals experiencing work-related burnout, who have been **on medical leave for at least three months**, or for whom there is a prognosis of a work stoppage lasting at least three months. The programme references **the definition of burnout** provided by Desart and De Witte (2019) as its primary framework:

> "A state of work-related exhaustion that occurs among employees, characterised by extreme fatigue, reduced ability to regulate cognitive and emotional processes, and mental distancing. These core dimensions of burn-out are often accompanied by a depressed mood, along with non-specific psychological and psychosomatic issues. Burnout is caused by an imbalance between high job demands and insufficient professional resources. Additionally, external problems unrelated to work and/or personal vulnerability can contribute to the development of burn-out.".

According to the collective, Green Care programmes should be integrated into the legal framework as an intermediate measure to support **patient recovery and eventual return to work**. These programmes could be incorporated into the reintegration pathways outlined in the health insurance and disability legislation. In addition, Green Care could serve as an intermediate step to **prevent short-term disability cases from developing into long-term incapacity**, which is more costly to society.

The governance of the programme

The programme is a **collaborative initiative** involving various stakeholders from funding to field operations.

- Collective of funders

Several foundations, including the King Baudouin Foundation, have partnered with Terre de Vie to finance the programme, approving the initial three-year budget and receiving regular updates on progress and expenses.

- Monitoring and Steering Committees

Funders meet three to four times a year in a monitoring committee, coordinated by Telos Impact, to review achievements and approve future plans. A steering committee, composed of Terre de Vie representatives and programme coordinators, oversees daily operations and supports the team's efforts.

- Supporting structures

The programme's success depends on a network of supporting organisations that provide infrastructure and staff, contribute to the burnout study, handle external communications, and connect with the agricultural community to help establish a green care prescription system.

- Terre de Vie Foundation[25]
- King Baudouin Foundation (KBF)[26]
- Nos Oignons ASBL[27]
- Steunpunt Groene Zorg[28]
- Vaches et Bourrache (CPAS of Tubize)[29]
- Royal Forestry Society of Belgium (SRFB)[30]
- Vincent Dubois, MD, PhD: General Medical Director at Epsylon ASBL, Brussels; Professor of Psychiatry at UCLouvain, Belgium
- Marc Mormont, PhD: Honorary Professor of Sociology, Department of Environmental Sciences and Management, ULiège, Belgium
- Benoît Gillain, Psychiatrist: Head of Psychiatry at Saint Pierre Clinic in Ottignies; Vice President of the Federal Council of Mental Health Care Professions; Clinical Lecturer at UCLouvain
- Hans Keune: Chair of Care and Natural Environment, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Antwerp
- Marius Gilbert, PhD: Doctor in Agronomic Sciences and Biological Engineering; Vice-Rector for Research and Innovation at ULB; FNRS Research Director

[25] https://fondationterredevie.org/

[26] https://kbs-frb.be/en

[27] https://nosoignons.org/

[28] https://groenezorg.be/

[29] https://vachesetbourrache.be/

[30] https://srfb.be/

- Véronique Monnart: Farmer at "Ferme du Buis" and co-representative for "Social Farming Initiatives" at the GAL Parc Naturel des Plaines de l'Escaut

The wider context

The Belgian policy context in which care farming is situated

Turning to the **broader context**, it is important to first recall that Belgium is a **federal state** composed of **three Regions and three Communities**. The Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital Regions have powers connected to the *territory or geographical region* (e.g. employment), the Flemish-, French- and German-speaking Communities have powers connected to the *individual* (e.g. welfare), and the federal state holds *'overarching' powers* (e.g. public health, social security). This leads to a highly complex institutional environment that involves multiple actors across multiple levels, with different powers and responsibilities in labour and social policy, but also in other policy domains relevant to this case study. As a result, the regulatory framework and ecosystem of actors are fragmented. Care farming, moreover, is situated at the crossroads of **several policy domains** extending beyond labour and social policy, including agricultural policy, urban planning, health, employment, social security, among others.

A key focus in Belgium is the growing concern over **mental health**, with a particular emphasis on addressing burnout. This mirrors a broader European trend, as highlighted by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who has stressed the importance of mental health support across the EU. In Belgium, there has been an increasing recognition of burnout as a major public health issue, driven by the pressures of modern work environments. Care farming has emerged as a valuable therapeutic tool in this context, offering individuals suffering from burnout or other mental health conditions an alternative pathway to recovery through meaningful activities in nature.

This mental health focus is also set against the **backdrop of labour and skills shortages** in Belgium. The country faces significant challenges in reintegrating individuals who have been sidelined from the workforce, particularly those dealing with long-term unemployment or health-related work absences. As a result, care farming is viewed as a promising solution that not only aids recovery but also promotes social reintegration. By helping individuals regain their confidence and skills in a supportive environment, care farming aligns with broader efforts to address labour shortages and improve workforce participation.

Belgium's agricultural policy also plays a critical role in the development of care farming. The agricultural sector is undergoing transformation, with an increasing emphasis on sustainability and diversification. Care farming fits into this policy framework by allowing farmers to diversify their income streams while contributing to social goals. Furthermore, it provides rural areas with additional economic and social

support, creating opportunities for farmers to engage in social services while promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

The Green care programme aims at offering a significant improvement in well-being through active participation and engagement with nature. It provides personalised support, with guidance from professionals in mental health and social farming, ensuring that each individual's needs are addressed. The flexibility of the programme allows for tasks and activity schedules to be tailored to the participant and the specific farm, with the option to continue beyond the study period if desired.

From the interviews with people suffering from burnout and who joined care farms, we found that participants often reported **experiencing reduced stress levels, enhanced social interaction, and a sense of reconnection with a more natural rhythm of life**. Additionally, the program helps in emotional regulation and boosts self-esteem, providing participants with a renewed sense of value and purpose.

Care farming in Europe

Across Europe, **care farming is on the rise**, driven by the growing recognition of its potential to address social, mental health, and environmental challenges. Many countries are increasingly adopting care farming as part of both agricultural and healthcare strategies. In the European Union, social farming initiatives, which blend therapeutic care with agricultural activities, are seen as innovative approaches to create jobs, foster social inclusion, and promote mental well-being, especially in rural areas. The European Union's CAP Network emphasises care farming as an area of innovation that combines the multifunctional role of farming with social care, facilitating connections between urban and rural populations (CAP Network, 2023; Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009).

Additionally, care farming is being increasingly **recognised as a social innovation**, with multiple projects across EU Member States contributing to rural development, social cohesion, and health outcomes. Countries like the Netherlands, Italy, and the UK are pioneers in expanding care farming programmes that integrate vulnerable groups into farm environments, aiding both rehabilitation and social reintegration (Hassink et al., 2020). This aligns with broader EU agricultural policies that promote multifunctional farming as a means to address both social and environmental goals (European Commission, 2023).

The rise of care farming is also **linked to wider societal shifts**, where healthcare systems explore alternative, community-based approaches to mental health and social care. By merging environmental sustainability with therapeutic objectives, care farms offer a comprehensive solution that benefits both individual well-being and ecological health, contributing to the sustainability of rural communities (Di Iacovo et al., 2017).

As the concept gains traction, it is expected to inspire similar innovations across other regions, further embedding care farming into national and EU-level strategies (Hassink et al., 2020).

4.2.2. How does it fit into the WeLaR square of "megatrends"?

The developments in care farming should be situated in a context where **global megatrends** such as globalisation, digitalisation, and climate change – which are at the core of the WeLaR project – are **reshaping labour markets and welfare states**.

The developments in care farming must be understood within the broader context of global megatrends that are fundamentally transforming labour markets and welfare systems. **Globalisation** has intensified economic competition and led to shifts in employment patterns, often leaving vulnerable groups, such as those with mental health issues or disabilities, further marginalised. Care farming offers an innovative solution by providing these individuals with meaningful engagement, skills development, and social reintegration opportunities. As labour markets become more dynamic and competitive, care farms serve as an alternative pathway to reintroducing people into the workforce or society, especially those who may struggle to re-enter conventional job sectors. Care farms offer a unique environment where individuals recovering from burnout or mental health issues can rediscover their capabilities and rebuild their confidence in a safe, supportive setting. Through manageable tasks like caring for animals or working in the garden, participants experience small but meaningful achievements that remind them they are capable of doing productive work, something they may have forgotten during their burnout. These activities also help them regain trust in others through teamwork and collaboration, while proving that work can be fulfilling without causing harm or overwhelming them. This not only helps restore their self-esteem, but also reshapes their relationship with work, showing them that it can be done in a healthy, balanced way, ultimately preparing them to re-enter the labour market with renewed confidence. In that sense, what care farms provide can be understood as ensuring that the preconditions to be able to enrol in a training programme or labour market reintegration programme in a next stage are met. This aligns with the broader goals of welfare reform, which increasingly focus on social inclusion and adaptability in the face of economic pressures brought about by globalisation.

At the same time, **demographic shifts** and the accelerating pace of **digitalisation** are reshaping societal needs and the welfare state. Populations across Europe, including Belgium, are ageing, and this has increased demand for care services, both for the elderly and for those struggling with burnout and mental health challenges linked to modern work environments. Care farming plays a critical role in addressing this demand by providing a therapeutic, nature-based approach that contrasts with more digitised care

environments Modern approaches to mental health treatment are increasingly relying on remote or app-based services, particularly in response to the shortage of mental health care staff. These digital solutions, such as teletherapy or mental health apps, offer convenient access but can lack the hands-on, human connection that some individuals need. In contrast, care farms provide a more personal, nature-based alternative, where therapy is integrated with physical activities and social interaction in a real-world environment, offering a different approach to mental health treatment outside of institutional or purely digital settings.. Additionally, **climate change** is driving changes in agriculture, pushing farmers to adopt more sustainable practices. Care farming, which often integrates environmentally friendly practices with social care, can help address the twin challenges of supporting vulnerable populations while promoting ecological sustainability[31]. The connection between supporting vulnerable populations and promoting ecological sustainability in care farming is more intertwined than it might first appear. By engaging participants in environmentally friendly practices such as organic farming, sustainable land management, or conservation efforts, care farms provide hands-on activities that benefit both the individual and the environment. For the vulnerable populations involved, these practices offer a therapeutic experience that helps them reconnect with nature, develop new skills, and improve their mental health. At the same time, their work directly contributes to ecological sustainability, as they actively participate in maintaining healthy ecosystems. This creates a symbiotic relationship where the healing process of individuals is tied to nurturing the environment, showing them that their actions have a positive impact on the world around them, further enhancing their sense of purpose and well-being. Another point, although exploring it fully is beyond the scope of this case study, relates to the interplay between climate policy and agricultural policy. The latter is a regional competence in the Belgian institutional system, while climate policy is split across the federal and the regional governance levels. As climate policy is tightening to make progress towards carbon neutrality, it also affects agriculture as the norms that farms need to meet are ever increasing (especially for farms that are in proximity of protected areas of nature), and keeping up with those requires significant investments. As a result, some farmers just stop their overall activities, while other farmers are rather looking into a diversification of activities, both within agriculture and beyond (e.g., tourism, service provision, etc.). For some, this may include care farming. As also became clear in

[31] Care farming can provide an additional source of income for farmers, though it is important to highlight that the contribution to their overall earnings is quite small, and no farms rely solely on care farming for their livelihood.

the interviews, some of the care farms do focus on organic produce or sustainable production, but this does not apply to all.

These trends highlight the relevance of care farming as a multidimensional approach to welfare reform, combining health, social inclusion, and sustainability in a rapidly changing world—precisely the focus of the WeLaR project.

4.2.3. Key impacts and ways these are being addressed or shaped

Care farms in Belgium are experiencing key impacts that are being shaped by evolving challenges, opportunities, and changes in policy contexts. Over time, the sector has adapted to new realities in both the agricultural and social care domains, while also encountering unintended consequences that require ongoing responses.

Changing challenges and opportunities

Initially, care farming was seen primarily as a **niche activity**, but it has **grown in recognition as a valuable tool** for addressing mental health and social reintegration. As awareness of burnout, stress-related illnesses, and other mental health issues increases, the demand for care farming services has also expanded. This creates opportunities for farms to diversify their activities, offering a **new source of income and social engagement**. However, there are challenges related to scalability, as not all farms have the capacity to host care recipients, nor do they have the expertise needed for therapeutic care.

In recent years, labour shortages have highlighted the potential of care farms **to reintegrate individuals into the workforce**, particularly those who have been sidelined due to long-term unemployment or health issues. This growing focus on workforce participation offers care farms new avenues for collaboration with social services, but it also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of such initiatives, especially if funding and support mechanisms are not consistently maintained.

Unintended consequences

The increase in demand for care farming creates a potential strain on resources, with farms needing to balance their care activities with agricultural production. In some cases, there may be unintended social consequences, such as care recipients feeling isolated if they are placed on farms in remote locations without sufficient social interaction or follow-up support from healthcare providers.

Evolving policy context

The policy context around care farming is also changing. With heightened attention to mental health issues at both national and EU levels, particularly in response to pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic, there are more opportunities for care farms to integrate into formal health and social care systems. However, this also brings new challenges, as care farms must navigate increasingly complex regulatory frameworks and ensure compliance with health and safety standards.

Agricultural policies that promote sustainability and diversification have opened doors for care farms to thrive, but these policies are subject to shifts in political priorities. For example, the increasing focus on environmental sustainability could create opportunities for care farms to play a role in ecological preservation, yet it may also impose additional regulations or expectations regarding how farms are managed.

New challenges and future directions

As the concept of care farming matures, new challenges are emerging. One major issue is the professionalisation of care services within farming environments. Farmers may need more training in mental health care, social work, or therapeutic practices, and there could be a need for better collaboration between care farms and healthcare providers to ensure that care recipients receive the appropriate level of support.

Looking forward, care farms will need to continue adapting to changes in societal expectations, labour market dynamics, and agricultural trends. Opportunities exist for expanding care farming services to address issues such as ageing populations and rural depopulation, but this will require strong policy support, sustainable funding, and greater public awareness of the benefits that care farms can provide.

4.2.4. Methodology

This report presents a case study on care farms in Belgium and their aim to support persons suffering from burnout by letting them work on farms. As defined by Simons (2009), a case study is *"an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context"* (p.21). Adopting a case study approach is thus particularly suited for this research on care farming as it allows to bring together and integrate the perspectives and experiences of a wide range of actors and to fully account for the context in which this study is set.

Methodologically, this case study builds on rich data collected through desk research and fieldwork. The **desk research** involved a review of the academic and grey literature on care farming (with a focus on the concept, prevalence and impact), mental health and burnout, global megatrends and their impact on labour markets and welfare states, and related topics.

The **fieldwork** consisted of 10 in-person interviews (6 participants to the programme, 2 health professionals and 2 farmers) and 2 focus groups with 12 participants in total. The profiles of the focus groups participants were diverse: a student who had worked on social integration through social agriculture, farmers from welcoming farms, a university professor and sociologist with experience in green care programs in Belgium, a psychiatrist who supports patients in green care programmes, a nurse and researcher who has studied these issues, a therapist and physiotherapist who provides nature-based therapies, a green care counsellor, an employee of the farm who connects participants in agricultural green care programmes with farms. This diversity in participants in the interviews and focus groups ensures a **holistic view** on the case study at hand. The French-speaking focus group was organised in-person, the Dutch-speaking one online. The interviews were conducted in person, at multiple care farm premises at various locations across Belgium. This allowed the research team to also gathered some observational data. All fieldwork participants received detailed documentation concerning the purposes of the study and gave their consent for participation. Both the focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

The research team obtained approval of the KU Leuven social and societal ethics committee for its research on care farming (approval number G-2023-7073). The research furthermore underwent a check concerning its adherence to the GDPR.

4.3. Megatrends

Of the megatrends covered in the WeLaR project, this case study is most closely related to **climate change**. However, this case study touches on the other three megatrends as well, be it more indirectly. Note that the global trend of demographic change is not discussed separately, since it was not brought up in any of the interviews or focus groups that were held (and no striking differences are noted in terms of age, gender, etc. among care recipients using the programme). Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the pressure of the aging Belgian society on the labour market and welfare state when analysing the other trends.

4.3.1. Globalisation

Green care programmes in Belgium, including care farms, are not immune to the pressures of globalisation that affect traditional agriculture. While care farms focus on therapeutic and social benefits, they still operate within the broader agricultural economy and face many of the same challenges. The disruption of global value chains, intensified by events like the Ukraine war, affects access to resources and supplies, creating uncertainty for both traditional and care farms. Additionally, global price competition impacts the viability of agricultural operations, with care farms needing to balance their social mission with the economic realities of farming.

Like traditional farms, care farms are under pressure to perform, particularly as they also rely on agricultural productivity to sustain their operations. The push to remain financially viable, alongside the demands of offering therapeutic services, can place significant strain on care farmers. In rural areas, where agriculture is increasingly threatened by economic downturns, care farms are subject to the same challenges of fluctuating markets, urban-rural tensions, and rising costs as other farms. Although their primary focus is on well-being and mental health, they must still navigate the complexities of a globalised agricultural sector.

The contribution of care farm participants can be particularly valuable for farmers, especially in labour-intensive forms of sustainable farming. Between relying on farming families, who may have other jobs, and seasonal workers typically hired for specific tasks, the involvement of care guests provides additional support. Their work input is appreciated as they engage in a variety of activities, offering flexibility and alleviating the monotony often associated with agricultural labour. By allowing participants to work at their own pace and rotate between diverse tasks—such as transplanting seedlings, weeding, or building tunnels—care farms not only enhance the well-being of vulnerable individuals but also provide practical, supportive assistance to farmers. This dynamic creates a win-win situation, where farmers benefit from consistent help while offering therapeutic work experiences to participants.

> "It is a win-win situation. […] In Belgium, we often rely on seasonal workers, and it's becoming increasingly rare to find local participants. Typically, these workers come from Polish or Romanian companies. The exhausting part is the monotony of doing the same task all day. For instance, during the strawberry season, what makes it particularly draining is having to wake up at 4:00 AM every day and pick strawberries for two straight months. […] And this is where it becomes very important for farmers who welcome [local] individuals facing various vulnerabilities to offer a diverse range of activities. For instance, one moment we might be transplanting seedlings,

> then we might be weeding, and at another time, we could be building a tunnel. They feel better, work at their own pace and we have some support". [farmer of the green care programme]

4.3.2. Digitalisation

Digitalisation, while offering numerous advantages in terms of efficiency and connectivity, can also contribute significantly to stress and mental health issues among workers. The constant demand for availability and rapid response times, driven by technology, can lead to an "always-on" culture that blurs the boundaries between personal and professional life. This relentless pressure often exacerbates (feelings of) burnout and depression, making the need for effective mental health interventions even more urgent. The Green Care programme addresses these challenges by providing a counterbalance to the stressors associated with digitalisation. By encouraging participants to engage in nature-based activities, the programme promotes a restorative environment that helps individuals disconnect from the overwhelming pace of the digital world and reconnect with themselves and their surroundings.

Moreover, the programme can incorporate digital tools to enhance its impact and outreach. For instance, using mobile applications or online platforms could facilitate the scheduling of activities, provide resources for participants, and offer a space for community building among individuals facing similar challenges. Such digital tools could also be used to track progress and share experiences, creating a supportive online community that complements the face-to-face interactions in agricultural or forestry settings. These digital tools could also facilitate tracking progress and sharing experiences while enabling remote therapy or counselling, allowing individuals to maintain connections with familiar mental health professionals. This would help create a supportive online community that complements face-to-face interactions in agricultural or forestry settings. By harnessing the benefits of digitalisation while mitigating its stress-inducing effects, the programme can create a comprehensive support system for individuals struggling with mental health issues, ultimately fostering resilience and well-being in a digital age.

4.3.3. Climate change

Care farms in Belgium are increasingly feeling the effects of climate change. The changing climate disrupts the delicate balance required for farming operations, which are integral to the well-being of participants and the success of care programmes. Rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and more frequent extreme weather events such as heatwaves and floods have a direct impact on crop yields, livestock health, and the overall viability of farm ecosystems.

The unpredictability of weather also poses challenges for the structured nature-based activities that care farms offer. Outdoor programmes, which are crucial for participants' physical and mental well-being, can be disrupted by these climatic shifts. Additionally, increased stress on crops and livestock leads to greater financial burdens on farms, many of which already operate on tight budgets. These pressures may reduce the ability of such care farms to offer consistent and high-quality care, thereby affecting the vulnerable populations who rely on them for mental health support, rehabilitation, and social reintegration.

More generally, nature plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of care farms in Belgium, offering a range of benefits that contribute to the well-being of participants. Care farms integrate agricultural activities with therapeutic support, creating an environment where nature is not just a backdrop but an integral part of the healing process. For many participants, engaging with nature provides a profound sense of tranquillity and a break from the pressures of daily life. The natural setting of care farms fosters relaxation and reduces stress, which is essential for those dealing with mental health issues or recovering from burnout. The act of working with plants and animals, breathing fresh air, and experiencing the changing seasons can be incredibly grounding and restorative.

Furthermore, nature-based activities on care farms help participants reconnect with a slower, more deliberate pace of life. This reconnection can improve emotional regulation and provide a sense of accomplishment and purpose. Tasks like planting, harvesting, and caring for animals offer tangible goals and rewards, which can boost self-esteem and foster a sense of achievement.

4.4. Impacts

4.4.1. Labour market

Care farms in Belgium have the potential to impact the labour market by addressing crucial issues related to **well-being and stress management**. The modern work environment is increasingly recognised for its potential to induce high levels of stress, which can lead to burnout—a state of profound exhaustion, diminished capacity for cognitive and emotional regulation, and a sense of detachment. This not only affects individual health but also has broader implications for productivity and employee retention.

Care farms provide a unique solution to these challenges by offering an **alternative approach to workplace well-being**. By integrating therapeutic activities with agricultural work, these farms create a setting where individuals can actively engage with nature, benefiting from its calming effects. The programme's flexibility allows tasks and schedules to be customised, accommodating the needs of each participant and facilitating their gradual reintegration into the workforce. This personalised support, alongside the hands-

on, transparent work processes found on a farm, plays a crucial role in reducing stress and fostering emotional regulation. The practical nature of farm tasks, where participants can clearly see the results of their efforts, helps **rebuild a sense of self-efficacy**—something often lost during periods of burnout. Engaging in meaningful, tangible activities allows individuals to **regain confidence in their abilities**, while working in a nurturing environment promotes emotional stability. Furthermore, care farms provide opportunities for **socialisation and connection with others**, which helps rebuild self-esteem. By addressing these key factors—self-efficacy, social connection, and emotional regulation—care farms create a holistic recovery process, tackling the root causes of burnout.

Care farms help individuals reconnect with a natural rhythm and engage in purposeful, meaningful work, fostering personal recovery and healthier work habits. Through tasks that encourage balance and a sense of accomplishment, participants often learn to set clearer boundaries, manage stress, and prioritise well-being—skills that can aid them when they return to the workforce. However, for these personal improvements to truly enhance overall workplace well-being, a broader transfer of these positive aspects is necessary. While individual growth, such as adopting a more balanced approach to work and a sustainable sense of priorities, can increase resilience and job satisfaction, this alone may not be enough to address the root causes of burnout in traditional workplaces. For real, lasting change, employers must also make systemic adjustments, creating environments that value mental health and work-life balance. This might involve rethinking work structures, promoting more flexible schedules, reducing high-pressure workloads, or offering supportive resources. When organisations incorporate these lessons from care farming—emphasizing a healthier relationship with work—they can create more resilient teams, reduce burnout, and foster a more satisfied, productive workforce. Thus, care farms offer not only personal development but also a model for reshaping work environments to prevent burnout and improve overall well-being.

4.4.2. Welfare state and public finance

Care farms in Belgium present a promising opportunity to positively impact the welfare state and public finances by fostering labour market re-entry, shortening long-term illness leave, and enhancing the overall well-being of participants.

While re-entry into the labour market and the reduction of long-term illness leave **are not the primary objectives of care farms**, these benefits often arise as indirect effects of the programme in the longer run. Care farms focus on improving participants' well-being through structured support from mental health professionals and social farming activities, which encourage a gradual re-engagement with daily life. The

therapeutic benefits of interacting with nature and receiving personalised support help participants rebuild their confidence and emotional resilience.

> "The farmer in this kind of programme is neither a caregiver nor a reintegration agent. He is someone who welcomes participants and offers activities. […] If we had an explicit goal of reintegration, then we would need to implement the necessary resources, but at the moment, that is not the case." [Expert during a focus group]

The flexibility of care farm programmes—allowing for tailored tasks and adaptable schedules—accommodates individual needs, facilitating a smoother and more sustainable transition back to work. Although the main goal is to enhance well-being, the resulting improvement in participants' work capabilities can lead to shorter periods of illness leave and could potentially lead to a decreased reliance on disability benefits. These positive outcomes contribute to public finance savings and highlight the value of investing in care farms as a means to support both individual recovery and broader economic efficiency.

4.5. Social innovation

Care farming is highly interesting to investigate from a social innovation lens because it directly addresses **pressing social and health-related needs, which are at the forefront of the current public and policy debate in Belgium,** and thus **helps to address a major societal challenge**. Although Belgium has a long tradition in paying attention to work-related psychosocial risks and their outcomes, given that the number of workers exposed to mental health issues is on the rise, there is a need for change and capacity building.

Vulnerable groups such as individuals facing mental health issues, disabilities, or social isolation stand to benefit greatly from care farming programmes. Through providing access to nature, meaningful work, and opportunities for social interaction, care farming effectively meets psychological and physical well-being needs that are often inadequately addressed by conventional healthcare systems. This approach aligns with the first element of social innovation identified by Portales (2019), which is the **satisfaction of needs**. By offering a holistic and comprehensive alternative to traditional care models, care farming provides innovative solutions to gaps in the healthcare system.

While care farming offers a holistic and innovative alternative to traditional care models, addressing critical gaps in the healthcare system, its reach is currently limited. Not all doctors and psychologists are fully aware of this option. However, the goal of the Green Care programme is to raise awareness, so that more healthcare professionals become familiar with it, ultimately expanding its availability to those who could benefit most. It is interesting to note here that in many interviews with care recipients, it was

mentioned that their doctor had recommended them to find something that they enjoy, and this search led them to a care farm (in some cases this was a farm that was already recognised as a care farm, in other cases this was not the case). Moreover, some care recipients highlighted that by working on the farm, they (re)discovered what they actually need to feel confident and what brings them happinesses (e.g., being outside, taking care of animals). This helped them to reflect on what they really wanted from their life and, for some, brought them on a different path moving forward.

From the perspective of innovation, care farming further introduces a novel solution by **blending agricultural practices with social care**, which is an approach rarely seen in mainstream healthcare models. This integration of **farming and healthcare** creates a powerful synergy, where the needs and strengths of each sector complement and address the challenges of the other. In care farming, the therapeutic needs of vulnerable individuals—such as those recovering from mental health issues or in need of rehabilitation—are met through farming activities that also benefit the agricultural sector. Tasks that foster personal growth, resilience, and well-being simultaneously support the operational demands of sustainable farming. This Schumpeterian recombination of practices and institutions not only offers creative, practical solutions to complex social challenges but also highlights how blending sectors can create innovative models of care. By merging the healing potential of nature with the structured routines of farming, care farms offer new ways to approach both mental health and agricultural practices, enriching communities and addressing broader societal needs. The unique way in which nature-based therapies and purposeful, productive work are used to support healing and promote social reintegration highlights the innovative aspect of this model. In doing so, care farming fulfils Portales' second element of social innovation, which focuses on the innovation of the solution itself. This innovation disrupts traditional care practices by demonstrating that the natural environment, coupled with meaningful labour, can provide a pathway to recovery and well-being that is both cost-effective and deeply human-centered.

Care farming also drives significant changes in social structures and relationships, **fundamentally altering how society perceives both care and farming**. By empowering participants to take active roles in their own rehabilitation within a collaborative setting, care farming challenges conventional healthcare hierarchies, where patients are often passive recipients of care. Additionally, care farming expands the traditional role of farming, integrating it with community-oriented, therapeutic practices. These shifts in the understanding of both labour and care align with Portales' third element of social innovation, which is the transformation of social structures and relationships. Care farming creates new relationships between participants, healthcare providers, and the farming community, building stronger social bonds and promoting inclusive social practices that go beyond conventional healthcare frameworks.

Lastly, care farming enhances societal capacity to act by **engaging local communities and empowering individuals through meaningful involvement**. These programmes often rely on community engagement, where residents, volunteers, and organisations collaborate to support the farm and its participants, at the local or regional level. This collective effort fosters social cohesion and equips individuals with new skills, fostering both personal resilience and community solidarity. This point was in fact highlighted in many of the interviews and in the focus group discussions, where for example care recipients spoke about how being in touch with several actors and organisations helped them feel supported and helped them to build up a network, whereas intermediary organisations and other stakeholders spoke about the importance of knowledge exchange and the benefits of seeking synergies between approaches that are now often poorly integrated or sometimes even appear to run counter to each. Through this collaborative framework, society becomes better prepared to address ongoing social and health challenges, demonstrating Portales' fourth element of social innovation, which emphasises increased societal capacity to act. By building networks of support around such initiatives, communities become more resilient and capable of responding to both individual and collective needs, thus contributing to a more adaptive and inclusive society.

4.6. Conclusions

The Green Care programme stands as **a pioneering initiative** that addresses both **mental health challenges and environmental sustainability** through the innovative concept of "Green Care." By enabling healthcare professionals to prescribe nature-based activities within agricultural and forestry settings, the programme provides a structured pathway for individuals experiencing burnout and depression to engage in therapeutic activities that promote recovery. These activities can range from gardening and planting trees to maintaining green spaces, which not only facilitate personal healing but also help participants reconnect with nature. This **holistic approach** is designed to empower individuals, fostering resilience and a sense of purpose, while simultaneously aiding in their reintegration into the workforce. By tackling mental health challenges early on and preventing short-term disabilities from escalating into long-term incapacities, the Green Care programme alleviates pressure on the healthcare system and underscores the importance of preventive measures in mental health care.

Moreover, the programme emphasises **collaboration among diverse stakeholders**—including farmers, healthcare providers, local communities, and academic institutions—creating a robust support network that enhances its efficacy and from which each involved partner benefits. This multi-faceted approach enriches the recovery experience for participants and promotes community engagement, social cohesion,

and shared responsibility. **Farmers play a crucial role in this initiative**, as they not only provide the spaces and resources for therapeutic activities but also act as facilitators, guiding participants through their recovery journey. For some, who have experienced a burnout or mental health issues themselves, it also is important to share their story and contribute to the support of someone else. Additionally, by leveraging existing social farming structures and conducting thorough evaluations in partnership with academic experts, the Green Care programme exemplifies a comprehensive model that integrates mental health care with social and environmental dimensions. This interconnectedness fosters a deeper understanding of the benefits of nature on mental health and encourages communities to embrace sustainable practices that support both individual well-being and environmental health.

Finally, the impact of the Green Care programme extends beyond individual recovery. By addressing mental health issues and promoting environmentally sustainable practices, the initiative seeks to **improve the well-being of the local community on multiple levels**. In this context, "community" refers not just to the immediate geographic area—such as local residents and nearby populations—but also to the broader social and working environments that these individuals interact with regularly. Care farms, for example, create a space where individuals with mental health conditions can participate in meaningful activities, often working alongside others in shared tasks. This helps reintegrate them into the local workforce, reducing their isolation and fostering a sense of belonging. Moreover, by retaining people with mental health conditions within a working community, care farms can indirectly **challenge the stigma often attached to such conditions**. When individuals with mental health challenges actively contribute to farming and sustainable projects, they demonstrate their capabilities, altering perceptions and promoting greater understanding. This inclusion promotes a healthier, more supportive local environment, which benefits everyone. At the same time, the initiative's focus on mental well-being reduces the likelihood of future crises, thereby helping to **lower long-term healthcare costs** while building a more resilient and inclusive society.

The programme not only helps individuals regain their footing but also strengthens the social fabric of the community by fostering connections and shared experiences. As it demonstrates positive outcomes, the programme could serve as a blueprint for future policies that seek to unify mental health care with social and ecological objectives, which are part of a wider package of measures to prevent and manage work-related psychosocial risks and mental health issues. In doing so, it not only strengthens the welfare system's capacity to respond to evolving societal challenges but also paves the way for a healthier, more sustainable future for all.

The Green Care programme has the potential to **inspire policy-makers and stakeholders in other European countries** grappling with the escalating issues of mental health, burnout, and depression. As mental health continues to be a pressing concern globally, the lessons learned from the Green Care programme could facilitate the establishment of comprehensive, community-oriented strategies that prioritise well-being and environmental stewardship in the fight against mental health crises across Europe.

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5. Fitting an Octopus into the Serbian welfare state: the Hobotnica initiative

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5.1. The “story” of the case

The "Hobotnica" project ("Octopus" in English) is a social innovation initiative in Serbia aimed at addressing the unpaid labour burden faced by rural women. Developed by national-level gender activists and implemented by a regional women's association, the project was designed to alleviate caregiving and household responsibilities, enhance physical and psychological well-being, and empower women in rural communities. The program provided modular, flexible services across various areas like health, education, legal aid, digital literacy, and social support, allowing women to tailor support to their specific needs. The service also generated broader positive impacts on the users, such as increasing their social connectivity and opening new economic opportunities to them.

A unique aspect of Hobotnica is its structure, designed to be adaptable to local contexts with limited resources. By targeting rural women, who are often marginalised in both social policy and economic opportunities, the project highlighted the intersectional challenges of gender, economic inequality, and geographic isolation. Through a user-centred design, it gathered insights on the needs of the women it served, underscoring the importance of addressing specific community needs, which are often overlooked in the more standardised social policy approaches.

The project’s short-term funding model limited its sustainability in the original format, but it demonstrated to local communities the value of localised, intersectional social investment-oriented delivery of social services. The challenges of running Hobotnica after the expiry of two rounds of donor funding (GiZ and UN Women) highlight structural limitations of the Serbian welfare state. The existing legal and institutional framework hinders social service delivery that is oriented towards social investment and away from cash benefits for the poorest of the poor, making it very difficult to sustainably invest in people’s wellbeing and capabilities.

Hobotnica’s impacts also extended beyond immediate localities it served, stimulating dialogue on unpaid female labour and inspiring new activist ideas for the project stakeholders. The case study thus highlights the importance of considering both direct and indirect impacts in evaluating social innovation projects and calls for the development of more supportive institutional and governance frameworks to enable the delivery of cross-sectoral and modular services that can support the adaptation of marginalised communities to the new megatrends.

5.1.1. The case and its context: Modular support for unpaid female work in rural areas

Hobotnica (Octopus, in English) is an innovative, gender-responsive service developed as a donor-funded project by national-level activists and consultants specialising in gender equality, social protection, and gender-responsive budgeting. The project was implemented by a Serbian regional female association called Žensko udruženje kolubarskog okruga - ŽUKO (Women's association of the Kolubara region). This initiative emerged as a grassroots activist effort to address the issue of unpaid female labour in rural areas, It was developed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the topic of unpaid female work gained urgent attention from the national gender-focused activist community.

The service was targeting women in small municipalities and rural areas of Serbia who are overburdened with caregiving responsibilities and unpaid household work. These responsibilities come at the expense of their leisure time, income generating activities, and even their physical and mental health. The project responded to the reality that women's work is unending, draining their resources and limiting their ability to sustainably improve their socio-economic status. The coronavirus pandemic presented a crucial opportunity to launch the service in 2021, as the already disproportionate care burden on women worsened when the state withdrew even the minimal support services previously available. The project was carefully designed to protect participants' safety, with adequate precautions—such as holding initial support events online, wearing masks at in-person meetings, and strictly following health guidelines.

Hobotnica's design consists of eight elements, or sub-services, that work together to reduce the burden of unpaid household and care work on women. Interviewee 1 emphasised that the eight elements represent eight arms of the octopus, visualising the constant multitasking expected of women in their stereotypical gendered roles. Interviewee 2 echoed the same symbolism, saying that women are often expected to 'be like an octopus'. She added,

> "We always tell our families and our kids, I don't have 10 hands, I'm not an octopus".

The eight elements of Hobotnica are:

- Love Yourself – Support for the physical and mental health of women. Two general practitioners and two psychotherapists were engaged to provide this service.
- Support Knowledge – Provides assistance to children of the beneficiaries with homework and studying at home.
- Empower Yourself – Provides legal support in various areas.

- Get Trained – Distribution of digital tablets to beneficiaries who, through an initial survey, expressed the need for additional training in the use of IT equipment, while also indicating that they do not own their own IT equipment.
- Unite – Advisory and organisational support aimed at encouraging women from rural areas to form associations.
- Get Transported – Organising transportation for beneficiaries to increase mobility, due to the lack of public transport and private vehicles.
- Socialise – Aimed at reducing social exclusion among the beneficiaries.
- Take a Break – Includes a joint one-day trip for the beneficiaries, fostering the creation of positive and shared memories, and a break from their daily routines (not implemented by the time of the pilot evaluation due to lack of budget).

Figure 5. The logo of Hobotnica

Hobotnica is innovative because it spans multiple social policy areas, addressing health, education, training, digital literacy, employability and gender rights in a holistic way. This approach allows it to respond to various needs that do not fit neatly within one sector. The service is also designed to be flexible and modular, enabling it to 'expand' and 'contract' its services as needed, while maintaining a controlled level of standardised quality. The modular design of the service was created with cost-effectiveness in mind as well, aiming to tailor it to small municipalities with limited social protection budgets and personnel.

The service was designed in consultation with the target users, following principles of social innovation. This involved an initial assessment of their needs and ongoing feedback from the users. The women included in the needs analysis ranged in age from 22 to 81. All interviewed stakeholders highlighted this user-driven component as essential, as it provided new insights—even for gender experts—into the specific needs of women in rural areas and their children. For example, it revealed issues such as the lack of physical or transportation infrastructure in villages, which limits women's ability to connect and socialise independently of men.

User-driven design also underscored the importance of a modular service structure, as needs varied across households and localities. Additionally, the service design incorporated insights from the initiators' own practice, introducing some needs that were initially less recognised by the users, such as psychological support. Interestingly, psychological support ended up being one of the most used services although it was not ranked highly in the users' driven needs assessment (as noted in interviews 1, 2, and 4). This highlights the importance of designing services that incorporate users' perspectives while enriching them with broader knowledge on gender dynamics and insights from other contexts.

Hobotnica is a local level initiative. The service was initially developed with the support of UN Women and GiZ funding (German bilateral donor) as well as national-level consultants working on gender-responsive planning and budgeting (two of whom were interviewed for this report). It was piloted in 2021 in the municipality of Mionica, in the Kolubara District of central-west Serbia, and the local female association ŽUKO was in charge of implementing it. In 2022, the service was piloted in another nearby municipality Lajkovac, again by ŽUKO, but now with the additional support of a national level NGO, Gender Knowledge Hub. In this second round of funding and change of location, support was provided directly by the GIZ project "Social Protection Services for Vulnerable Groups", without involvement of UN Women. The goal of the repeated piloting was to scale the initiative by expanding its coverage and duration, allowing for an evaluation of the service. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to initiate brainstorming and consultation activities aimed at achieving managerial, financial, policy, and institutional sustainability for the service.

5.1.2. Key impacts and ways these are being addressed or shaped: A potential for future scaling and a strong ideational legacy

According to all interviewed stakeholders, the future of Hobotnica in its original format is uncertain, as the service was formally discontinued once the GiZ funding was exhausted. However, inspired by the Hobotnica model, the municipal authorities in Mionica have taken a positive step by issuing a public call

to the local community, inviting them to suggest services they would like the municipality to provide. This municipal initiative, which targets not only women but all citizens, demonstrates that Hobotnica showcased to the municipal authorities the value of assessing user needs when deciding on community services.

Beyond this immediate impact on the local municipality, Hobotnica served as a broader "ideas-generating laboratory" (interview 5), acting as a catalyst for growth, capacity building, and increased national visibility for the regional association ŽUKO, which implemented it. Additionally, it sparked a broader national conversation on unpaid female labour in the Serbian society, which ŽUKO is now a part of. It also revealed new perspectives on the position and needs of women in rural areas of Serbia, even to gender experts, thus promoting policy learning on important socio-economic topics.

The interviewed stakeholders expressed a shared interest in making the original Hobotnica service more sustainably available to the pilot communities in the future. They are continually exploring opportunities to scale its methodology to other localities across Serbia, and potentially beyond. However, they hold varied perspectives on governance challenges and the initiative's most desirable outcomes—a common occurrence in social innovation projects. While some consider the continuation of the original service in the original localities as key, others are more focused on developing long-term strategies that would involve a wider range of organisations in delivering services inspired by the original design in places which can obtain funding and personnel to administer it.

In other words, while ŽUKO remains committed to the mission and concept of the Hobotnica project, they are seeking more favourable institutional and financial conditions to enable its continuation. In the meantime, they are developing a strategy to involve other organisations and expand the service to new local contexts. They are also using insights gained from Hobotnica to evolve their work on other issues, including national advocacy campaigns related to unpaid female labour and gendered inheritance rights for agricultural land.

5.1.3. Methodology

The selection of the case study was informed by personal inquiry and consultation with key stakeholders in Serbia, including policymakers and members of the NGO community who are actively engaged in addressing social issues. These stakeholders provided valuable insights into social policy projects, allowing for the identification of a relevant case that exemplifies a notable social innovation initiative for the Serbian context. Additionally, we ensured that the chosen case aligned with the megatrends explored in the broader WeLaR project.

A total of six interviews were conducted with key project stakeholders, five of whom have been directly involved in the project.[32] The first interview was conducted with a gender expert and originator of the project idea, who identified the local organisation and context for its implementation. She also participated in the initial evaluation efforts aimed at preparing the project for national accreditation as a social service. The second interview was with the head of the regional women's association ŽUKO, which is responsible for implementing the initiative. The third interview was with a social innovation expert and consultant, who worked closely with ŽUKO to design strategies for ensuring the project's sustainability. The fourth interview was conducted with an employee of ŽUKO who was directly involved in providing services to the women participating in the initiative. The fifth interview was with a gender expert from the Gender Knowledge Hub, another female association that participated in the fundraising for the project, and who supported ŽUKO's donor management efforts. The final interview was with an external stakeholder, a former government employee with extensive experience in mainstreaming social innovation at the local municipal level in Serbia. No interviews were conducted with representatives of the local authorities, since none of the interviewed stakeholders felt they would add value to our understanding of the Hobotnica project.

Although the interview questions were preplanned according to ZSI guidelines, the interviews themselves were conducted using a semi-structured approach by the principal investigator, who has extensive experience with interview-based research. This approach allowed interviewees to freely share their own perspectives on the project while ensuring that information relevant to WeLaR was gathered.

Five interviews were conducted online and one in person. All of the interviewees signed the consent form and agreed to be recorded, following which transcripts were produced personally by the author of this report. Interview contents were coded using NVivo software, ensuring that key insights were captured systematically and comprehensively, including both complementary and overlapping perspectives.

[32] I would like to sincerely thank Sanja Nikolin, Jelena Ružić, Aleksandra Vladisavljević, Katarina Ranković, Višnja Baćanović, and Aleksandar Rončević for their invaluable contributions to this case study. Their willingness to be interviewed and provide candid, detailed insights on both the strengths and challenges of the Hobotnica initiative has been essential to this research.

Although no interviews were conducted directly with the end users of the service, this report additionally draws on an unpublished evaluation study which includes interviews with beneficiaries and provides direct quotes from them. Additionally, the project's unpublished sustainability plan was also consulted. These references are listed at the end of the report.

5.2. Megatrends

Hobotnica is a supply-side intervention aimed at reducing the negative impact of household responsibilities on women's employment and earnings. In addition to alleviating unpaid care work, the service focuses on improving women's digital skills, enhancing their access to healthcare, strengthening their legal rights, and fostering cooperation and networking among them. Provision of such services can be categorised as social investment, equipping women with better training and tools to enhance their earning potential and life quality, i.e. contributing towards their social and economic inclusion. By simultaneously reducing mothers' childcare burdens and providing children with access to educational support, Hobotnica additionally strives to improve opportunities for the next generation. With its focus on women (and their children) in rural areas of Serbia, which are facing depopulation risks and demographic change, the service highlights the importance of intersectionality by addressing the multiple, overlapping labour market, social policy and demographic challenges, and the need for modularity in service design for addressing them. The Hobotnica project thus addresses several key issues highlighted by the WeLaR project.

5.2.1. Globalisation: Regional inequalities and support to small farmers

Regional inequalities, intensified by globalisation and, in Serbia's case, economic decline of the 1990s and failed privatisations of the 2000s, have left many areas economically vulnerable. While some regions have since managed to reindustrialise through foreign direct investment (FDI), others have seen limited or no such recovery, deepening geographic disparities. Alternative sources of growth have not systematically emerged in those places either, although there have been some attempts to invest in sectors like tourism. As a result, local government budgets in many regions and localities remain strained, with increasing numbers of people in need and limited resources to address social and economic challenges. As interviewee 3 described it, they are currently forced 'to keep re-financing their problems without solving them.'

Furthermore, areas that are experiencing depopulation and economic decline have been hit particularly hard by austerity measures imposed by the central government during the mid-2010s, as well as the

reduction of municipal administration personnel, which has weakened their administrative capacities. This situation was effectively illustrated by interviewee 2:

> "When I come to the Mionica municipality, there is just one person in finance who is in charge of everything. When I ask who is in charge of LED, she say's – I am, And youth and sports? I am… So this person is at breaking point".

This combination of reduced social policy budgets and diminished capacities has reinforced 'one size fits all' solutions. These top-down approaches offer little room for local decision-making and consultation with the community, as they involve imposing policy prescriptions without assessing the specific local needs or evaluating which local resources could be repurposed to meet new social risks.

By providing a composite and modular service that spans across several social policy areas, Hobotnica was designed with the idea to make it particularly suitable for smaller, less developed municipalities because it is tailored to contexts with low administrative capacities and availability of personnel. According to interviewee 1, the modularity of its design enables optimisation of small municipal budgets for social services while also being user-needs driven. At the same time, through the interviews, it emerged that cross-sectoral coordination efforts and administrative capacity are still needed to deliver such composite and flexible social services. Therefore, additional hidden costs were generated over time for those delivering the service (this is discussed in greater detail in section 5.3.1 below).

Another contribution of Hobotnica to the challenge of globalisation is reflected in its support to small-scale female farmers. The government's approach to developing agriculture and rural areas is heavily skewed toward supporting larger agricultural enterprises—a trend closely tied to globalisation. While there is significant state aid directed at agriculture, the focus is on promoting large-scale landholdings, reinforcing the 'winner takes all' mentality (interview 1). Globalisation's emphasis on efficiency and large-scale production further reinforces the marginalisation of small-scale farmers, particularly women, by favouring larger players in the agricultural sector.

Programmes aimed at supporting small landholders also often overlook women. In Serbia, only 16% of agricultural land is owned by women, and these plots are typically less than 2 hectares in size (interviews 1 and 4). Even when government subsidies offer additional points for farms owned by women, this is often treated as a box-ticking exercise for gender inclusion. These women rarely have genuine decision-making power on their farms, nor do they achieve economic security and independence from the land they work on.

Women who do own land tend to manage small gardens with diverse crops, like tomatoes, which require extensive manual labour and minimal technological input. This type of labour-intensive and unmechanised farming makes it difficult to generate substantial income. Additionally, the small size of these plots leaves women more vulnerable to weather disruptions and long-term challenges like climate change (interviews 1 and 4; also see section 5.2.4 on climate change).

Hobotnica steps in to address these lived realities of women in rural areas. As interviewee 1 put it, "Life in a village is a form of punishment for these women", because they remain invisible to the policy makers. By focusing on providing the women with legal and psychological advice, digital literacy, advisory and organisational support to form associations and socialisation opportunities where they can exchange ideas and experiences, Hobotnica seeks to provide small-scale female farmers and gardeners with the support they need to improve their mental health and socio-economic conditions. By investing in their children's skills, such as English language proficiency or digital literacy, the programme has also worked towards building capabilities of the next generation (also see section 5.2.3).

While providing a foundation for tackling the challenges of labour-intensive small-scale female farming and gardening, the project stops short of providing direct support for these businesses. It does not participate in the formation of female cooperatives, for example, or in providing economic advice for setting up higher-value-added production. The ŽUKO association, however, is engaged in another complementary initiative in the same region: a digital marketplace for selling and delivering products from female agricultural producers. This initiative appears to align more closely with the Hobotnica participants' immediate financial needs, and also addresses their more structural economic conditions. Interviewee 5 emphasised the importance of also spending time and resources on local projects with such an immediate economic impact, noting that it makes sense for ŽUKO to prioritise developing such a service over Hobotnica, as it offers an ongoing and immediate economic benefit to the entire community, including to some of the women working in ŽUKO. It seemed to interviewee 5 that such efforts are more beneficial to the community than working on short-term donor-funded projects on activities that do not generate additional income and which are thus more difficult to sustain in the longer run.

In short, although supporting overburdened women's leisure time and general education and self-care through Hobotnica is valuable, it is important to also acknowledge the liberal perspective on development where women's economic empowerment can also help them to lead more independent lives, reduce exploitation of their unpaid labour, and encourage their learning and innovation. These different perspectives reveal an interesting almost philosophical tension. On one hand, the Hobotnica project hopes

that, given more free time and information, women will be able to organise themselves effectively, lead sustainable lives, seek out what interests them, and innovate. On the other hand, more recent debates which are interested in the role of institutions in the 'little d's of development', would suggest instead that more structured activities and institutionalised incentives may be needed to enable economic self-empowerment and community innovation (e.g. see Avlijaš and Gartzou-Katsouyanni 2024). It is a moot competition to what extent income generation and social reproduction activities can generate synergies, and to what extent they are necessarily in an either/or relationship.

An explicitly positive role of globalisation was also identified in the interviews. While the stakeholders primarily emphasised Hobotnica's role in mitigating the threats of globalisation to their target group, they also acknowledged that the ideas generated by the initiative took on a life of their own. This was made possible by the increased interconnectedness and the exchange of ideas among stakeholders involved in the project, which represents a positive side of globalisation. Communication and collaboration between them contributed not only to the success of Hobotnica but also positively impacted their other projects and activist efforts. This suggests that, although globalisation presents socio-economic challenges for marginalised areas and communities, it also enables connection and networking for them. This can drive creative solutions and amplify social impact, extending the project's reach and influence beyond its immediate environment. This finding invites reflection on the potential of building social innovation ecosystems made up of many similar small-scale initiatives. However, it also raises questions about what is necessary to create a critical mass of these projects and whether scattered project-based donor funding alone is sufficient to catalyse these ecosystems into existence.

5.2.2. Digitalisation: Empowering rural women through connectivity and information access

Hobotnica's provision of tablets and digital skills training to rural women helped these vulnerable populations adapt to the global trend of digitalisation, equipping them with skills for an increasingly digital world. The women used digital tools to access legal information, connect with other women through online groups, exchange experiences, and socialise. Having a tangible service that included a material gift, like a tablet, often increased household support for the project, as family members could see its broader benefits. Owning tablets also enhanced the women's social connectedness, enabling them to stay in touch with family and friends across the country and even abroad. In the words of one user interviewed for the project evaluation report:

> "I received a tablet and learned how to use it. Now, I've put my SIM card in it, and it's useful to me. When I sit down to have coffee, I call my sister, and we video chat while drinking coffee

> together, as if we are together in person. I also visit the municipal website, which they showed us how to use, to check if there's anything new for us farmers, and I check 'Lajkovac at a Glance' to see what's new, as they post updates there. Now we have a group on Viber, us women who attended the training sessions. It's great that we're connected because now we have someone to talk to, and they also notify us about anything new from the municipality. I never used to follow or know about any of this before."

According to interviewee 1, opening these opportunities also revealed some women's 'hunger for new knowledge', sparking their interest in additional training and adult education services. Their interests ranged from learning new agricultural and plant growing techniques, to history or the arts, or even to starting a business. This illustrates how increased contact with the outside world can generate new ideas for improvement of one's own and community circumstances and create more meaningful, creative lifestyles for rural women. Therefore, although adult education was not a primary focus of Hobotnica, the digital access it provided arguably facilitated new learning opportunities for those who sought them.

The evaluation report, however, shows that most women used the digital tools, along with legal and associational support, to access information that could directly and immediately benefit them, such as information on subsidies, social assistance schemes, or something directly related to building a small business (e.g. manicure, hairdressing), rather than adopting a broader, exploratory approach to learning. Many of the women also pointed to the value of getting the tablets for themselves to use for leisurely pursuits, such as watching TV shows, talking to their friends, or searching for information on Google. This is a quote from a user interviewed for the 2022 evaluation report:

> "I couldn't believe it when they called me for the training and the tablet. Even my family couldn't believe it. I've never received anything like this before."

This aligns with well-known research on how poverty shapes decision-making, often leading to short-term thinking where immediate needs often take priority over long-term investments like education or health. As notably shown by Banerjee and Duflo (2012), scarcity can limit cognitive bandwidth, making it challenging for individuals to engage in activities that don't provide immediate returns, such as broader learning processes and investment into their futures.

5.2.3. Demographic change: Building rural resilience and providing alternatives to migration

More women than men leave rural areas in Serbia, primarily due to limited employment opportunities and their traditional exclusion from land inheritance (according to interview 1). This disproportionate

migration of women from already depopulating areas worsens existing demographic challenges, as their departure accelerates population decline and weakens rural communities, which rely heavily on women's unpaid care and community work. Furthermore, there are no government initiatives to support social activities or improve quality of life in villages. For example, while a government programme offers houses to young people who return to rural areas, there is no investment in complementary activities. As interviewee 1 noted, everybody eventually leaves because "a house is not enough to keep you in a village".

Hobotnica tackles this megatrend by providing lifestyle content and empowerment to women in rural communities, making them more likely to stay (also see section 5.2.1 on globalisation). It also connects their children to the world from their own communities, encouraging them to imagine the possibility of starting their own rural or agricultural businesses one day that could generate good income and contribute to local development, rather than viewing migration as the only option.

The evaluation report contains interviews with a number of project participants, many of whom expressed how valuable it was to access new information through Hobotnica, socialise with other women, and get psychological support to cope with the everyday challenges of rural life without adequate state support. As one service user shared:

> "We learned a lot through this programme. We have an association of mothers of children with autism. Through the programme, we took initiative, and the women from ŽUKO taught us how to write statements that we sent to the media and the municipality. We received a tablet, which I now use for the association's work; it's the only thing I don't let the children use, so they don't break it."

She then went on:

> "A psychologist is something that everyone needs, but especially those of us who care for other sick individuals, so this was particularly meaningful to us. The municipality should provide us with a psychologist because we will survive everything, but in the end, we will go crazy."

5.2.4. Climate change: Climate resilience and sustainable tourism education can be integrated into the project in the future

Although tackling the impacts of climate change was not a primary focus of the Hobotnica initiative, interviewee 1 believes that this megatrend could easily be integrated into the programme. The programme could be adapted to include education on climate resilience strategies for rural farming communities. By equipping women with knowledge and skills to adapt to changing climate conditions, the initiative could

promote more sustainable agricultural practices. This could include training on drought-resistant crops, sustainable farming techniques, and methods for reducing the environmental impact of farming activities.

Incorporating climate resilience and sustainable tourism education into the existing framework would not only improve the women's economic stability but also enhance the long-term sustainability of their rural communities. As rural areas are often disproportionately affected by climate change due to their dependence on agriculture, such measures would align the initiative with global efforts to combat climate change while supporting social and economic inclusion. Moreover, by supporting small-scale female farmers who are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts in other ways, the Hobotnica project has already contributed to local adaptation efforts to this megatrend.

5.3. Impacts

Hobotnica was a small scale, highly localised initiative which was implemented only in two locations over a period of less than two years. As of November 2022, when a qualitative evaluation study was conducted, the composite Hobotnica service had been used by a total of 89 women, 30 girls, and 27 boys. The total number of services used by the beneficiaries was 245, meaning that women, on average, used 2.7 or nearly 3 services. This evaluation results suggest that this service, within 5-7 months in each location, contributed to alleviating the burden of unpaid labour for women and improved their overall well-being and quality of life. The evaluation report, however, does not contain a quantification of these effects, but is based on qualitative testimonies from service users collected via interviews and focus groups. Based on these data, users reported improvements in their mental health and that they felt better about themselves. Some women finally underwent medical examinations they had been postponing and received answers to health-related questions and explanations from doctors. The users reported feeling better informed on topics of interest, gained new skills, and had more motivation. Their social lives became more enriched, and they had the opportunity to prioritise themselves, even if only briefly. Participants also reported a greater readiness to try new things, and a growing desire among women to initiate positive changes in either the private or public sphere. All these micro-changes collectively contributed to improving the quality of life for rural women and their children. In addition to the direct users, the evaluation report notes, unfortunately without providing additional details, that schools also recognised the value of the service, noting improved grades among the children who participated in the "Support Knowledge" service.

The initiative also improved the users' access to information and made them better connected to the community as well as a wider network of people. This aspect was achieved by increasing their access to information and connectivity, not only via digital tools but by providing them with other forms of support,

including legal, psychological, and associational expertise. Quoting one of the users from the evaluation study:

> "We don't have anything in the village, and we aren't that educated to know much. Whenever I need something, I either give up or I have to spend 10 days figuring out how things work. It meant a lot to me to have someone I could call to ask about subsidies, loans, and I even called for information for my mother, who is a person with a disability."

Interviews with the stakeholders also revealed additional unintended labour market effects of the initiative on those who were implementing it, which are discussed below.

5.3.1. Labour market: Indirect impact on participants and hidden costs for service implementors

Indirect impacts on the local labour market

Although Hobotnica's primary aim was to support women with unpaid care work rather than directly impact their labour market adaptation to the new megatrends, some participants reported positive effects on their economic activities. Many women gained access to new information, legal assistance, and community support, which helped boost their income-generating activities in small-scale farming. Additionally, the evaluation report highlighted that a few participants used the tablets and legal aid provided by the programme to start their own businesses.

> "I use the tablet to search on Google, mostly for information on agriculture and manicures. I gather ideas and knowledge. I attended a manicure training, but I had to stop because I couldn't afford it. I haven't started working independently yet because the materials and tools are expensive."

> "I got married after school and never had my own hair salon, but I did hairdressing for people in the neighbourhood at their homes. During the program, with the help of a lawyer, I registered and opened a shop in a space where I converted a garage and received some support. Now, with the tablet, I watch everything related to my work on YouTube and use it to order consumable materials."

In this sense, the initiative also contributed to the digital literacy and upskilling of the target group and helped reduce information gaps that they faced when seeking income-generating opportunities. Several participants noted the positive impact of having more free time as a result of the programme (e.g., reduced time spent on transport, support for children's learning, and easier access to legal and administrative information), which could potentially enhance their labour supply by freeing up time for income-generating activities.

Additionally, Hobotnica created indirect, long-term labour market benefits for the next generation by exposing participants' children to individuals with diverse life experiences. Interviewee 4, who taught English to children in the community, reflected on how sharing her educational experiences and the benefits of learning English helped inspire the children. Many of these children come from rural backgrounds, where their families expect them to follow similar paths. However, she noted that these children have potential beyond what their parents might envision, even if they remain in agriculture. Learning English allowed them to connect with people from outside the community, gain new ideas, and access knowledge that could support their futures, including adopting new agricultural technologies or developing rural tourism. Interviewee 4 emphasised that speaking English was key to unlocking these opportunities. Through casual conversations during lessons, instructors who had studied abroad—one through Erasmus in Italy, another in the United States—helped broaden the children's perspectives, exposing them to ideas beyond their immediate surroundings. These indirect project effects illustrate how even small learning opportunities can provide new meaning and perspectives, creating ripple effects for everyone involved and providing alternatives to migration from rural areas.

Hidden labour market costs for service implementors

Interviews with the stakeholders also revealed a mix of positive and negative labour market impacts for those involved in implementing Hobotnica. Although the interviewees primarily focused on the experiences of the end users, important institutional and social policy governance related lessons can be drawn from examining how the project affected the service providers.

On the positive side, Hobotnica provided innovative employment, learning and national visibility opportunities for women from ŽUKO and their collaborators involved in the service delivery. However, as the initiative was designed as cost-effective and highly modular, so that it could be implemented in smaller, less developed municipalities, delivering it resulted in unsystematic implementation due to the hidden costs for those implementing it. This issue, indirectly raised by interviewees 2 and 4 and more explicitly by interviewee 5, reflects a concern that Hobotnica's budget did not fully account for the true costs of implementation.

Namely, Interviewee 1 also noted that delivering a flexible and modular service is generally challenging because, when hiring someone to implement the service, there is a need to guarantee them a certain amount of work. This creates a risk of precarious employment for those involved in service delivery, as they may end up being hired on zero- or minimum hour contracts. It is thus important for such projects to also consider how to protect service providers, who often belong to the more vulnerable groups

themselves (e.g. low-earning women, single mothers, etc.). This underscores a significant policy challenge, as many implementers face similar vulnerabilities as the populations they serve, despite having better education or social positioning. Calls to solidarity and mutual aid are often the spiritus movens of such initiatives, but they can lead to their burnout and financial unsustainability over the longer-run. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some people were not able to go to their regular jobs, which gave them the flexibility to deliver the service, but to employ service providers properly in the longer term, they would need some job security. Moreover, ŽUKO employees themselves delivered some of the services, such as English language tuition, because they had the knowledge to deliver it at that level, while

> „the real professors were too expensive for the available budget offered by the donors" (interview 4).

This issue highlights an economic reality: pro-development initiatives cannot achieve sustainability without adequate resources. Without sufficient funding, these programmes risk depleting the already scarce resources they are intended to replenish. Donors as well as other stakeholders in social innovation projects should be mindful of such challenges when defining project deliverables (this concern was also raised in interviews 3 and 5).

To take this self-reflection on inadequate compensation for the expected efforts further, interviewee 5 also questioned why the project founders and donors hadn't requested additional funding to cover the real costs of the service. She suggested that the urgency of the pandemic may have influenced their decision to accept limited resources rather than risk securing none at all. She added that even major funders, like UN Women, might have missed the opportunity to secure more sustainable funding due to their own reluctance to 'rock the boat' and challenge existing frameworks. This points to a tension between 'putting the blame' on structural conditions which limit access to resources for certain groups and thus nurturing hopelessness, vs encouraging more pro-active 'lean in' and assertiveness related attitudes, which can sometimes work and even generate hope, but are likely difficult to sustain in the longer-run without adequate institutional structures to reinforce them.

Such issues highlight a broader challenge within feminist and social movement contexts, and normatively driven organisations or professions, where the work a person does to help marginalised individuals is 'never enough'. In other words, work aimed at supporting vulnerable and exploited populations can paradoxically lead to self-exploitation among implementers, as the low cost of a service often reflects an undervaluation of the real labour and resources required for these efforts (e.g. see Fraser, 2017).

Therefore, while useful for the service users, modularity and cross-sectoral complexity can have 'a dark side' in national contexts with too much labour market flexibility leading to precarious employment which may not ultimately serve the interests of service providers. Interviewee 1 highlighted the structural challenge of delivering flexible social services in a highly inflexible welfare state such as Serbia, by drawing onto the example of Sweden where local organisations can deliver various social services, while they are being trained, monitored and managed by larger non-local organisations that specialise in the supervision of such local service providers. But Sweden is famous for its flexicurity oriented welfare state, where flexible employment is adequately balanced by social security benefits that remove the risk of experiencing precarity due to labour market flexibility (Avlijaš et al. 2021). The Serbian legal framework for labour market regulation and social services provision is very limiting in this regard. There is no flexicurity for the labour force, while the law also does not allow non-local organisations to be financed by local municipalities. Nor does it allow for multi-annual financing frameworks which would offer some stability to organisations that are delivering services (this should change with the adoption of programmatic budgeting which is planned). Instead, organisations working in social service delivery are never sure what is going to happen to their budgets from one year to the next.

In sum, the labour market experiences from the implementation side of the project highlight two interrelated but distinct challenges:

i) There is a structural undervaluation of social reproduction work, making it difficult to secure sufficient funding to alleviate some women of this burden while not overburdening or exploiting others.

ii) Delivering affordable, comprehensive, modular and user-responsive services in legal and institutional settings that are inadequate for delivery of such services generates unsustainable 'hidden' costs for those attempting to implement them.

While the first challenge was widely recognised and understood by the interviewees who were well versed in feminist ideas, there appeared to be less awareness of the institutional and welfare state foundations necessary to avoid self-exploitation in this type of service delivery. Instead, most of the interviewees spoke about a need for more dedication, enthusiasm, resilience, and even personal sacrifice to maintain Hobotnica's original vision, though they reluctantly admitted that "it was just too hard to continue this work" (interview 5). This suggests that the implementers may have internalised a social norm that inadequately remunerated work, sustained by passion and 'flexibility' should be a sufficient driver of social change, regardless of the institutional setup that does not support social investment.

This underscores the need for greater awareness among donors and experts about the governance challenges which arise not just from a general lack of state capacity but also from structural incompatibilities between certain welfare state models, labour market regulations, and the more progressive, investment-oriented, intersectional approaches to social service delivery that we see in the Nordic countries. Addressing these structural barriers requires much more than simply doing the work within the existing system. It involves pushing back against entrenched economic and political disincentives to shift social policy in the direction of tackling new social risks, which are often reflected in uncooperative and punitive institutional frameworks that are particularly resistant to change.

5.3.2. Welfare state and public finance: Revealing institutional constraints and evolving monitoring needs of social policy delivery

Hobotnica's challenges in sustaining the service beyond donor funding highlighted the shortcomings in Serbia's legal and institutional framework for social policy. It illustrated the ways in which the system has difficulties in shifting toward a more adaptive, social investment-oriented welfare state that can respond to the emerging megatrends studied by WeLaR. The challenge is not solely in the lack of administrative capacity to administer more complex services. If the issue was only in the lack of municipal capacities to deliver the service, non-state actors would be able to sustainably provide the service instead of them. The larger challenge lies in the absence of a supportive governance structure that non-state social policy actors can rely on, even when these actors are willing to offer services instead of the state. This leads to over-exploitation of their resources and their inability to shield themselves and their employees or collaborators from the adverse impacts of flexibility (e.g. by providing a combination of flexicurity arrangements which can offer institutional support for flexible forms of employment).

The project's focus on gender and social reproduction also underscored how addressing the so-called new and complex social risks via social policy is directly linked to the ability of communities to adapt to the emerging megatrends. This points to the important role of social investment in tackling both the adverse effects of the megatrends, such as the deepening regional inequalities, digital literacy gaps, demographic ageing and outmigration from rural areas, as well as their positive impacts such as enabling these communities to benefit from greater connectivity, knowledge exchange, and innovation that characterises this 'new era'.

Additionally, Hobotnica highlights the tension between the need for a more modular and adaptive approach to social policy project design and implementation and the current emphasis of both donors and national authorities on traditional monitoring and evaluation metrics. The project shows how we miss out

on a lot of spillover effects if we solely measure the success of social policy projects by their duration or the number of users served. Their role in demonstrating new possibilities to the stakeholders, fostering learning among all participants, and generating positive spillover benefits for the community and beyond, should also be acknowledged and resources allocated for it.

Uncovering institutional challenges in welfare state design

There are structural limitations in Serbia's welfare state restrict the delivery of services which have the potential to strengthen the adaptability of local populations to the four megatrends. This is the case even when the services are delivered by non-state actors.

The policy and budgetary undercapacities of local governments in Serbia due to globalisation, but also the crisis and de-development of the 1990s (as discussed in section 5.1.1), have been further reinforced by the absence of a future-oriented social investment agenda in Serbia's overall social policy design. This absence has led to significant and growing underinvestment in human and social capital, especially for vulnerable groups, as the system solely focuses on the provision of basic cash benefits to the poorest and to the unemployed. These difficulties in shifting towards a social investment oriented welfare state which would ensure better preparedness of the population for ongoing and future challenges brought on by the four megatrends that we focus on in the WeLaR project, are well established in social policy and political economy literature on Central and Eastern Europe (Avlijaš 2022; Avlijaš, Hassel, and Palier 2021), where many growth strategies closely resemble that of Serbia. Namely, countries in the wider region that have pursued reindustrialisation driven by foreign direct investment (FDI) have not had structural economic or political incentives to reorient their social policy design towards social investment. Serbia corresponds to such a typology of the welfare state, with sporadic social investment-oriented interventions only taking place via donor-funded activities. This social policy focus on the so-called traditional Bismarckian state limits the potential for social policy to facilitate community adaptation to global megatrends and to enhance local resilience to global changes, especially in localities which are negatively affected by the deepening regional disparities.

As already discussed, legal and institutional constraints that are related to the functioning of the welfare state and labour market regulation in Serbia generate hidden costs even for non-state actors who use donor funding to implement services that go against the overarching logic of the Serbian welfare state. Institutional settings, such as the relationship between the deregulated labour market and the welfare state, affect grassroots stakeholders negatively because they keep them stuck in cycles of self-exploitation.

This is not a sustainable setup as it generates many costs for the implementors, as indicated by the inability of Hobotnica to achieve duration in its original form.

The process of implementation of Hobotnica also shows how gender focused social policy interventions that cut across multiple social policy jurisdictions and often require modular design and flexibility can reveal what otherwise would remain hidden social policy needs. This observation is in line with feminist research which argues that the feminist methodology is about uncovering important social processes that otherwise remain hidden. To that end, Hobotnica also inspired national-level awareness raising campaigns on unpaid female labour and inequalities in female access to resources, including the ones ran by ŽUKO itself, and will continue to inform national policy making.

The needs assessment-oriented methodology of the project seems to have achieved more resonance with the local authorities, as it inspired the municipal authorities in Mionica to start asking different vulnerable groups what types of local services they need (these types of efforts likely align with local electoral agendas, so this effect is not that surprising). This indicates that such a user-driven approach resonates with a more rigid welfare state structure, showing an entry point through which social movements can start engaging with the system.

Monitoring and evaluating composite modular services

The modular and flexible approach of the Hobotnica initiative offers a model for addressing diverse and evolving needs in vulnerable communities. This flexibility, however, brings complexities in monitoring and evaluating by traditional means projects that are based on evolving user needs. This points to a need for developing methodologies and securing resources that can go beyond monitoring short-term service delivery metrics.

The finding from evaluation study that each woman, on average, used around 2.7 (or nearly 3) services support the core premise of Hobotnica: that a single service cannot fully address gender inequalities or meet the needs of women in rural areas. The modular service design allowed women to choose the sub-services that provided the most immediate support, acknowledging that they often lack the time to use all available options, even though they could benefit from them. Over time, the same user may require a different combination of sub-services. The interviewees who were directly involved in project design were committed to defending its modularity, as they were often asked by donors and local authorities why they needed to provide ‘so many services’ and questioned on whether this approach was truly cost-effective and efficient in terms of resource use. Moreover, some stakeholders also questioned the need for some of the services after the pandemic, especially transportation and support for children’s online learning.

Interviewee 5 specifically questioned the necessity of making the service so modular and multi-faceted, arguing that while this approach was beneficial for end users, such complexity may have limited the service's long-term sustainability and its potential adoption by local municipalities.

Responding to such concerns, Interviewee 3 explained that the most innovative aspect of Hobotnica lies in its structure: it has a stable "head" of the octopus representing the core foundation and concept of the service, while the "tentacles" are modular and adaptable, responding to specific user needs and changing external circumstances. Such design encourages the women to prioritise their own needs and adjust these priorities as necessary. Other interviewees also argued that the modular design and the variety of sub-services allows Hobotnica to maintain relevance and resilience over time.

For example, two interviewees noted that the English lessons they provided to children, which were initially meant to support online learning during school closures, ended up addressing a broader need of preparing children for their futures. Therefore, this need turned out to be not only related to online schooling during the pandemic, but also to the general lack of access to high-quality English classes, even within the regular school system (interviews 2, 4). Another interviewee pointed out that the importance of transportation for women ended up being less about getting to work, but about

> "shopping or going to meet with their friends and support groups in town. You have a tavern in every village where men drink, but you don't have a patisserie where women would get together" (interview 5).

In other words, their transportation needs evolved from simply providing mobility during the pandemic to meeting a broader need by helping women with social activities and personal errands they wished to handle independently, without male involvement.

This draws attention to the fact that in order to monitor social policy interventions whose goals and deliverables are continually adapting to changing circumstances, on the one hand additional space and resources in project design are needed for learning and adaptation activities, rather than providing just delivery of the service and basing evaluation only on numbers of users and services. On the other hand, it points to the fact that there needs to be some balance between perfect flexibility and modularity and real-life constraints of service delivery, which includes an institutional and legislative framework that reinforces self-exploitation of those delivering the service (as discussed in section 5.3.1).

Demonstrational value and spillover effects

The case study also draws attention to the limitations of traditional project evaluation methods, which focus on quantitative outputs (such as the number of services delivered). Instead, it suggests that the value of such projects might lie in the qualitative changes they inspire, the knowledge exchanged, and the long-term shifts they stimulate in the community.

Interviewee 5 and interviewee 6 found that Hobotnica brought a lot more value to the local community and activist circles than seems to be case if we only look at the project metrics. Their take was that social innovation is about experimenting and exposure of communities to new ideas and ways of doing things, and that its purpose is to showcase new possibilities, foster creativity, and stimulate problem-solving within a community. Both interviewees emphasised that social service projects as pilots or experiments can inspire change and lead to scalable solutions even after they are over because their ideas can spill over to other initiatives. Interviewee 5 expressed their enthusiasm for the demonstrational value of Hobotnica in the following way:

> "We are always dreaming about how things should look, what needs to happen. I was thrilled that this could actually happen, this Hobotnica, and that it could show the local community that it is possible, that it's not unattainable." Interviewee 6 backed this view by stating that "the point of social innovation is not for you to take over the core functions of the state, it is supposed to serve as an input for public policy design, because it allows you to make mistakes and take risks that you cannot take with government funds."

Both interviewee 4 and 5 also pointed out that they were frequently using Hobotnica as an input and a best practice for other projects they were working on. Hobotnica was thus demonstrating to other contexts and environments how women can support one another, share resources and access external ones.

Interviewee 5 also found it very educational to learn about the specific needs of women in rural areas from the experiment, lessons that she could then integrate in her other policy consulting work. Another illustration of spillover effects for those who were involved came from interviewee 4, who stated the following:

> "We were connecting with others and trying to implement the general goals of the association. Sometimes I feel like I'm going in circles, dealing with the same topics, but then I realise how interconnected these issues really are. I found the experiences from Hobotnica especially useful for working on the "What Is My Share?" social media campaign at the national level (an awareness

raising campaign focusing on the gendered nature of land inheritance). I have referred to insights on unpaid work and undervaluation of women from Hobotnica countless times to this end."

The interviews thus revealed two main perspectives among those involved in the project. Some participants express disappointment that the service has not become a sustainable, long-term solution for the involved communities, while others emphasise its value as a learning model with potential for adaptation and transfer to other contexts. Notably, those more engaged in on-the-ground service delivery were more focused on its experimental and transferable components. This aligns with earlier observations (see section 5.2.1) on how certain positive aspects of globalisation—such as exposure to national-level policy discussions—have allowed local groups to gain visibility, learn from broader social policy initiatives, and explore ways to expand their own impact beyond limited, underfunded local service provision.

In contrast, those who originally conceptualised the project are understandably more invested in seeing it continue in its initial form. This difference in perspective is natural, as implementers are often more attuned to the evolving nature of such projects and the constraints they face in practice. Recognising these different viewpoints can enrich future approaches by balancing the need for sustainability with flexibility for learning and adaptation to the evolving needs of all project participants (in line with Hobotnica's motto), and not just the end users of the service.

Hobotnica thus also served as a valuable social experiment, showcasing the complexity involved in managing social innovation projects that aim to build human capabilities through a mix of services and require coordination among multiple stakeholders (see section 5.4 for more details on governance). Beyond benefiting end users, it also empowered the local women involved in delivering the service. The design and implementation challenges identified through this experience offer valuable lessons that can be applied more deliberately in future similar projects. Moreover, these additional effects show the limitations of only narrowly monitoring and evaluating service delivery instead of its broader impact on the community and beyond.

5.4. Social innovation

Hobotnica also generated important insights and lessons on the challenges of governing social policy innovation in the age of the new megatrends. The interviewed stakeholders expressed a shared interest in making the original Hobotnica service more sustainably available to the pilot communities in the future and in exploring opportunities to scale its methodology to other localities across Serbia and potentially further afield. However, they also had varying perspectives on what 'true success' of the initiative would

entail, which is rather typical for social innovation projects. While some see continuation of the original service as a key token of Hobotnica's success, others are more interested in developing longer-term strategies that would involve a broader range of organisations in the process of delivering services to women that are inspired by the original design, but more sustainable in terms of the design that can realistically be supported by local communities. ŽUKO has been attempting to secure government funding for the continuation of the service, but they have thus far been unsuccessful. Part of this difficulty, they feel, stems from issues related to state capture in Serbia, where political connections are often essential for accessing government resources, and feminist projects like Hobotnica are not prioritised (interview 2). At the same time, ŽUKO also acknowledges that securing funding solely for service delivery in its original form hasn't been their top priority. From a strategic perspective of their own organisation, they are more interested in scaling the Hobotnica model to other municipalities and working with other local organisations to train them for service delivery, rather than continuing fundraising and direct implementation in the existing locations by themselves. This links back to the discussion in section 5.3.2 where there are also evolving needs of the organisations involved in the implementation, but also hidden costs for them from continuing to stay tightly bound to the original concept.

When it comes to the role of local authorities, interviewees 1 and 2 believed that having them fully take over service delivery would be a key step towards sustainability 'in an ideal world.' However, all interviewees expressed significant doubt about the government's ability to manage such a flexible service design, even though they were not unfriendly to the initiative and took some generic interest in its activities. In fact, the Mionica municipality learned through Hobotnica about the value of conducting a needs assessment before delivering services to its population is already an important contribution of Hobotnica for raising local social policy capabilities. Moreover, interviewee 2 told me they had a meeting with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy over something else, where they mentioned the initiative Hobotnica without realising ŽUKO were the ones implementing it, "and they were shocked that Hobotnica was actually us".

This shows that Hobotnica has become genuinely visible among the social policy bureaucracy, and that they are interested in its principles. These insights support the claim that was made in section 5.3.2 that a lack of state capacity or interest is not the only problem, but that the institutional design of the existing welfare state in Serbia presents a bigger challenge to generating economic and political incentives for social investment policies. If Serbia were an EU member state, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) could be drawn upon as a supranational institution and source of funding, to recalibrate some of the existing ways of approaching social policy design.

At the micro-level, interviewee 3, who developed a sustainability plan for the initiative, suggested that there are several other ways to finance the service, including private sector involvement, contributions from users (as not all are in precarious financial situations), and community-level crowdfunding efforts. No efforts have yet been taken to explore these alternative sources of funding in practice.

Interviewee 1 felt that the donors were also "complicit" because they were not interested in pursuing sustainability of social innovation services that they fund. Once they complete their project and they get an award and "brownie points" for implementing it successfully, they move on without actual concern for the users of the service and what happens to them afterwards. They expect small local organisations without any capabilities, who are burdened with their own survival, to have the power and time to lobby the central and local government to accredit the service and mainstream it. Interviewee 1 summarises this issue as a stand-off where those who understand what the service is meant to do have no budget and capabilities to deliver it, while those who have the capabilities and could find a budget (because the budget is there and can be used from various sources) do not understand why the service should be implemented or have interests that are not aligned with the interests of the end users.

The overall impression from the interviews is that the initiative was created as an urgent response to a growing need during the pandemic, using leftover donor funding and goodwill to get it off the ground under extraordinary circumstances. However, there were no clear and formal expectations from the onset that the initiative would lead to the development of a long-term institutional infrastructure. Those delivering the service, however, never really promised to the end users a sustainable service that they would continue to deliver in the long run. The sustainability plan was developed later during the second pilot phase but wasn't paired with a funding source substantial enough to allow members of the local organisation to fully commit to ensuring a transition to sustainability over several years. Additionally, the plan didn't provide an option for the local organisation to choose a path other than sustainability without it being perceived as a shortcoming in terms of the project's vision. As a result, the limited resources available for pursuing sustainability, along with an ambitious plan that didn't fully align with those resources, may have created some tension among participants. This dynamic highlights the importance of aligning sustainability goals with realistic funding and planning to maintain collaborative trust and ensure that all partners feel supported in their roles.

To counterbalance this dynamic between the stakeholders, and taking a broader central government perspective on social innovation, interviewee 6 explained that it is nobody's job to do the work that the government fails to do, but that the idea behind social policy experimentation is to provide some examples

of what is possible, and ideas and inspiration to policy makers, which then might or might not then be taken on board. This cannot be done by the risk-averse public sector and its social policy budgets and institutions where there is not much room for "making mistakes and learning from them". They also pointed out to social innovation is generally a long-term effort which requires "pushing the stone uphill" without getting easily discouraged or believing that you have failed just because the stone is not on top of the hill. Interviewee 3 made a similar point:

> "Donor funds are very important for piloting purposes because they allow something to be tested and experimented around. It's very difficult for a local municipality to separate funds for experiments."

In summary, the ambitious expectations set by the project's conceptualisers played a crucial role in getting Hobotnica off the ground. However, the vision for long-term sustainability was built on limited resources and faced significant institutional constraints, leading to hidden costs for those implementing the project. Some interviewees expressed that these concerns about sustainability sometimes overshadowed the initiative's actual achievements and the valuable, though less tangible, knowledge spillover effects it generated. This focus on measurable outcomes is understandable, as we often seek concrete results and lasting changes when aiming for social impact. However, it's important to recognise that social innovation projects, like Hobotnica, offer unique value precisely because they provide space for experimentation, learning, and growth beyond immediate expectations. Such initiatives not only benefit end users but also empower implementers by equipping them with new skills, insights, and connections. This capacity-building effect enables them to address other community challenges that align with their interests and motivations, potentially leading to new and impactful solutions over time. In the words of interviewee 4:

> "I think we are also learning throughout this entire process, and it really meant a lot to me, and I am happy to have been a part of it.".

However, adapting this more comprehensive social innovation mindset would require programmes, institutions and organisational human resources which recognise the value of these indirect effects and open-ended processes of capacity building, and which plan and allocate resources to them. This is precisely what a social investment framework would hope for, as it is not only concerned with social investment into the poorest of the poor, but in raising people's capacities more broadly.

5.5. Conclusions

What's New: Hobotnica introduces a modular, user-responsive service model in Serbia, specifically tailored to the needs of rural women burdened with unpaid care work. This approach is innovative within Serbia's social policy landscape, where traditional welfare services are inflexible, compartmentalised by sectors (e.g. health, education, social assistance), and typically focused on cash benefits for the poorest. The initiative emphasises the importance of the more holistic and encompassing social investment for adaption of rural communities to the new megatrends. Such an approach addresses not only the immediate needs of the community members, but also enhances their long-term well-being, develops skills, and builds their community engagement and resilience. Improvements in social connectivity, personal empowerment, and enhanced economic opportunities for rural women were also observed.

What's Surprising: While the project was designed to alleviate unpaid labour, it also sparked demand for adult education, entrepreneurship, and community engagement among participants, illustrating the ripple effect of services that support social reproduction on the one hand. On the other hand, the project revealed a significant gap in Serbia's institutional and legal frameworks that generates hidden costs for the implementation of such progressive, adaptive social services. This finding suggests that innovative social experimentation often reveals structural limitations within certain welfare states, that go beyond inadequate state capacity to deliver services. In addition to that, these structures generate extra hidden costs for those attempting to implement such services.

What the Case Stands For: Hobotnica serves as an example of how grassroots social innovation and experimentation can address challenges arising from globalisation, digitalisation, and demographic decline, and especially those that affect intersectionally marginalised groups, such as rural women. It illustrates the potential of composite, modular, and flexible social services that are driven by user needs to support communities while also leveraging digitalisation and positive aspects of globalisation, such as increased connectivity and knowledge exchange among various stakeholders, including international donors, local organisations, and national-level experts. The case also has a demonstrational value in showing what a shift from a purely cash-based welfare system to one that invests in human and social capital would entail, while also highlighting how the overarching legislative and institutional framework of the state can constrain the sustainability of such efforts.

What's to Be Learned: The case raises the question of whether providing more free time and access to information is enough to significantly strengthen users' socio-economic capabilities, or whether such services should include a more direct focus on income-generating activities to empower users through economic advancement. WeLaR might seek to explore policies that balance both aspects, recognising that economic empowerment, through job creation and secure employment opportunities, is also essential for sustainable socio-economic development.

Examining how the provision of these services impacts those delivering them has highlighted how an unsupportive legislative and institutional framework (e.g., deregulated labour markets and lack of flexicurity) can hinder social service providers' ability to deliver flexible and modular services, generating hidden costs. This project thus emphasised the importance of evaluating the impact of social services not only on recipients but also on providers, particularly non-state actors.

Moreover, it underscored how traditional monitoring and evaluation metrics may overlook broader impacts and both negative and positive spillover effects, suggesting the need to consider these 'uncontrolled' effects as they contribute to or inhibit the formation of a larger ecosystem of innovative social investment approaches. Addressing structural issues in social policy requires not only adequate resources but also a shift in governance to valuing both service adaptability and the well-being of providers as much as that of end users. Shifting from an exclusive focus on immediate service needs of the marginalised toward broader, long-term social investments like education or health calls for a reassessment of the broader positive impacts of policy efforts and a deeper understanding of the hidden institutional costs that burden service providers.

This draws attention to the need for evaluating the impact of social services on service providers, particularly when these are non-state local actors, not just on the recipients. It also reveals how traditional monitoring and evaluation metrics can overlook the broader impacts and spillover effects of initiatives, suggesting that these 'unintended' effects contribute to building a wider ecosystem of innovative social investment approaches.

Implications for the WeLaR project

Several findings from the case study are relevant for WeLaR's exploration of welfare state resilience and social innovation. The pros and cons of modular, flexible service provision tailored to local needs in contexts with limited state capacity and welfare states that are institutionally and legislatively incompatible with the social investment agenda could be valuable in WeLaR’s broader exploration of social service delivery. The identified challenges provide input for WeLaR’s goal of identifying and addressing structural barriers within welfare states.

Hobotnica also highlighted the hidden costs for non-state actors in delivering social services, especially in precarious labour markets. For WeLaR, this underscores the importance of evaluating not only the benefits of a policy for service recipients but also the sustainability and well-being of the service providers. Addressing this could involve designing policies that offer better labour protections and resources for non-state actors, especially given the rise of non-traditional employment structures. Considering the well-being and support needs of welfare service providers could also improve the sustainability of labour policies and foster a stronger, more empowered workforce capable of driving social change.

The case study also emphasised the existence of qualitative spillover effects of Hobotnica, such as empowering all stakeholders and encouraging local innovation, which traditional metrics might overlook. This aligns with WeLaR's objective to develop more holistic monitoring and evaluation frameworks that capture the broader social impacts of welfare programmes.

Since Hobotnica leveraged globalisation's positive aspects—such as connectivity and knowledge exchange—to strengthen local initiatives, WeLaR might explore how similar community-driven innovations could benefit from international collaboration, particularly by connecting local actors to a wider network of support and resources.

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6. "Essential" but marginalised: giving voice to live-in carers in Austria

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6.1. The “story” of IG 24

IG 24 – “Interest group of 24-hour carers” *(Interessengemeinschaft der 24-Stunden-Betreuer*innen*) is a grassroots initiative that provides direct information and mutual support to live-in carers as well as advocating their interests as a marginalised group in the labour and welfare service market. IG 24 responds to the way the Austrian welfare state built a transnational labour market into its provisions for elderly care in an ageing society. They aim for better and fairer inclusion of care providers into more regular labour or care service markets instead of being locked into precarious and unfair form of self-employment. With this view, they represent an activist and transformational position in an ecosystem in which various, also more established actors explore ways in which to inform and support live-in carers and improve their position.

While the focus of the present case study is IG 24, the organisation cannot be understood without an outline of the unique construct of live-in care in Austria, and an exploration of neighbouring initiatives in Austria that aim to support live-in carers, improve their living and working conditions, and explore alternative ways of delivering long-term care in between family and residential care.

6.1.1. IG 24 itself

IG 24 was established in 2020 through the fusion of two grassroots organisations of live-in carers from Slovakia and Romania that each connect carers through social media and provide mutual support and sharing of experiences, legal and other advice in the respective languages. It provides information, advice and support to live-in carers, advocates for their interests, lobbies welfare and care policy, and engages in research and practice projects that explore improvements and alternatives in the delivery of elderly care.

IG 24 consists of a core team of five volunteering activists who partly work in the profession or the support infrastructure and has some 2,000 registered members. Since there are no membership fees, the organisation itself measures its outreach largely by followers on social media where its founding communities continue to provide information in Slovak and Romanian. In October 2024, the Slovak Iniciativa had some 3,268 followers and Romanian DREPT is a closed group of 15,532 people.

The organisation is funded through donations and through several projects it conducts in collaboration with other organisations that support live-in carers, universities and research organisations. However,

it remains an activist organisation that opposes the current Austrian model of live-in care and largely relies on volunteers' work. It demands regular employment of carers in the public or non-profit sector, regularisation of working conditions that recognise the real-life demands of their work, standards of decent accommodation and board, and prevention of sexualised violence. However, IG 24 spokeswomen are clearly aware of the obstacles, and explore ways to strengthen their position in self-employment or alternative arrangements as well.

> "We want to regain our dignity as women and migrant workers and support each other better in our everyday isolation and frequent excessive demands",

says the IG 24 website (last visited 26 September, 2024).

6.1.2. Live-in carers in Austria

Live-in carers in Austria are mostly middle-aged women from Eastern European countries (the majority from Slovakia and Romania) who are hired by elderly people or their families to provide what colloquially is called "24-hour care" (hence "IG 24").[33] The large majority of them are self-employed and most work in a "rotational model" in which two carers per recipient alternate turns every two or three weeks and commute home in between (Österle & Bauer, 2016). Carers' tasks, location and working hours are chiefly determined by their client's needs. Their work is often provided through agencies that connect clients and carers and assess clients' needs.

The self-employment model also means that by definition live-in carers by are not represented by trade unions (but see section 6.6.4). Instead, like almost all groups of self-employed and businesses in Austria, they are obliged to become members in the Chamber of the Economy, specifically, the section for "life

[33] In Austria, the term "24-hour care" is commonly used. However, IG 24 themselves and other authors point out that round-the-clock availability of carers is not legally possible in labour law and cannot be expected from self-employed carers either. In the law, the term "Betreuung" (in English, something in between "support" and "supervision") is used instead of "Pflege" ("care"), which keeps the function at a distance to the health professions. Actual healthcare functions (such as administering medication) must be explicitly delegated to the carer by a qualified health professional. However, the legal definition of live-in care as a domestic service is at odds with the fact that the public subsidy for the service requires clients to have an assessed need for care ("Pflegestufe") of above 120 hours of care per month (Famira-Mühlberger, 2017).

counselling and personal care". However, the representation of the group in the Chamber is dominated by the agencies that act as intermediaries in the sector.

6.1.3. The origins of IG 24

In 2020, the challenges of live-in care came to a head with the pandemic's restrictions on travel and mobility: live-in carers who commuted found themselves stranded either with their clients in Austria or without their jobs at home, sometimes for months on end (Leiblfinger et al., 2020; Leichsenring et al., 2021). The Austrian government organised some dedicated chartered flights and night trains which turned out to be largely symbolic and underused, and eventually offered a tax-free one-off bonus of EUR 500 for carers who worked extended rotas above 4 weeks. Implementation and accessibility varied among Austrian provinces. However, the Austrian hardship fund (*Härtefall-Fonds*) that offered some income replacement for struggling self-employed, was hard to access for live-in carers since it required a bank account in Austria and application information was only available in German.

In response, one of the founders of the IG 24, whose family had worked in live-in care and who had written a master thesis on the subject, launched a petition for immediate action to address these challenges. Alongside this initiative, she created a Facebook page specifically for Slovak speaking 24-hour carers for disseminating vital information and mobilizing support, "Iniciativa24: Representation of the interests of Slovakian 24-hour caregivers" (*Iniciativa24: Interessenvertretung der slowakischen 24-Stunden-Betreuer*innen*) (Interview 2). Meanwhile "DREPT – Representation of interests of 24-hour caregivers" (*DREPT – Interessenvertretung der 24-Stunden-Betreuer*innen*), a self-organised group of Romanian carers and activists registered as an association in August 2020.[34] Eventually, "Iniciativa24" and "DREPT" joined forces to form IG 24 to advocate for the rights and interests of all 24-hour carers. However, both organisations retain their Facebook presence separately in Slovakian and Romanian respectively.

6.2. Methodology

The fieldwork on the case study began by an initial meeting with an IG 24 representative to introduce the WeLaR project and seek their participation. After internal discussion, two interviews with board members were agreed. Interviewee 1 is a working 24-hour caregiver in a rural area of Austria, interviewee 2 one of

[34] https://ig24.at/de/ig24-wer-wir-sind/

the founding members of IG 24. Interview 3 was conducted with a representative from the Austrian Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, who has significant expertise in long-term care policy and provided further insights into the regulatory framework and policy context of live-in care. Finally, we interviewed the project manager of the Curafair project, an initiative by one of the large Austrian social service NGOs that offers professional advice and support to live-in carers and collaborates with IG 24 in several projects. Warm thanks are due to all our interviewees for their time and the insights they provided.

All interviews took place online and lasted in between an hour and 90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized before being analysed using MaxQDA software. The coding process began with codes derived from the reporting guideline for all case studies (in the annex) and added open codes to identify new and case-specific themes that emerged during the conversations.

In addition to the qualitative interviews, we analysed various documents and sources. This included the IG 24 website, which is cited throughout the study, as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs' website, particularly sections on caregiving, 24-hour care, and the care reform. We also reviewed relevant policy documents and academic literature on the working conditions of carers, demographic changes, and the legal and economic frameworks surrounding live-in care in Austria.

6.3. Context: Live-in elderly care in Austria

6.3.1. Regulation: from informal care to self-employment

Live-in elderly care was formalised in Austria in 2007.[35] Before, it existed largely in the informal sector, already based on carers commuting from neighbouring East European countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary. The domestic care law of 2007 ("Hausbetreuungsgesetz") basically legalised this arrangement. Although households and care providers may also employ live-in carers, self-employment predominates and is often procured through agencies. Public subsidies are available (if care recipients have a monthly income below EUR 2,500, not counting some transfers and allowances) and

[35] This followed a public debate in the context of the 2006 national election campaign when elderly relatives of some senior politicians were discovered to be cared for by informally hired carers. The law was originally intended as a transitory "repair" measure (Bachinger, 2010) but then remained.

carers fulfil some limited training requirements.[36] Since self-employment in many professions and trades is quite strongly regulated in Austria, personal care assistance ("Personenbetreuung") was established as a trade in 2007, and a distinct trade of "organisation of personal care assistance" added in 2015 to cover agencies (Leiber et al., 2021). Due to the lower cost of self-employment to clients who do not have to pay social security contributions, self-employment became the default in Austria and the model a "unique area of regulated live-in personal care" in Europe (Leichsenring et al., 2021, p. 34).[37]

However, this particular system has attracted considerable criticism due to its regulatory framework and associated working conditions. Self-employment raises issues related to labour rights and social protection, as care workers often lack the language skills, overall information, legal knowledge and resources to negotiate fair working conditions (see section 6.6).

Agencies play a central part in the system, bridging but sometimes also exploiting information and institutional gaps. In 2023, 912 agencies were registered with the Chamber of the Economy. Agencies range from small, local operations to large players, some of which are connected with the large non-profit providers of social services in Austria. Agencies' roles vary, but mostly go beyond just matching carers and clients assessing needs or giving advice to both sides. Inevitably, they influence the contracts of carers with households. Some agencies oblige carers to use additional services, collecting and handling payments and administrations or organising transport between carers' homes and workplaces. While such services may be welcome in the light of the non-trivial administrative burdens of self-employment in Austria, they provide opportunities for obscure fees and keep carers in a dependency that is at odds with their self-employed status. Reportedly, some carers and also households are not even aware that agencies are not employers or expect them to take on parts of an employer role (Aulenbacher, Leiblfinger, et al., 2021).

> „Many carers are happy to hand these tasks over, but you have to be extremely careful and tell them to look what is written there, if they give any power of attorney to agencies. How can they

[36] This subsidy is paid in addition to the general Austrian cash-for-care benefit that is based on a needs assessment only. Both are funded through taxes. Since September 2023, it amounts to a monthly EUR 800 for hiring two self-employed live-in carers who typically alternate in two- or three-weekly shifts. If a household uses employed staff, the subsidy amounts to EUR 1600.

[37] For a comparison with the Swiss model which is based on employed carers and the German version that typically uses posted workers provided by agencies in Poland or other countries of origin see (Aulenbacher, Lutz, et al., 2021).

> revoke it? You can't simply, blindly rely on agencies acting in your favour: Yes, we do know from practice, how weird their practices can be" (Interview 2).

Interviewee 1 sees agencies as largely exploiting information asymmetries.

> „Agencies work very hard to ensure we get as little information as possible. The less we know about what to expect, the better for them. The more naive we are, the better they can sell us."

6.3.2. Incomes in live-in care and costs to households

Comparing carers' incomes and cost to households of both self-employed and employed carers explains the predominance of the self-employment model in Austria and also its entrenchment in care policy.[38] An assumed daily fee for carers of EUR 81 represents the lowest rate found on the website of a large agency associated with a non-profit social service provider. We further assume that a self-employed live-in carer works alternating rota with a colleague. Social security payments are at 25.3% of their income (see Appendix for details) and at this income, no income tax is due. This gives the carer a monthly net income of EUR 917.69 plus room and board during their stay. Notably, this is only 23% above the 2024 Romanian gross minimum wage of RON 3,700[39] (= EUR 743.63). An employed carer working fulltime without nightwork, neglecting the specific working hour regulations of the Domestic Care Act, would take home EUR 1,750.25, or with nightwork EUR 2,250.68 per month as a starting statutory minimum wage.

For household cost, we assume the model of two carers working alternating shifts, a monthly agency fee, a general cash-for-care allowance and the subsidy for self-employed or employed carers respectively. Live-in care by two self-employed carers would cost the household EUR 1,663.40 per month, whereas two employed carers would amount to EUR 3,481.09 without nightwork, and EUR 5,514.01 if nightwork is required.

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[38] This follows the analysis of Famira-Mühlberger (2017) who also concluded that a regularisation of live-in carers' employment made sense neither for households nor for policy although carers bear the cost of the policy priority on affordability.

[39] https://wageindicator.org/salary/minimum-wage/romania

6.4. Megatrends

6.4.1. Globalisation

Globalisation enables the Austrian model to rely on low-cost foreign "labour" for care services. Most live-in carers working in Austria come from Eastern European countries, drawn by the relatively higher incomes compared to wages in their home countries. Historically, the arrangement emerged within the informal sector with jobs provided through agencies located in these countries or through personal networks of recommendation. As one interviewee notes, the work opportunity drew women from remote and rural places especially, whose local jobs had disappeared during post-socialist transformations or failed to cover the increasing cost of living.

> "Where I come from in Slovakia, it's a very small town, and many migrate to Austria or Germany, but mostly Austria. In my circle of friends, all the mothers of my friends are abroad" (Interview 2).

The reliance on foreign labour highlights the interconnectedness of Austria's care system with global or transnational labour markets, where the economic disparities between countries drive workers to seek employment in wealthier nations. However, both IG 24 and the Ministry agree that the reliance on foreign carers is coming under increasing strain as wages and living standards in neighbouring countries improve:

> "The standard of living in our countries, those near the Austrian border, has become much higher over the last 20 years, and no one is willing to do this hard work for just a little more money than they would make at home. So, the agencies are now looking further afield for people who are still willing to sacrifice more for the money, because it is still attractive to them" (Interview 1).

This shift reflects the dynamics of globalisation, with labour forces moving from poorer regions to wealthier ones, and as those regions develop, new sources of labour must be found.

6.4.2. Digitalisation

While IG 24 do not directly address digitalisation, the organisation has effectively harnessed digital tools to expand its reach and enhance its advocacy work. Digital platforms have become crucial to connect with a broader audience, particularly through social media. By using Facebook and chat groups, IG 24 is able to engage carers who may otherwise be difficult to reach, to share information and organize collective efforts, partly overcoming the geographical isolation of carers that hinders collective action:

> "We are like little mice hiding in households and scattered in different places. It's hard to get everyone together" (Interview 1).

However, not all carers are fully integrated into the digital sphere due to lack of skills, time or connectivity. Accordingly, IG 24 supplements its digital efforts with word-of-mouth communication to ensure inclusiveness. As one member described,

> "we at least try to reach as large a group as possible online via Facebook and then spread the word by word of mouth to others who can't even be reached via Facebook" (Interview 1).

This hybrid approach demonstrates how the organization leverages digital tools while remaining mindful of the diverse capabilities and access of its members. Indeed, it shows how digital and in-person contacts are interconnected in fields of spatially dispersed work.

Platform work has so far not much extended into the intermediation of live-in care in Austria. There are online platforms such as pflegeboerse.at where households fill in a questionnaire and can look at brief portraits of possible carers, but the service is complemented by home visits and in-person advice by the agency in charge. A Carinthian startup platform, Harmony & Care was spun off a research project by the Carinthian University of Applied Sciences in 2015, won an innovation prize of the province and gained well-known investors, by trying to match carers and clients through a learning algorithm that used psychologically validated personality profiles.[40] It aimed to provide the matching service to live-in care agencies in Austria and abroad, but went insolvent in 2023.[41]

6.4.3. Demographic change

Both live-in care and IG24's emergence and ongoing efforts are tied to the demographic megatrends of migration and an ageing population, which place increasing demands on care services in Austria. Generally, the dependency rate of 65+-year-old inhabitants (pensioners) to those aged 20-64 (working-age population) is expected to increase from 31.5 in 2021 to 51.7 in 2050. The intergenerational support rate of potential care recipients aged 85+ years to potential family carers aged 50-65 years (the age cohort

[40] https://www.harmonyandcare.com/system

[41] https://www.kleinezeitung.at/wirtschaft/6300950/Trotz-prominenter-Investoren_Kaerntner-Startup-Harmony-Care-muss

of their "children") is at 11.2 in 2021 and expected to reach 33.6 in 2021 (Famira-Mühlberger & Trukeschitz, 2023). Yet, women's increased labour market participation and increases in the standard retirement age lower the availability of actual carers in this group.

The rising need for 24-hour care at home, coupled with a declining pool of available carers, intensifies the pressures created by these demographic shifts. As one interviewee noted,

> "some agencies report that the demand for carers who provide round-the-clock care at home is increasing. But there is a shortage of workers" (Interview 1).

This shortage is not only a result of a shrinking workforce but also reflects economic changes:

> "The willingness to pay is so low. And fees have been stagnating for years. That's no longer right, and many people are emigrating [further]" (Interview 1).

In addition, the current cohort of carers are gradually retiring:

> "The proportion of Slovakian workers has fallen sharply, as they are now also retiring – so that is the next challenge we face" (Interview 3).

Moreover, some demand for care has shifted to residential arrangements since the state's recourse to a care recipient's assets to pay for residential care ("Pflegeregress") was abolished in 2017. For people with lower incomes from pensions etc. but with some assets and their heirs, residential care has thus become a more attractive option:

> "There are some who no longer have the means to pay us. They prefer to go to retirement homes, because if they have nothing, then they don't have to pay anything in the retirement home" (Interview 1).

In this context, legislative responses struggle to keep up with the ageing of the population. The live-in care system in Austria also shows the impact of demographics on policy: it continues to focus on the affordability of the system for (middle class) care recipients who in their majority tend to be native and thus potential voters, whereas the interests of key workers with foreign citizenship tend to carry less weight.

6.4.4. Climate change and sustainability

Issues of climate change and sustainability are not addressed in this field, although heat waves will likely present increased challenges in elderly care including its architectural and spatial arrangements. In a wider perspective, the model of live-in care assumes elderly people living in sufficiently spacious housing to

accommodate a carer. In rural areas, this most likely means owner-occupied single-family housing – which, regarding space consumption and soil sealing, is hardly a sustainable way of providing housing and may even become a burden on homeowners. If parts of new cohorts of elderly people become more open to alternative arrangements either from earlier experience with shared housing or from lack of resources due to decreased pensions, they may explore more communal or clustered care arrangements for both recipients and providers of care – for example assigning a house or apartment to the use of a team of "live near" carers that could provide care to a group of households. The same might be imagined in the large council housing areas in Vienna – but for now, apart from privately organised shared households such ideas have not arrived in the mainstream.

6.5. Impacts

IG 24 have established themselves as a stakeholder in the field. They provide widely used information to live-in carers and contribute to connecting and supporting them, and take active part in public and policy discussions on long-term care. The organisation collaborates with other non-profit organisations that support live-in carers, on exploring and developing alternative models and social innovations in long-term care. However, they are painfully aware that their impacts on carers' actual living and working conditions have been limited. In the light of current priorities of care policies interviewees from IG 24 feel they are deemed "radical" in the field. This tension carries its own frustrations. Interviewee 2 notes:

> „ In spite of our efforts, and quite apart from the demonstrations and the awareness raising, there is no political interest, simply to address the structural problems. But we don't want to see that as our failure, it's simply ongoing work, because our demand of employment in live-in care … is not imaginable at present, in Austria" (Interview 2, Pos. 39).

Nevertheless, although political progress is slow, IG 24's lobbying efforts for improved working conditions, fair remuneration, and better recognition of care work within Austria's legal framework are very gradually yielding results, specifically in combination with the efforts of other non-profit actors in the field.

6.5.1. Labour market

In 2023, 57,634 active, self-employed live-in carers were registered with the Chamber of the Economy (WKO, 2024), as well as 912 agencies. In 2022, 22,499 households received the subsidy, a marked decrease from the 25,281 households in 2017. There are no figures available on households who pay for live-in carers by themselves. In comparison, in 2021, some 48,000 people (37,800 full-time equivalents) were

employed in residential long-term care facilities looking after 115,200 residents there. 21,700 staff (13,000 in full-time equivalents) provided mobile care to 154,600 recipients (which may also include some extra support to those with live-in carers). 800,000 adults provide (unpaid) family care to people living at home (BMSGPK, 2023).

Assuming neat distinctions between the segments of elderly care provision, a simple division of care recipients by paid care workers shows large differences in labour utilisation between types of care: A full-time equivalent worker in mobile care looks after almost twelve clients on average, whereas in residential care a full-time equivalent worker cares for three residents. This is of course largely explained by the more limited care needs of mobile care users as more extensive care on a mobile basis is not always available in Austria. If two thirds of households hire two carers in the "rotational model" as Famira-Mühlberger reported (2017) and the other third make do with one carer, an average live-in carer is in charge of 0.66 people (or more, if they are working in a couple's or larger household). This leaves very little slack for carers' sick leave, holidays or other absences (unpaid in the case of self-employed carers). If we ignore the possible differences of year 2022 and 2023, the self-employed live-in carers make up some 45% of the workforce in long-term care (and more than half in full-time equivalents) who look after 12.5% of care recipients. They face considerably lower incomes, longer and less predictable working hours than their colleagues in more institutionalised work contexts.

Interviewees report that recruitment of live-in carers is becoming more difficult. The number of live-in carers is slowly declining already. In addition, wages and the labour market in Eastern European countries are becoming more favourable to potential carers. For example, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for women in Slovakia was at 6% and in Romania at 5,1% in August 2024 although we can still assume considerable regional challenges in the labour market.[42]

> "This is one of the challenges for the next years. Wages are increasing in Romania, in Slovakia etc. What will be the effect of that? If that improves massively, this contractual relationship will not be quite as attractive to carers", says the representative of the Ministry for Social Affairs (Interview 3).

[42]The EU average for women is at 6.1%, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/3-02102024-ap.

Labour market development may thus support IG 24 in advocating for regular working conditions and raising awareness of the systemic issues within the care sector. Yet its spokeswomen feel that even this challenge is being hijacked by actors invested in the self-employment model:

> „Yes, [staff shortages] can create some political pressure and it's being presented in that way. During debates on the care reform [see section 6.5.2] the Chamber of the Economy argued that live-in carers often migrate to other countries. But then I wonder, how do the demands of the Chamber benefit carers themselves? How can the profession become attractive for carers? For this, clearly the fees must increase. But how can you ensure that in a self-employed model?" (Interview 2)

The shortages in live-in care thus do not improve carers' negotiating position much since this particular service market is strongly asymmetrical with regard to information, representation and bargaining power. Neither the market nor the welfare state are currently delivering structural improvements. Social innovations in a continuum from information and support to collective action are addressing these issues but are struggling with these interrelated constraints.

6.5.2. Welfare state and public finance

As we have seen, the origins of the Austrian self-employed live-in care model lay in the large disparities between labour market opportunities and incomes between Austria and its Eastern neighbours. It responded to demographic, labour market and gender regime changes in the context of a "conservative" welfare state, "private" gender and "familialistic" care regime (Appelt & Fleischer, 2014; Bettio & Plantenga, 2004; Walby, 2020): ageing people requiring care but wishing (or needing) to remain at home traditionally are cared for by (predominantly but not exclusively female) family members, largely in the form of unpaid carework. Currently, ca. 801,000 people in Austria provide informal family care at home (Trukeschitz et al., 2022). As women have been increasing their labour market participation and their mobility, these family members are less available for care provision. However, with the labour market impacts of post-socialist transformations and then the EU accession of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, new groups of workers became mobile and available to take over these functions. The institutionalisation of the Austrian self-employment "model" provided some regularisation but favoured the interests of care recipients and their families and rendered it affordable for those with the means and space to host a live-in carer. The interests of carers themselves were hardly considered, under the assumption that compared with available work in provincial Eastern Europe, working in the sector in Austria still provided an attractive option to carers.

From a public finance point of view, the live-in carer model lowers public expenditure on long-term care as it delays care recipients' needs for more costly residential care (Famira-Mühlberger 2017). For the demographic and labour market reasons outlined in section 6.4.3 above, public expenditure on long-term care is expected to increase from 1.4% of GDP in 2022 to 3.6% in 2060 assuming stagnating cash transfers to care recipients and increasing cost for services (Famira-Mühlberger & Trukeschitz, 2023).

Figures provided by Trukeschitz et al., (2022) for 2019 show the comparative cost of various care models to public budgets[43], without considering the cash-for-care allowance. Residential care incurred a cost of € 27,492 per care recipient per year whereas mobile care (again with lower needs of care) costs € 4,656. Live-in care costs € 5,267 per recipient, less than a fifth of the cost of residential care (for more details on the calculation see section 6.8.3).

For all these reasons, currently the live-in care model appears somewhat locked in politically. However, it may gradually phase itself out with decreasing availability of carers, slowly increasing alternative options for them, and increasing cost to households and/or public budgets. In this constellation, the political entrenchment may even hinder the exploration of alternative models of care provision by policy and care providers.

The self-employment model of live-in care has been criticised by social scientists, labour lawyers, feminists, unions and live-in carers themselves since its inception. Self-employment intermediated by agencies that also conduct initial negotiations, with working conditions determined centrally by the client's needs and routines, is hardly compatible with legal definitions of self-employment.[44] Indeed, IG 24 are aiming for some strategic litigation to challenge the agency-based self-employment construction. They launched a crowdfunding campaign to cover court costs in early 2024.[45] In addition, the legal construction of domestic support ("Betreuung") is at odds with the care needs of most clients (Famira-Mühlberger, 2017) and structurally overburdens carers with responsibilities and liability risks. In addition,

[43] In long-term care in Austria generally, cost is shared between the federal state and the provinces.

[44] Critics have noted that in other sectors, the statutory health insurance rigorously sanctions "bogus self-employment" in such cases as media, construction, or fitness studios (Hamann, 2017).

[45] https://ig24.at/de/thema/ig24-pflege-gerichtsprozess/

the live-in model limits carers' personal space and dissolves work-life boundaries, leading to psychological and economic challenges (Lutz & Benazha, 2021).

As the problems of elderly care at large became more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health, headed by members of the Green Party in a Conservative-Green coalition, developed a package of initiatives towards a reform of care. IG 24 were involved in stakeholder consultations but did not feel that carers' direct interests were addressed. For live-in care, the focus was on quality assurance. The subsidy to care recipients was increased by EUR 250 - EUR 500 per month, and for users of the subsidy, obligatory home visits by a healthcare professional, organised by social security, were extended to four times a year. A representative of the Ministry explained,

> "there are no controls, in the sense that if some criteria aren't fulfilled, this or that public authority gets involved, it's a home visit for quality assurance, to give advice and support. … I understand the criticism of IG 24, but that's how the model has been designed. … It's about starting a conversation with the families, with the person needing care, and with the caregiver" (Interview 3).

The Ministry also supported the initiative of the large agencies run by social service NGOs in Austria to establish a quality certificate for agencies in Austria. This requires them to inform both carers and clients transparently, have carers document care, and provide advice and "objective" support to both sides in cases of conflict. For carers, "adequate" accommodation and possibilities to take breaks are required. In autumn 2024, some 41 out of 912 agencies had been certified.[46] While this sounds unimpressive, the Ministry's representative says,

> „but these 40 agencies are partly very large agencies that say they cover a third of all cases" (Interview 3).

IG 24's representatives see the certification sceptically and point out that the Chamber of the Economy, by supporting agencies in achieving the certification, redirects a portion of carers' membership fees to agencies' purposes.

[46] https://oeqz.at/

> „they're getting paid for that as well, the agencies. There is funding for applying for the certification. And that's the question, this funding is paid by the [obligatory] membership fees. So what do they do with carers' membership fees?" (Interview 2, Pos. 70)

Logically, they would like to see more Chamber and public funding going to supporting carers themselves, for example subsidising their social security payments.

The general focus of social policy thus remains on the interest of care recipients in good quality care. However, in the light of the labour market situation in health and social care generally, some empowerment of carers is not entirely unwelcome politically, especially if they are equipped with skills and information to access other jobs in residential or mobile care. Hence, for carers, the roll-out of the advice and counselling service of the Curafair project (see section 6.6.4) across the whole of Austria came out of the reform package. In addition, Curafair is tasked with providing short e-learning modules in carers' first languages to carers to develop their skills and knowledge.

6.6. Social Innovation

Social innovations, as defined in the literature (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Jenson, 2015; Therace et al., 2011), often arise in response to gaps in existing welfare or labour systems, particularly where state or market mechanisms fail to adequately protect vulnerable groups. In this sense, the establishment and regulation of the live-in care arrangement in Austria could already be considered a "social innovation" in delivering social services itself, albeit hardly a progressive one.

IG 24 now challenges the limitations of this model and aims for regular employment of carers in the public or non-profit sector, working conditions that recognise the real-life demands of their work, standards of decent accommodation and board, and prevention of sexualised violence – also an issue exacerbated by the privacy of live-in care arrangements. It has established itself as a well-respected stakeholder in the field of live-in care and was also consulted by the Ministry of Social Affairs in the context of the "reform" of 2023. Yet it plays a distinctly critical role. One interviewee emphasized:

> "We criticise bogus self-employment and structural problems. We can be critical of the care reform because we are not tied to state funding" (Interview 2).

However, this autonomy has the downside of discontinuous and unreliable resources. In addition to donations, IG 24 relies on project funding in varying configurations to develop and implement support infrastructures, training and alternatives of organising the sector. In addition, activists express some frustration with the gap between IG 24's successes in awareness raising, gaining research interest and

developing support infrastructures for live-in carers and the lack of actual improvements in the status, social security and working conditions of their constituency. They agree with the Ministry's representative (Interview 3) that this would require a considerable revision of the Home Care Act and the funding model. In that sense, IG 24's aspirations are clearly more transformational than their actual impacts.

6.6.1. Strategy

In conversation, activists are aware of the political and economic constraints:

> „Our aim would be to achieve an employment model. But that's beyond all aims. Until this happens, we want to improve the current situation at least" (Interview 1).

Interviewee 2 sees the initiative's projects and collaborations as an incremental way of getting there,

> "That would be a pilot, and that is something we work towards in the context of the projects … moving from precarious to secure working conditions" (Interview 2).

In parallel, she considers a scenario of strengthening the position of self-employed carers, to "encourage carers to work independently, without agencies." (Interview 2). Nevertheless, achieving this independence is a complex process:

> "So the goal would of course be to get to this point, to work as independently as possible. But in between there are steps where you must provide information, where support is needed." (Interview 2).

In her colleague's view, regularisation would mean to wrest the intermediary role from private sector agencies and have a state or non-profit body in that capacity, enforcing standards and ensuring adequate skills and training of carers:

> „I believe that the role of the agency should be in the hands of the state or the public … because a public authority does not need to make a profit and can … look out for other values. … That it looks out for needs and not profits" (Interview 1, Pos. 30).

The empowerment of carers and institutional innovations in this view are interrelated, and just improving the market is not what IG 24 want.

6.6.2. Opportunities and constraints

Opportunities for carers' empowerment may result from the labour market and demographic situation: labour shortages across the health and social sector and international competition may offer carers more options, either improving their market position in self-employment or enabling them to move to other segments of long-term care that offer more regular and secure employment.

Another opportunity emerged in the summer of 2024: IG 24 was selected to receive a considerable donation by the initiative of philanthropic millionaire Marlene Engelhorn, who is redistributing 25 million Euro of her inheritance to 77 non-profit organisations in Austria. Beneficiaries were chosen by a council of 50 randomly selected and representative people who were advised by experts and debated over six weekends on the redistribution of private wealth in the public interest.[47] This money will contribute to strengthening the organisation by employing some of the association's volunteers. Currently, IG 24 is based on volunteer work in combination with some paid project work if and when funding is available. This is welcome,

> "because it's just not possible to retain volunteers in the association over several years, that is just too hard" (Interview 2, Pos. 28).

6.6.3. Participation

In a grassroots organisation such as IG 24, participation is embedded in the structure of the organization. Carers are involved at every level, from decision-making to strategic planning, to ensure that their voices are not only heard but also translated into concrete action. In this sense, IG 24 directly involves and empowers their constituency. However, continuous involvement of working live-in carers is difficult due to both the unpredictable day-to-day demands of their job and the inevitable discontinuities in jobs in live-in elderly care due to clients moving to residential care or dying.

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[47] https://ig24.at/de/der-gute-rat-hat-fertig-beraten-50-menschen-haben-entschieden-wie-das-erbe-von-millionenerbin-marlene-engelhorn-rueckverteilt-werden-soll-25-millionen-euro-gehen-an-77-projekte-und-organisationen/

6.6.4. IG 24 in the field

Soon after its inception, IG 24 made connections with researchers, other interest organisations and some of the large welfare NGOs in Austria of which some also run live-in care agencies or provide other services to the elderly. In this field, they retain their unique position by advocating for a fundamental restructuring of this system. Unlike government-funded programs (such as Curafair, see below), IG 24 operates independently and can respond more flexibly to the actual needs of carers through its grassroots work. Not least, it managed to procure funding for several projects of research, information and support for live-in carers. To explore IG 24's cooperations and its position in the field further, we first introduce some actors in the field of supporting live-in care.

Other actors supporting live-in carers

Initiatives to support and organise live-in carers have existed from the mid-2010s onwards. In 2016, Ingrid Sitter, a volunteer with experience in care work, organised the first live-in carers' café in a church hall in Leonstein in rural Upper Austria (Brunner, 2020), to exchange experience and advice and overcome live-in carers' isolation. The café is still in operation and inspired several projects in collaboration with both IG 24 and Curafair. Meanwhile, Elena Popa, a live-in carer in Austria herself, started a Facebook group for Romanian carers in Austria and in 2018 reached 22,200 members, who advised one another, organised transport and jobs, and specifically exposed fraudulent Romanian agencies (Hamann, 2018). In 2017, the feminist "Women's petition for a referendum" ("Frauenvolksbegehren") in Austria also called for a shift of the live-in care system to regular employment (Hamann, 2017). These pioneers, accompanied by some press and media coverage, developed several elements of IG 24's organising, information and peer support activities.

Currently, other initiatives contribute to social innovations aiming to improve the situation of live-in carers. Since these are publicly funded and have been developed by established institutions, they complement IG 24's activities in some ways. These initiatives and projects cooperate in a range of projects and share each other's information. They respect one another and indeed have some overlap both in staff and clientele with, for example, IG 24 recommending Curafair's services for legal advice and support if necessary. Yet as we might expect there are some tensions between a bottom up, self-funding activist organisation that insists on pointing out the structural injustices of the Austrian live-in care model and the professionalised, publicly funded and mandated initiatives that work on improvements "within" the system. Curafair's project manager summarises it like this:

> "I don't want to take the role of interest representation too much. That's what IG 24 do, and they are very much working on that, to somehow resolve that system … As a project, with our public funding structure, we rather see our role in ensuring that the system works well for all involved." (Interview 4).

Curafair was established as a project by Volkshilfe Oberösterreich, one of the large social service non-profits, in the province of Upper Austria in 2019 to professionally advise and counsel live-in carers in their first languages, provide information leaflets and guidelines. They also scaled up the live-in carers' café format of Leonstein to other regions, hosted by volunteers – which, indeed, was the starting point for the project. This was first funded by the province, and in 2023, in the context of the larger effort by the Federal Ministry for Social Affairs (see section 6.5.2), has been rolled out to cover the whole of Austria. In October 2024, the project has ca. 12 people working largely part-time, eight advisors, one supervision and two legal professionals, the coordinator and project manager, and is still hiring. In between May and October, they had ca. 1000 contacts:

> „Many of our cases are very, very difficult, or have escalated far, with high debts to social insurance, with difficulties with registration, with little understanding of a carer's own work situation, and some people who are less than organised" (Interview 4).

Most information, advice and counselling happens remotely by chat, e-mail or the phone. Supervision (in the sense of professional counselling and reflection in social services) is also on offer but not utilised much. Curafair have also been discussing training initiatives in Upper Austria,

> "to offer people training and accommodation during their weeks off work, so they don't go back to their home country but can do that training." (Interview 4).

Another potential plan is to offer a mediation service in cases of conflicts between carers, clients and agencies. Although some agencies, especially the larger one, offer this in more or less formalised terms, there may be space for a neutral service.

Some actors outside of IG 24's network also explore models to improve the situation of carers and their clients. These focus on non-profit agencies, skill upgrading and providing services to both clients and carers. Fitting with the current political context, they also employ the reasoning of ensuring high-quality care. For example, the personal care pool ("Betreuungspool") in the federal province of Vorarlberg has been developed as a high-quality non-profit agency by the regional association of long-term care

delivery.[48] The pool offers care services in between four and 24-hour and thus addresses needs below full live-in care as well. In its public presentation, it emphasises "dignified and loving support and care" and the value and appreciation of carers' work (Betreuungspool Vorarlberg, 2024). It advises households and handles administration for them and supports carers by offering training, an obligatory liability and legal protection insurance, and accommodation if they find themselves in between jobs. Carers' daily rates in the pool start at EUR 90.

The services trade union vida has been supporting and representing various groups of precarious freelancers for years, such as call centre agents, food delivery workers, and creative industries professionals through its vidaflex initiative.[49] Following a survey of live-in carers (Thäter & Reichmann, 2023), they developed a platform to "finally make live-in care fair, safe, and above all transparent and free of the usual hidden provisions and gag contracts".[50] They offer intermediation "on an equal footing" (ibid.). The platform uses a digital matching algorithm to suggest carers to households with suggestions checked and supervised by trained healthcare professionals. It charges households an annual EUR 980 with reductions for members of the union and the Austrian pensioners' association (Pensionistenverband). Carers pay EUR 200 if they are members of vidaflex, and EUR 500 otherwise for the service. In the federal province of Burgenland, the platform participates in a project offering training to carers.[51] It recruits trainees from Hungary and Croatia in particular, offers online German classes before they start the course which comprises 200 hours each of instruction and practical training.[52]

IG 24 are somewhat unconvinced by the initiative and see it as blurring the difference between employment and self-employment:

[48] The province has a distinct model of mobile long-term care delivery through local "care associations" which combine elements of insurance (providing care to members who pay membership fees) with public funding (Trukeschitz et al., 2022).

[49] https://www.vidaflex.at/

[50] https://betreuerinnen.at/faq

[51] https://betreuerinnen.at/burgenland

[52] https://www.bfi-burgenland.at/projekte/24-stunden-pflege.html

> „It's a strategic move, just to squeeze the bad agencies out of the market. But it's questionable for us, if a union, or a part of a union simply enters the intermediation business," says interviewee 2.

Nevertheless, improvements on the side of agencies appear more politically viable at the moment than a shift to regular employment.

Cooperations

IG 24 integrated itself into a research and practice community around live-in care swiftly after its inception.[53] Both scientifically and politically, this connects with longer debates on low-wage and precarious work, also in the European context. In this context, a focus on care may remind collective actors and social scientists that "new forms of employment" (Mandl et al., 2015) – that aren't all that new – are not necessarily driven by online platforms (Holtgrewe, 2016).[54]

The organisation's collaborations and its engagement with European networks underscore its efforts to expand its reach and integrate complementary social innovations. By embedding itself within a network of diverse actors from research and practice, IG 24 strengthens their capacity to influence both national and European policies although their impact is somewhat more indirect than activists would like it to be.

Alternative pathways

In between IG 24 and its collaborators and "competitors", alternative scenarios and models are being developed. Apart from the "regular employment" scenario, there are the alternative options of "non-profit agencies" and "real self-employment" of empowered, skilled and well-informed carers. Non-profit agencies are emerging on the provincial level and through the vidaflex initiative. Whereas IG 24's interviewee 1 can well imagine non-profit and public agencies, IG 24 generally are keeping their distance

[53] Some notable projects include: "Unsere Arbeit, unsere Rechte" (= Our work, our rights") and "Das Unsichtbare sichtbar machen" ("Making the invisible visible"), both funded by the Austrian Chamber of Labour's digitalisation programme, EU-funded "Care4Care" which explores employment scenarios for live-in care (Sagmeister, 2023), and "MigraCare" that develops the carer cafés and training modules that feed into Curafair's rollout of carers' cafés and training offers, funded by the Austrian Ludwig-Boltzmann-Gesellschaft.

[54] Cf. the campaign "A house of dignity for domestic workers" by the European federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT).

to the union initiative (see above). "Real self-employment" is envisioned by interviewee 2 as a more auspicious plan B and the Curafair project manager agrees:

> „that would have some potential, but most likely for the more experienced live-in carers. They often do that by themselves, work without an agency, and find their clients by themselves. But doing that needs quite a good understanding of how the system is organised. And you don't have the security when one contract ends that you get another one through the agency. But we do have a mandate to advise people in that direction. And it would be an interesting model, for carers to see that they could move from this bogus self-employment to a tidy self-employment" (Interview 4).

Alternatively, and more ambitiously, both this interviewee and IG 24 would like to pursue a cooperative model and could imagine a pilot along these lines:

> "thinking about a cooperative of carers as a self-organised agency. … That would be an interesting project. I don't know who would fund that and who could conduct it, but supporting the implementation of such an organisation, building the know-how and supporting carers in doing the intermediation themselves, in a self-organised way, that would be very, very interesting. …. Personally, I think that would be interesting for many – how do you say, low-skilled, or low-status occupations , … for cleaning, or parcel delivery, that would be totally interesting systems, but that's very utopian" (Interview 4).

IG 24 itself has already started consultations with the Austrian SMART cooperative[55], which originally covers creative industry freelancers. Interviewee 2 of IG 24 agrees and has a strategic vision already that aims to bring about such a transformation incrementally:

> „In the context of a cooperative, that would be great if carers could participate, if their working conditions made that possible and how it would be feasible and if guidelines could be developed, there you can imagine a lot of things. Only, it always stops at this question of funding.. … So you

[55] https://smartat.coop/, an originally Belgian-based cooperative that offers employment contracts to freelancers, including legal advice and training, checking of service contracts and converting fees into wage payments, charging 10% of the negotiated fee.

can theoretically develop a model and calculate it, and then you need a lot of lobbying to figure out where there is an interest to really, practically implement that".

6.7. Conclusions

IG 24 represents a social innovation within Austria's live-in caregiving sector, addressing the working conditions of (migrant) carers through a multifaceted, grassroots advocacy model run by a collaboration of live-in carers and activists. Notably, it does so in a part of the health and social care sector that with its self-employment construction falls through the cracks of Austria's generally encompassing social partnership. By focusing on these structural inequalities, such as potentially bogus self-employment with inadequate institutional representation, the organisation goes beyond merely mitigating precarious working conditions, seeking to transform the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate these issues. This implies a long-term vision of systemic change which, however, is constrained by the sustained political lock-in of the precarious self-employment model of live-in care in Austria. Hence, IG 24 act in between transformative aspiration, activism and the incremental work of providing information and support to carers in navigating the complexities of their work and legal standing, often through social media. In addition, they advocate for carers' rights in public, raise awareness, lobby policymakers, and participate in demonstrations, often together with other organisations that support precarious and undocumented workers. Not least, they collaborate with a network of organisations that bridges research into alternatives and support of live-in carers and have conducted a series of research-cum-practice projects that gather knowledge, ideas and strategies and contribute to funding the organisation.

The organisation thus responds to a specific configuration of the megatrends investigated in the WeLaR project that was thrown into sharp relief during the Covid-19 pandemic: the Austrian welfare state responding to demographic change in a cost-saving way by drawing on a transnational labour market opened up by post-socialist transformations and economic inequalities in between old and "new" EU member states and beyond. While income increases in Central and Eastern Europe challenge that model and increase pressures to make live-in care work in Austria more attractive, the policy focus on "affordability" of live-in care to both client households and public budgets continues to sustain a model that may not be overly sustainable in the long run.

"Impacts" of IG 24's social innovations for these reasons are more indirect than activists would like: they take a distinctly transformative position that demands social justice and challenges existing policies and other organisations' strategies, fill a striking gap in the representation of more than 50% of the full-time equivalent workforce in long-term care, and contribute to a slow-moving, incremental, collective

exploration of alternative care arrangements, simultaneously developing a collaborative and competitive ecosystem of social innovation (Domanski et al., 2020) in live-in care.

Although IG 24 operates within Austria, the challenges it tackles — precarious working conditions of migrant live-in carers, insufficient labour protections, and systemic inequality — are neither confined to the Austrian context (Aulenbacher, Lutz, et al., 2021; Mairhuber & Allinger, 2021; Sagmeister, 2023) nor to the care sector. They connect to wider issues of precarious mobile work (Lillie et al., 2022), gendered transnational labour markets (Harsløf & Zuev, 2023) and welfare markets (Ledoux et al., 2021). These issues are widespread across Europe, making IG 24's grassroots advocacy, combined with its strategic partnerships, an example for organising and supporting precarious workers and service providers in transnational markets. Although IG 24's core activities are rooted in the specific socio-political environment of Austria, the strategies applied by IG24 – such as participatory governance, the use of digital tools and the networking – are applicable in similar contexts across Europe. In a more reflexive vein, IG 24's experience of navigating between incremental improvements and a critical stand on structural inequalities, achieving uneven impacts, echoes the experience of many social movements with transformative aims.

6.8. Appendix: Income of carers and cost to households and public budgets

6.8.1. Income of self-employed and employed carers

Following Famira-Mühlberger's (2017) approach, an exemplary daily rate of a self-employed carer (EUR 81) plus the fee for the agency were taken from the website of one of the larger agencies that is part of one of the big non-profit welfare providers in Austria. The rate refers to domestic support for one care recipient without large shares of healthcare.[56] For social security contributions of the self-employed in Austria, the social security website was used, not taking the reduced rates for newly established contractors into account. At this rate, they do not pay income tax, even including taxes on in-kind benefits. For employed workers we use the 2024 minimum starting wage of domestic carers for the sick or elderly without formal training (both for jobs without and with regular work at night) and calculate employer social security contributions and net wages with the calculators on the finanz.at and akwien.at websites. This wage in

[56] A cheaper multilocal agency's website mentions daily rates in between EUR 60 and 80 in 2024, whereas in the province of Vorarlberg, the rates in the "Betreuungspool" (see section 0) start with EUR 90.

domestic services is paid 15 times a year due to Christmas and holiday bonuses. We thus divide the annual wage by 12 to reach a monthly figure. For both groups, taxes on in-kind benefits ("Sachbezug") in the shape of food and board are included.

Table 4. Estimated incomes of a self-employed and employed live-in carer 2024

		self-employed carer	employed carer, no night work	employed carer w/ nightwork
daily rates	€ 81*182 days	€ 14 742,00		
monthly minimum wage	*15/12		€ 2 291,25	€ 3 155,00
social security payments	-25,30%	-€ 3 729,73		
tax + social security			€ 541,00	€ 904,32
monthly net income		**€ 917,69**	**€ 1 750,25**	**€ 2 250,68**

6.8.2. Cost to households

For household cost, we assume the model of two carers working two weeks' alternating shifts, neglecting the cost for extra mobile support or replacement workers and calculate employer social security contributions with the calculator on finanz.at. The monthly agency fee to cover support and supervision of carers and advice to households is taken from the same agency website as the daily rate.

Table 5. Estimated cost of 2 alternating live-in carers to a household with one care recipient in 2024

		2 self-employed carers	2 employed carers, no nightwork	2 employed carers w/ nightwork
daily rates	€ 81*365/12	€ 2 463,75		
monthly minimum wages	*15/12*2		€ 4 582,50	€ 6 310,00
security contributions			€ 810,19	€ 1 115,61
fee to agency		€ 318,00		
travel		€ 240,00	€ 240,00	€ 240,00
cash-for-care allowance		-€ 551,60	-€ 551,60	-€ 551,60
live-in care subsidy		-€ 800,00	-€ 1 600,00	-€ 1 600,00
monthly net cost for household		**€ 1 663,40**	**€ 3 481,09**	**€ 5 514,01**

6.8.3. Cost of long-term care to public budgets

For the cost to public budgets, Trukeschitz et al. (2022, p. 90) provide some figures which estimate the users of live-in care from the number of registered carers.

Table 6. Annual public expenditure per client in different types of long-term care

	Residential care	mobile care	live-in care (estimate)
users	70 312	98 589	30 000
public expenditure	€ 1 933 000 000	€ 459 000 000	€ 158 000 000
public expenditure per user	**€ 27 492**	**€ 4 656**	**€ 5 267**

If we simply divide the public cost by user of care (and ignore that users of live-in care may also use some mobile services) we find that, in spite of differing care needs and the subsidies to live-in care, the cost of live-in care per care recipient to healthcare budgets is only ca. 13% higher than that of mobile care.

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7. Ensuring asylum seekers can use their benefits: exchange initiatives for asylum seekers in Germany

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7.1. Introduction

Beginning with the 2008 financial crisis and escalating with the mass refugee inflow that characterised the last decade, political debate in Germany has been increasingly centred on the tensions between openness and isolationist migration policies. Not only has this change brought previously latent views and attitudes into focus in mainstream discussions, but Germany's stance on immigration has become increasingly polarised. While the country receives a significant number of asylum applications, a considerable proportion of the German population expresses concern about immigration, viewing it as a pressing national issue. This apprehension has fuelled policies aimed at regulating immigration. One of these policies is the reactivation of payment cards for asylum seekers. These controversial payment cards and paper-based voucher schemes, which were originally introduced in the 1990s, were—with the exception of very few localities—abolished in the 2010s.

Payment cards typically take the form of prepaid cards or digital payment solutions, and are provided to displaced individuals by governments, humanitarian organisations, or international agencies. Nominally, they are designed to deliver financial assistance in an efficient way, replacing traditional aid distribution methods like physical goods or cash. They are often restricted in use, with a focus on meeting essential needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, or medical expenses, and may be further limited to use at certain retailers (e.g., participating supermarket chains) and forbid transfers to other bank accounts, especially international transfers. Proponents argue for their practicality and deterrent effect, claiming they simplify administrative processes, minimise the misuse of funds, and make Germany less attractive for potential migrants.

However, critics argue that these arguments lack empirical support and that payment cards primarily serve to restrict asylum seekers' agency, presenting a technological limitation that exacerbates their existing socio-political vulnerabilities. Further, the patchwork of implementations of the payment cards in their current form leads to a discontinuous and unreliable distribution of resources for asylum seekers, wherein the assignment mechanism used to distribute asylum seekers across the German municipalities in part also decides their relative standard of living in the proceeding years.

This chapter focuses on the activities of grassroots initiatives challenging the payment cards and offering workarounds. For example, facilitating a system wherein asylum seekers purchase gift cards in local stores with their payment cards and then exchange said gift cards for cash with community members during regular swap meetings organised by the grassroots initiative. Our focus is thus not on the payment cards themselves, rather on the reactions of civil society to their existence. However, these two issues are intertwined, so we will review the impact of the initiatives in light of the arguments put forward for and against the cards.

We begin this chapter by providing some context on immigration in Germany, on the payment cards, and on earlier systems. We then describe our methodology and the key findings we derive from our qualitative analysis. Finally, we offer some tentative conclusions, putting the initiatives into the broader context of the debate about immigration and the payment cards.

7.2. Context: Asylum Seekers in Germany

In recent years, Germany has been one of the primary destination countries in Europe for asylum seekers. In 2023, Germany received the highest number of asylum applications in Europe (329,035 first-time applications) and ranks fourth in terms of per capita asylum claims among European member states (Destatis, 2024). Germany also ranks fourth among all refugee hosting countries globally in terms of relative refugee population share; 2.8 percent of the resident population are refugees (Eurostat, 2023). Against this background, German society has become increasingly concerned about humanitarian migration to Germany. In 2023, a nationally representative poll revealed 44 percent of Germans feel migration is the biggest problem in Germany (infratest dimap, 2024). The second biggest problem, climate change, was only mentioned by 18 percent of respondents. In response to increasing public concern about immigration, policy makers began initiatives to curb migrant inflows. One policy, among many, is the widespread introduction of payment cards for asylum seekers.

7.2.1. Payment Card Use in Germany

Payment cards (*Bezahlkarten* in German) often look like debit cards, though they sometimes carry identifying features distinguishing them from typical cards, and provide access to a proportion of the monetary benefits that asylum seekers receive from the government. Asylum seekers in Germany are eligible to benefits according to the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act (AsylbLG). This law was introduced in 1993 as part of the so-called “Asylum Compromise”, which was a reaction to the high number of asylum seekers in the early 1990s. Benefits under the AsylbLG serve to secure the material and socio-cultural

subsistence minimum. They are comprised of the necessary needs (e.g., clothing, food, and electricity) and the necessary personal needs (often incorrectly referred to as "pocket money"). The amount of benefits to which asylum seekers are entitled differs conditional on whether or not they reside in a reception centre, whether or not they are a single individual, and whether they are a young adult or child typically resident in their parents' household.

Generally, there are six categories of entitlement ranging from approximately 300 euros (for children) to 400 euros (for single adults) per month in total benefits, of which approximately one half are for necessary needs. For asylum seekers living in reception centres, necessary needs are often met by so-called "benefits in kind" (henceforth, BIK), while necessary personal needs can be granted in the form of BIK, vouchers, cash benefits, or payment cards. For those not living in reception centres, both necessary needs and necessary personal needs may be met in the form of cash benefits, BIK, or payment cards. The practice of replacing cash transfers to asylum seekers with vouchers, first paper based and later sometimes as digitally operating payment cards, dates back to the 1990s. These vouchers could only be redeemed in certain stores, limiting asylum seekers' consumption choice sets on the one hand, and restricting price options on the other.

However, this practice was declared unconstitutional by the Federal Constitutional Court in 2012 because it violated the fundamental right to a dignified minimum standard of living. Despite the 2012 ruling, vouchers nevertheless continued to be issued in some regions of Germany to particular groups of asylum seekers, and since 2024 it is once again permitted to issue benefits under the AsylbLG in the form of a payment card (see, e.g., Brücker, 2024; Voigt, 2024 for details). Currently, there is a wide range of implementations of the payment card across different districts and municipalities. For example, while the city of Hannover introduced a card that carries no restrictions and functions like a normal debit card, other municipalities have imposed various restrictions. The most important of restrictions—and the focus of the initiatives described in this chapter—are the limits on cash withdrawals (often set at 50 euros per month per person).

Other common restrictions include an inability to make online purchases, and spatial and mobility restrictions, for example region-locking the cards to certain postal codes so that they can only be used in the district to which asylum seekers have been assigned (this is the case, for example, in Altenburg, Thuringia). Municipalities can also restrict the range of goods that can be purchased with the card. For example, there is a discussion about preventing the purchase of alcohol and tobacco products by means of

technical precautions. Finally, transfers with the card are often not possible or have to be authorised by the municipality, e.g., using whitelists of lawyers that can be paid by transfer.

Proponents argue that payment cards simplify administration, prevent abuse, and promote integration by helping asylum seekers learn how to use cashless payment systems (German Federal Government, 2024; Grasnick, 2024). Additionally, they put forward the argument that payment cards restrict the incentive to migrate to Germany by preventing the transfer of benefits to their countries of origin (Federal Government, 2024). Critics, however, argue that payment cards are stigmatising, restrict the autonomy of asylum seekers, and can lead to financial exclusion (Bennani-Taylor and Meer, 2024; Tazzioli, 2021; Coddington, 2019; Carnet and Blanchard, 2014). They also point out that there is no evidence that payment cards deter migration.

7.2.2. Grassroots Reactions to the Payment Cards and their Predecessors

The focus of our case study are grassroots initiatives challenging the payment card system by offering workarounds to the restrictions. The history of grassroots opposition to restrictive benefits payment systems for asylum seekers in Germany has been characterised by both formal organizational efforts and informal mutual aid networks. Early social opposition emerged in response to the AsylbLG, which introduced significant restrictions on how asylum seekers could receive and use benefits, specifically in regard to the "*Sachleistungsprinzip*" (in-kind benefits principle)—which mandated that asylum seekers receive benefits primarily in the form of vouchers and direct in-kind provisions, rather than cash.

Local initiatives in cities like Berlin and Hamburg began organising in the late 1990s to assist asylum seekers in converting vouchers to cash or accessing needed items that voucher systems made difficult to obtain. In the early 2000s, refugee support organisations documented how such systems restricted asylum seekers' mobility and autonomy. The organisation Pro Asyl has been particularly active in critiquing these systems and advocating for cash-based benefits. However, following the 2012 ruling that sought to rule out the issuance of vouchers in the place of cash benefits many grassroots initiatives ceased their operations, and it is only in recent years—with the reissuance of payment cards—that new grassroots have formed in opposition.

According to those we interviewed for this case study, some contemporary volunteers were part of previous initiatives and brought with them both local institutional and organisational knowledge. However, the challenges contemporary initiatives face are different to those of the past, in part given the digitalised element of the current payment card systems (in comparison to the previous incarnation of paper-based vouchers). The payment cards (unlike the vouchers) can only be used by the asylum seeker

card holder and cannot be directly traded. This has created a need for an intermediary exchange mechanism and forced grassroots initiatives to come up with new workarounds and organisational structures.

7.3. Methodology

A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to recruit participants with relevant experiences or knowledge pertaining to these initiatives. This method ensures the selection of individuals able to provide rich and detailed information (see, e.g., Palinkas et al. 2015; Suri, 2011; Tongco, 2007; Patton 1990). The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted virtually. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to steer the conversations while allowing participants the flexibility to express their views freely. The interviews each lasted around 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. We interviewed four respondents from different parts of Germany who, either in the past or contemporaneously, have been involved in such initiatives in an organisational sense. Two respondents were from the same initiative. Additional data were gathered through an expert interview and field notes, allowing for triangulation of key themes. To this end, we additionally interviewed an expert on the AsylbLG who is critical of the payment cards, though not currently active in a voucher exchange initiative.

Our analysis relies on a thematic approach (see, e.g., Brown and Clarke, 2006). Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim in German via Turbo Scribe, and then translated into English using a “consistent translation” technique such that multiple occurrences of the same or similar word or phrase across interviews are translated into the same word or phrase in the target texts. We then generated initial codes by organising and coding the data systematically, and used these to identify, review, and refine themes. The findings of our qualitative analysis are described in the following sections.

7.4. Megatrends

The case study presented in this chapter, focusing on the grassroots initiatives countering the restrictions imposed by payment cards for asylum seekers in Germany, is intricately linked to the four megatrends shaping contemporary Europe that are studied in the Horizon Europe project WeLaR (“Welfare systems and labour market policies for economic and social resilience in Europe”.

7.4.1. Globalisation

Firstly, the case study highlights the impact of globalisation/trans-nationalisation, of which migration is a key element. The payment cards are a reaction to the high numbers of migrants in Germany and the political climate surrounding immigration. While the efficacy of payment cards in deterring migration is a matter of contention, with interviewees suggesting that benefits are not a primary pull factor, the issue is multifaceted. Evidence on the influence of benefits on migration is mixed, and the choice of destination country or even specific district within Germany might be subtly influenced by the level and design of social support systems. Remittances, or money sent back home by migrants, are a concern for some, but the benefits granted under the AsylbLG are too low to allow for substantial remittances. Transfers of money to origin countries typically start only once people begin working and have higher incomes.

7.4.2. Digitalisation

Secondly, the case study reveals the double-edged sword of digitalisation. Many of the grassroots initiatives make use of digital tools to on the one hand improve the effectiveness of their work (for example, via the development of an app to improve market coordination), and on the other to reach a broader audience, particularly in terms of reaching German residents and recruiting them for the swap-meets. The transition to digital payment systems themselves via use of electronic payment cards also offers the potential for greater freedom and efficiency in benefit distribution. However, this digitalisation of services also enables stricter control and restrictions on the one hand and introduces new failure points on the other. For example, multiple interviewees highlighted that the current implementations of the payment cards are fraught with systemic errors, with money not being received, and cards being locked, among other issues.

Though functionality issues are often typical of public sector digitalisation attempts, the reality of asylum seekers as a vulnerable and marginalised group means that usability concerns may become an afterthought. Another concern voiced by multiple interviewees is that payment cards are just a first step towards providing social assistance in the form of cards with the possibility to impose similar restrictions on other social transfers. In general, this intervention is at odds with the overall idea of integration, as it can be seen as excluding, marginalising, and stigmatising people as consumers. This is done by giving them a very low amount of money and regimenting the use of that money. The Victorian suspicion of whether poor people can be trusted to spend money wisely is reflected in these concerns. Interestingly, the interviews do not touch upon the crucial aspect of data privacy and protection in the context of these digital payment

systems, raising questions about the potential for surveillance and misuse of personal data. This is an area that warrants further investigation.

7.4.3. Demographic Change

While less directly relevant, the case study also indirectly touches upon demographic change. Germany's declining fertility rates necessitate immigration to maintain a stable workforce (Fuchs et al., 2016; Ette et al., 2016). However, the restrictive policies and negative political rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers might deter not only those seeking refuge but also potentially "desirable" economic migrants, e.g., those able to fill key roles in areas where labour shortage exists. This raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of Germany's approach to immigration in the face of demographic challenges.

7.4.4. Climate Change and Sustainability

Issues related to climate change and sustainability are not directly relevant to this specific case study, though the desire to attract only the "right" migrants and the suspicion of how the poor spend their money can be seen as a way of reasserting control in the face of globalisation and rapid societal and environmental changes (Menke and Rumpel, 2022; Will, 2018). The large and largely uncontrolled inflow of migrants in Germany in 2015/16 may have contributed to this feeling of things being out of control. To that end, people may feel overburdened by the increasing number of crises and challenges including global warming, and this may lead to a less welcoming attitude towards migrants. Though truly exerting control over incoming asylum seeker flows is unlikely in the absence of extreme measures, government actors at the local and national level may want to *appear* to assert control over bureaucratic specificities where they are able to make changes—for the benefit of their constituents, but to the detriment of affected asylum seekers. Furthermore, while climate change is not a primary driver for the current group of migrants that Germany typically receives, it is important to acknowledge the potential for climate concerns to become a significant push factor in future migration waves (so-called "climate refugees", see, e.g., Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer, 2020; Hugo, 2011).

7.5. Impacts

7.5.1. Labour Markets

In Germany, asylum seekers face varying waiting periods before they can legally work, depending on their status. Those living in initial reception facilities are generally prohibited from working during their first nine months in Germany and while their asylum application is being processed. After nine months they

may apply for a work permit that is valid only for a specific job for which they hold a job offer. Approval is subject to a "priority review" that checks whether German or EU citizens are available for the position. For those no longer required to live in initial reception facilities, this limited labour market access is granted after three months. If an individual's asylum application is accepted, i.e., they are formally granted refugee status or subsidiary protection, they gain the unrestricted right to employment or self-employment.

Thus while the case study does not directly examine employment outcomes, there are nevertheless clear implications for the labour market outcomes of asylum seekers. Potential impacts of the grassroots initiatives on labour markets are indirect, in that any effects primarily arise via said initiatives' compensatory efforts to counteract the negative effects of the cards themselves.

First, the spatial restrictions embedded in many payment card implementations (e.g., region-locking cards to specific postal codes) could impede job search activities by limiting geographical mobility. This is particularly problematic in rural areas, where public transportation is inadequate and carpooling—which typically requires cash—may be necessary for accessing potential employment opportunities. Furthermore, the restrictions on cash access and online payments may create barriers to employment-related expenses such as transportation tickets, work clothing, or professional certification fees. This can create friction in the transition to employment, potentially delaying labour market entry and integration. By counteracting these effects via the provision of access to cash, frictions are reduced.

Second, the payment card system may also have longer-term implications for labour market outcomes through its effects on financial inclusion and literacy. By restricting normal banking operations, and limiting experience with standard financial instruments, the payment card system could impede the development of financial capabilities necessary for successful labour market integration. This is particularly concerning given that financial exclusion has been identified as a barrier to self-employment and entrepreneurship among refugee populations (see, e.g., Dhawan et al., 2023). The secondary role of the grassroots initiatives in providing access to information about financial literacy, social institutions, language courses, and other support services is therefore of key importance.

7.5.2. Welfare State and Public Finance

Similar to labour market impacts, the potential effects of the grassroots initiatives on welfare and public finance concerns are more indirect, in that negative effects are generated via the payment card systems themselves and counteracted via the existence of said initiatives.

First, from a public finance perspective, the payment card system presents a complex set of trade-offs. While proponents argue that the system reduces administrative costs and prevents misuse of public funds, the evidence suggests these benefits may be overstated or offset by other costs. The implementation of the payment card system itself requires substantial investment in technical infrastructure, ongoing maintenance, and support services. Moreover, the interviewees reported technical issues are common—such as delayed or incorrect benefit payments requiring retroactive corrections—which likely generates an additional administrative burden rather than reducing it.

The system also appears to create inefficiencies in benefit utilisation. The restrictions on where and how benefits can be spent effectively reduce the purchasing power of the allocated funds, as beneficiaries are unable to access lower-cost options, like second-hand goods. This means that the same level of benefits achieves less in terms of recipient welfare than would be possible with unrestricted cash transfers. Additionally, the emergence of informal markets, where payment card use is exchanged for cash at a discounted rate with private, profit-driven intermediaries, represents a direct leakage of public funds, reducing the effective value of the social assistance provided. The welfare state implications also extend beyond direct fiscal considerations. The payment card system appears to work against the broader goals of social integration and self-sufficiency that typically characterise welfare state objectives. By creating barriers to social and labour market participation, the system may increase long-term dependency on social assistance, potentially generating higher fiscal costs in the future.

Furthermore, the grassroots initiatives that have emerged in response to the payment card restrictions effectively represent an outsourcing of welfare state functions to civil society actors. While these initiatives help mitigate some of the system's negative effects, they do so through volunteer labour and private resources—essentially shifting costs from the public sector to civil society rather than eliminating them. This raises questions about the sustainability and equity of relying on such informal mechanisms to address structural deficiencies in the formal welfare system.

7.5.3. Market Failure: Safeguarding Entitlements

In part, the organised push-back against the payment cards by grassroots initiatives is due to a common understanding highlighted by all of our participants: the restrictions that are institutionalised by use of the payment cards make a vulnerable population more vulnerable because they restrict their ability to access resources even when a medium of exchange would otherwise be available (e.g., if benefits were paid to asylum seekers in cash). This understanding is backed up by theory and is reminiscent of Sen (1981)'s framework for understanding resource deprivation, in particular famines. According to Sen, food

insecurity or deprivation is not necessarily caused by a shortage of goods but can result from individuals lacking entitlements to access those goods. Thus, deprivation is often a consequence of a failure in entitlements rather than availability.

Sen (ibid.) distinguishes between availability (the total quantity of goods and services available in a society) and entitlements (the bundle of goods and services individuals can legally and socially access based on their ownership, exchange mechanisms, and rights). Exchange entitlement mapping (or E- mappings) can be used to define the set of goods and services that a person can legally acquire through a combination of production, trade, and other forms of legal transactions given their initial endowments (like labour power, skills, assets, and rights). They describe the relationship between a person's initial assets or resources and the final bundle of goods and services they can obtain by exchanging those resources in the market or through social systems.

In the case of payment cards, an individual's resources (savings prior to migrating, and the benefits available to them under the AsylbLG) represent their endowment. This initial endowment serves as the starting point for obtaining goods and services. Their E-mapping then depends on the existing rules and conditions that govern how they can trade their endowments. This includes the legal rights and market conditions (such as prices) under which exchanges are carried out. As highlighted in previous sections, payment cards for asylum seekers often come with limitations on how and where they can dispose of the benefits to which they are entitled. For example, restricting purchases to certain types of products, and prohibiting the purchase of non-essential goods, such as alcohol, tobacco, etc. In addition, these cards might only be accepted at specific stores or chains or restricted to use in a given region.

By trading their initial endowments, individuals obtain a final set of goods and services, which constitutes their entitlement set. Given the aforementioned restrictions, asylum seekers' entitlement sets represent a significant narrowing of the consumption choice set, limiting the bundle of goods and services individuals can legally and socially access within the broader availability of goods in the market. Therefore, although goods are available in the economy, asylum seekers are restricted from accessing them fully. Their entitlements are deliberately curtailed through state policy, effectively imposing an administrative rationing of consumption. This undermines their agency and autonomy in deciding how to allocate resources based on their individual or familial needs.

Contemporaneously, given these restrictions often lock-in asylum seekers to price menus at a narrow range of stores, reducing their ability to purchase e.g., cheaper second hand goods, access ethnic supermarkets where products can be purchased in bulk or that are compliant with dietary restrictions,

they implicitly limit the financial resources at the disposal of the cardholders via a further restriction of the E-mapping. Simultaneously, the methods of conversion offered by grassroots initiatives may also be imperfect, for example in cases where vouchers or gift cards are traded below face value to cover operating costs. These realities are a penalty on initial endowments, further reducing the entitlement set.

In Sen's framework, even if availability is adequate, the lack of flexible entitlements leads to a type of deprivation. The policy of payment cards thereby alters the entitlement set asylum seekers can achieve, potentially leading to material and psychological deprivation. Interviewees seem to share this view on restricted entitlement, even though they are likely not (fully) aware of the theoretical considerations by Sen. Further, the exigence of the payment cards creates missing markets. There is scope for profit-oriented intermediaries to "create" a medium of exchange to combat this market failure where the incentive is a further reduction in asylum seekers' endowments via the cost associated with any "fees" charged by these actors. The grassroots initiatives combat this market failure on the one hand, and by providing a one-to-one medium of exchange they reduce the vulnerability of an already-marginalised group.

7.6. Social Innovation

Social innovation refers to new solutions that simultaneously meet social needs more effectively than existing solutions and create new social relationships or collaborations, thereby enhancing society's capacity to act (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace, 2017). In the context of this case study, social innovation manifests through grassroots initiatives that not only address immediate practical needs but also challenge existing power structures, creating new social relationships between asylum seekers and local communities. The focus of our case study are grassroots initiatives challenging the payment card system used to distribute benefits to asylum seekers by offering workarounds to the restrictions inherent to the cards, though the specific limitations currently vary by region. These initiatives often serve multiple purposes, on the one hand acting as intermediaries between asylum seekers, institutions, and ordinary residents to intervene in a missing market for cash that exacerbates the vulnerability of a marginalised group, and on the other bridging cultural and social gaps by providing spaces for information exchange, advocacy, and acts of solidarity.

7.6.1. Goals of the Initiatives

On the Importance of Cash

One of the key interventions common to these initiatives is the provision of cash. For example, by facilitating an exchange system wherein asylum seekers use their payment cards to purchase gift cards in

local stores, and then swap said gift cards for cash with community members. A common theme among participants, mentioned by all interviewees, is that cash not only plays an important role in the everyday lives of many people in Germany, but is especially important for asylum seekers. As highlighted previously, under the AsylbLG all asylum seekers arriving in Germany are, at least on paper, entitled to a predetermined level of financial support that is expected to cover their basic needs. Nevertheless, when asked about the motivations behind one initiative, a voucher swap program, a member of a former East German initiative stated the goal of providing access to cash is:

> "I would say to give these people basic access to, for example, medication that they wanted to buy or public transport tickets or [something] similar" (Interview 1).

That is, the needs the grassroots initiative were responding to are indeed fundamental. Not because these goods are unavailable, or because the initiative organisers think they should be otherwise provided by state actors, but because in Germany things like transportation ticket machines are largely cash-based, and online purchases (i.e., via the app of a region's local transportation system) are not possible with a payment card. The restrictions to payment cards, or the voucher systems they pre-date, represent a significant hurdle—limiting asylum seekers' ability to act in different areas of life.

All interviewees report numerous situations in which cash is essential, e.g., for deposits, paying for interpreters in the hospital, or for carpooling in rural areas where public transport is inadequate. Moreover, many small shops, second-hand shops, or flea markets generally do not accept card payments, so the payment card cannot be used there, while many smaller shops have a minimum spend requirement for those paying with card. This rules out many opportunities for inexpensive shopping, affecting not only the consumption choice sets of asylum seekers but also their budget constraints. One interviewee reports that before the introduction of the exchange campaign, they had not realised how urgently refugees need cash:

> "I wasn't actually aware of how much people actually depend on cash before this campaign" (Interview 2).

Similar challenges are reported in the UK, which has already used a payment card system since 2009. The Asylum Support Partnership (2010) found that 40% of refugees were unable to buy food that met their dietary, religious, or cultural requirements in the specified supermarkets, with access to Halal food being a particular concern. Over half (56%) of respondents could not pay for travel to see their legal advisers or attend essential health appointments (53%) given a lack of access to cash.

Beyond Practical Challenges: Dignity and Integration

The lack of access to cash due to the issuing of payment cards or vouchers to asylum seekers not only has practical consequences but also raises fundamental questions of human rights and human dignity. Previous work in this literature has highlighted that cashless technologies serve to increase asylum seekers' dependence on both the state itself and humanitarian actors (see, e.g., Coddington et al., 2020; Jacobsen, 2017). This is something echoed by those we interviewed. All interviewees emphasise that payment cards restrict individual autonomy and self-determination. By withholding cash, individuals are denied the opportunity to freely dispose of the benefits to which they are entitled and to participate in social life on an equal footing. This can lead to a feeling of dis-empowerment and dependence, as those affected are reliant on the mercy of the authorities or the help of initiatives for everyday things.

According to the interviewees, the argument that payment cards prevent transfers abroad or to traffickers is particularly problematic in this context. In their view, this argument is not only factually unfounded but also discriminates against asylum seekers by generally insinuating that they would misuse their benefits. For the interviewees, the right to a dignified minimum standard of living cannot be relativised by migration policy, and the free disposal of the benefits granted to secure one's livelihood is an important part of this right. A previous study by Dhawan et al. (2023) points to similar issues. Interviewees in the earlier study also report that many refugees in Germany encounter difficulties when it comes to financial access, with implications for their later integration. In particular, a lack of access to such services makes it more difficult to build self-sufficiency in the short and long-run (e.g., through the accumulation of savings) and to take advantage of economic opportunities (e.g., starting a business).

Issuing vouchers or payment cards to refugees also carries the risk of exploitation of their plight. Some private individuals or shops take advantage of their need for cash by offering an exchange at a rate of less than one-to-one. For example, one interviewee reports cases where stores do not pay out the full value of the payment card transactions:

> "We have heard of stores that say, you can come with your payment card, I type 100 euros into the cash register, you pay with it and I'll give you 80 euros" (Interview 3).

More commonly, refugees make purchases for others with their cards but receive less cash than the value of the goods purchased:

> "Or there are people who say, we go to Mediamarkt [a consumer electronics store] together, you buy me a mobile phone for 500 euros, I give you 400 cash" (Interview 3).

This informal secondary market for cash, unlike the one-to-one exchanges facilitated by the initiatives we spoke to, is a reactionary response that leverages the precarity of asylum seekers' situation to generate profit for either stores or private individuals.

The long-term implications of these restrictive payment systems are profound. By denying asylum seekers flexibility and autonomy, such schemes exacerbate dependency and hinder the development of critical financial and decision-making skills needed for integration into the host society. However, the problems extend beyond issues of access to cash. Since the payment cards cannot be used for online purchases or transfers and are not associated with an IBAN like a typical German cash card, asylum seekers are by default excluded from services that require subscriptions—to include access to gyms, sports clubs, and similar organisations. Given the importance of said organisations to German social life, their exclusion is indicative of a broader problem; the inflexibility of the system fosters isolation from broader German society, as well as potentially reinforcing stereotypes about asylum seekers as dependent or separate.

7.6.2. Strategies

The initiatives we interviewed operate in different ways, depending on local conditions and the logistical capacities of the respective organisation on the one hand, and the timing of their interventions on the other. In general, interviewees emphasised that the scale and scope of their respective organisation's ability to act and react is implicitly limited by their volunteer capacity. One of the contemporary initiatives from one of the two large cities consists of a loose association of various organisations, including trade unions, charities, and political groups. The number of actively involved people is difficult to estimate, as many get involved spontaneously and without fixed membership. The tasks include organising the exchange points, checking credit balances of gift cards, managing sums of money, as well as public relations work and networking with other initiatives. In the other large city, the core of the initiative consists of around seven to eight people who coordinate the organisation and implementation of the exchange campaigns. In addition, there is a larger circle of volunteers who help with the exchange campaigns, collect donations, take on IT tasks, or take care of public relations. Further, this initiative is part of a larger campaign that opposes payment cards and organises demonstrations and other protest actions in addition to the exchange campaigns.

A Medium of Exchange: Vouchers or Gift Cards for Cash

One of the participants (Interview 1), who is associated with an initiative from a district in East Germany that had a system of paper-based vouchers in the 2010s, describes a mechanism of exchange as follows: operating between 2018 and 2020, volunteers collected cash from supporters and exchanged it for

vouchers from asylum seekers at specific times on predetermined dates. The vouchers were issued to the asylum seekers by the authorities as an alternative to cash and could only be redeemed in certain stores. The initiative thus tried to provide asylum seekers with at least part of their benefits in cash so that they could have more freedom to dispose of their money. The organisers of the initiative collected the cash from the supporters, counted it, packed it in envelopes, and then exchanged it for the asylum seekers' vouchers at the specified times.

Three participants are associated with two (different) contemporary initiatives from large cities in West Germany that were created in 2024 as a reaction to the introduction of electronic payment cards. The exchanges organised by these initiatives function according to a similar principle, but with an intermediate step (gift cards or vouchers bought in stores) that became necessary as, unlike the paper-based vouchers issued by the authorities, the payment cards cannot themselves be exchanged. In both cities, exchanges are organised at different locations and times, where asylum seekers can exchange their vouchers or gift cards purchased with payment cards for cash. Supporters can in turn exchange cash for vouchers or gift cards. In one of the two cities, the exchanges are organised de-centrally by various initiatives, while in the other city a central platform with an app has been developed to coordinate the exchange. In both cities, it is emphasised that this is a one-to-one exchange and not a sale to avoid legal problems.

Acting as Part of a Bigger Initiative against the System of Payment Cards

One of the participants described the gift card exchange campaign as just one component of a larger initiative against the payment card system. This larger initiative aims to either abolish the payment card system altogether or at least to lift the cash withdrawal limit. The exchange campaign serves as a means to an end, to offer those affected immediate help and support while also drawing public attention to the problems associated with the use of payment cards. That is, not only the inherent restrictions associated with the cards, but the issues with their implementation. For example, multiple participants report issues with the cards not being correctly topped up, sometimes for months at a time, which means that affected asylum seekers receive multiple months of arrears at once while still subject to the 50 euros withdrawal constraints.

In one of the two major West German cities, one interviewee describes actions the initiative is taking beyond the exchange campaign. Specifically, the initiative in which they are active also relies on demonstrations and petitions to put pressure on politicians. They try to educate the public about the negative effects of payment cards through public relations work and to initiate debate about alternative solutions, such as the use of bank accounts. The exchange campaign can be understood as a "drop in the

ocean" of practical solidarity with those affected, wherein a broader goal should be to help to challenge the legitimacy of the payment card system. The need for this was highlighted by all interviewees, though one participant elucidated specific instances. They note that the West German city in which they are based constantly highlights that there are almost no complaints about the payment cards by the asylum seekers. However, the process they describe for raising a complaint is not only extremely complicated but requires the ability to successfully navigate both digital technologies and a bureaucratic maze.

The interviewee describes a multi-step procedure that involves first contacting the Office for Migration to obtain specific instructions as to how and to which email address to make a report (the specificities of which are not consistent), then upon a successful virtual complaint the affected asylum seeker can call a hotline to follow up. In practice, however, it is common to receive an email stating the contacted office is not responsible, and the hotline is itself difficult to navigate with a multi-step menu and an automated system. Although more language options than German are available, when for example Persian is selected from the language menu, the line often simply hangs up. Our interviewee posits that this occurs when someone speaking the relevant language is not currently working. These factors taken together, means that the hurdle to successfully making a complaint, particularly as a new arrival with no assistance, is likely insurmountable.

This is indicative of a broader concern: the digital landscapes within which asylum seekers operate are fraught with systemic inequities and technological limitations that hinder their access to essential information, services, and resources. The proliferation of digital technologies has reconfigured global and local networks, and so-called “e-government” and increased digitalisation of local government apparatus are often presented as technological steps forward. However, these advancements have not been uniformly inclusive. In the context of forced migration, digital exclusion often compounds existing socio-political vulnerabilities, creating a multifaceted landscape of marginalisation. Further, given the precarity of asylum seekers’ situations, and lack of knowledge about local institutions, there is limited scope for users to protest, and indeed they are unable to opt out. In response to these concerns, initiative organisers have begun assisting with both the writing of complaints and calling the hotline together with those affected asylum seekers at the swap meetings.

This is also demonstrative of more fundamental actions these grassroots initiatives have built up around the payment cards. All interviewees highlight that the personal contact between asylum seekers and supporters at the exchange points enables the building of trust and the communication of solidarity. One emphasises the importance of direct encounters to give those affected the feeling that they are not alone

and that there are people who are committed to their rights. Another reports that the personal exchange at the exchange points helps to break down prejudices and create a better understanding between asylum seekers and the local population.

Finally, the exchange points not only serve as a pure market for exchange of vouchers or gift cards for cash, but also offer asylum seekers the opportunity to find out about other issues and receive support. One of the large-city initiatives, for example, offers asylum seekers legal advice. In the other large city, the initiative uses the exchange points to provide asylum seekers with information about social institutions, language courses, and other support services.

7.6.3. Opportunities and Constraints

Co-ordination Challenges

One of the biggest challenges for the grassroots initiatives is coordinating the exchange between asylum seekers who want to exchange their vouchers or gift cards for cash and supporters who are willing to exchange cash for vouchers or gift cards. In the city in which the exchanges take place de-centrally at different locations and almost daily, there is often an imbalance between supply and demand. Sometimes there are more asylum seekers present who want to exchange their vouchers than there are supporters willing to buy them, and sometimes it is the other way around. One initiative is therefore considering reducing the number of exchange points or bundling the dates in order to simplify coordination and ensure a better balance between supply and demand. However, this would also make it more difficult to deal with situations in which people need cash and cannot wait until the next exchange date.

Technical Problems and Possible Abuse

Another problem faced by the initiatives is the abuse of the system. For example, one of the initiatives reported that there were cases where asylum seekers offered empty vouchers for exchange. To counteract this, the volunteers have to check the credit balance of the vouchers online before the exchange. However, this is not possible with all vouchers, which increases the risk of abuse. In Hamburg, the initiative had problems with faulty gift cards that had no credit on them even though they were purchased regularly. The interviewee emphasised that such problems may arise because asylum seekers may abuse the exchange, but also that asylum seekers may be subject to fraudulent behaviour of the store where the gift card was bought. In any case, such a situation led to delays and frustration for both the asylum seekers and the volunteers.

Resistance from Politics and Society

The initiatives also face resistance from both the political sphere and society more broadly. In one of the West German cities, politicians expressed concerns about the legality of the exchange campaigns and indicated that they might be banned. The initiative in the other city is also encountering criticism because it undermines the payment card system and thus circumvents the control over asylum seekers' spending intended by the authorities. In the East German district, there were problems with supermarkets, some of which refused to redeem the vouchers or only accepted them under difficult conditions. For example, in some stores only certain products could be bought with vouchers, while other stores refused to accept vouchers for higher-priced goods. The arbitrary handling of the vouchers by the supermarkets led to frustration and stigmatisation of the asylum seekers and made the work of the initiative more difficult.

In part, the political backlash against initiatives is driven by one of the core arguments of proponents of payment cards. That is, the restrictions associated with them deter migration. While our interviewees all reject this argument, scientific evidence is mixed and multifaceted. Some of the existing evidence suggests that asylum seekers may indeed strategically spatially sort according to the relative attractiveness of conditions in host countries. For example, Agersnap et al. (2020) analyses the impact of a 50% reduction in benefits for non-EU migrants in Denmark and finds that this policy change deterred migration by approximately 5,000 individuals annually. However, though we know the restrictions associated with a payment card system may in effect reduce an asylum seeker's budget, asylum seekers are unlikely to be aware of these issues *a priori*. Thus the use of a payment card with no corresponding reduction in stated benefits is unlikely to affect the location decisions of asylum claimants. This view is consistent with existing evidence. For example, focusing on Switzerland, Ferwerda et al. (2023) find that differences in cash transfers and benefits between municipalities do not significantly influence migrants' relocation decisions within the country. Similarly, Thielemann (2006) examines the policy responses of EU countries to increasing migration and concludes that the abolition of cash transfers alone is ineffective in deterring migration. Instead, the primary factor that reduces migration flows is restricted access to labour markets.

Payment cards also often come with transfer restrictions, specifically in regard to the ability to transfer money to asylum seekers' countries of origin. While our interviewees consistently reported that remittances are not a significant concern (as asylum seeker benefits are generally too low, and remittances typically start only once employment is secured), and that traffickers must be paid upfront, it is possible that the situation is more complex. For example, some asylum seekers might be repaying loans to intermediaries rather than directly to traffickers, adding a layer of financial obligation beyond initial

migration costs. This may lead to stress and uncertainty on the one hand, particularly if money is borrowed from informal intermediaries in the absence of formal financial infrastructure in the sending country, and on the other an individual's ability to return home in future may be more difficult if they have defaulted on loans etc. and may even face civil or criminal proceedings. Again, the restriction to pay-out remittances with the payment card is unlikely to affect migrations flows due to the absence of knowledge about such restrictions prior to choosing the destination country. However, it may make repaying debt and potential re-migration plans for asylum seekers more difficult.

Nevertheless, these are not necessarily issues known to the general population, or indeed even to political proponents of the payment cards. Thus by undermining the payment cards, initiative organisers may not be perceived as safeguarding the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of a marginalised group already *present* in Germany, but rather, as undermining the latest attempt to control and curtail migration inflows now and in the future. Given the secondary role of the grassroots initiatives as advocates and political organisers, this mismatch in perception-reality is potentially important.

7.6.4. Future Opportunities

Despite the challenges these grassroots initiatives face, several significant opportunities for growth and positive impact emerge from our analysis. Perhaps most notably, the successful development of digital platforms and apps by some initiatives demonstrates the potential for technical solutions to improve coordination between asylum seekers and supporters. One of the large-city initiatives has created a central platform with an app to coordinate exchanges, showing how digital tools can enhance operational efficiency. This digital infrastructure could be expanded and shared with other initiatives, potentially creating a network of coordinated support across different regions.

The initiatives also have significant opportunities to build stronger networks among themselves and with other civil society organizations. Through these networks, they can share best practices for organizing exchanges, pool resources and volunteer capacity, and coordinate advocacy efforts. This networking potential is particularly important given the varied approaches taken by different initiatives and the wealth of practical experience they have accumulated in navigating both technical and bureaucratic challenges. This avenue may be particularly important as the payment card expansion takes place in the coming years, with new districts and municipalities affected.

Secondly, the regular interaction between initiatives and asylum seekers creates valuable opportunities for systematic documentation of issues with the payment card system. This documentation could serve multiple purposes: building evidence-based arguments against restrictive policies, countering the

narrative that there are "no complaints" about the system, and providing concrete examples for legal challenges. As highlighted by one interviewee, the current complaint system is prohibitively complex, making it difficult for asylum seekers to formally register issues with the payment cards. The initiatives' role in documenting these challenges could therefore be crucial in demonstrating the real impacts of the system.

Thirdly, the exchange points themselves serve as natural meeting places between local residents and asylum seekers, creating opportunities for meaningful community integration. As reported by multiple interviewees, these interactions help break down prejudices through direct contact and facilitate the building of lasting social connections. This aspect of the initiatives' work could be further developed, particularly given the importance of social integration for long-term outcomes. There is also potential to expand the role of exchange points as service hubs, building on existing examples where initiatives offer legal advice, information about language courses, and guidance on accessing social services. By providing multiple services at exchange points, initiatives can more effectively support integration while efficiently using their volunteer resources.

Finally, the initiatives are also well-positioned to contribute to public education and policy discussions. Their direct experience with both the technical implementation of payment cards and their human impact provides valuable insights for policy development. Their work offers a unique perspective on the intersection of digital technology, social policy, and humanitarian support. This is particularly important given the existing disconnect between political arguments for payment cards and the reality of their implementation, as highlighted by our interviewees. The initiatives' practical experience could help inform more evidence-based approaches to supporting asylum seekers.

7.6.5. Alternative Pathways

Several alternative approaches exist between the current restrictive payment card system and a complete return to cash benefits. One potential pathway is the adoption of a hybrid system where payment cards maintain their administrative efficiency but without severe restrictions—similar to the model implemented in Hannover where cards function essentially as standard debit cards. Another approach involves integrating asylum seekers into the mainstream banking system by facilitating the opening of basic bank accounts (Basiskonto). This is currently not permitted given asylum seekers are not formal residents prior to being granted refugee status or subsidiary protections, and a residence permit is required for access to banking facilities in Germany. However, this would both satisfy administrative oversight needs while treating asylum seekers with dignity and supporting their financial inclusion. Ultimately, any

alternative pathway must balance legitimate administrative needs with respect for human dignity and practical usability, while acknowledging that excessive restrictions may be counterproductive to integration goals.

7.7. Conclusions

In response to the rising number of asylum seekers and the controversies surrounding immigration policies, Germany has introduced a new payment card system for asylum seekers, which is intended to replace the existing cash and voucher-based support systems. These cards, while touted as a means to simplify administration, prevent abuse, and promote integration, have been met with resistance due to their restrictive nature, including limitations on cash withdrawals, regional restrictions, and the exclusion of certain merchants and goods.

Humanitarian actors, as key agents of social change, possess a unique capacity to counteract barriers through innovative interventions. We investigate the role of humanitarian actors in deploying social innovations aimed at mitigating these barriers, focusing on grassroots initiatives that have emerged to counter the restrictions associated with the payment cards. Primarily this occurs by organising voucher and gift card exchanges, but these exchange points not only provide asylum seekers with much-needed cash but also serve as a platform for building trust, communicating solidarity, and offering additional support with digital and bureaucratic barriers, as well as access to legal advice. These initiatives face challenges such as coordinating exchanges, preventing abuse, and navigating resistance from political and societal forces, but they also play a crucial role in mitigating the negative impacts of payment cards on asylum seekers.

The interaction between the impacts and megatrends described in this study reveal a complex web of interdependencies. The digitalisation of welfare distribution through payment cards, while potentially offering administrative efficiency, has paradoxically created new forms of market failure and social exclusion. This mirrors broader tensions in globalisation, wherein increased migration flows are met with technological solutions that may inadvertently restrict entitlements and agency. The initiatives' response to these restrictions demonstrates how social innovations can emerge at the intersection of digitalisation and globalisation challenges. While demographic change underlies Germany's need for immigration, the restrictive nature of payment cards may counteract this necessity by deterring potential migrants—given that negative political rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers might deter not only those seeking refuge but also potentially “desirable” economic migrants—and may also hinder the long-run integration of those who are granted protected status. These contradictions highlight how policy responses to one megatrend

(globalisation) may conflict with the demands of another (demographic change), while the technological solutions employed (digitalisation) can either exacerbate or ameliorate these tensions depending on their implementation.

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8. Socially innovating the welfare state: Comparative insights

Ursula Holtgrewe (ZSI – Zentrum für Soziale Innovation)

8.1. Comparing social innovation cases

In this paper, we draw the comparative conclusions on the case studies presented in previous chapters through the analytical grid of the WeLaR project, that is, the articulation of the "megatrends" of globalisation, digitalisation, demographic changes and climate change in the respective social innovation cases, and the impacts of these cases on labour markets, welfare states, and their own respective fields and networks of activities. In sum, social innovation initiatives emerge as creative and partial actors that respond to challenges in their immediate environment (that are shaped by interacting megatrends and political, economic and social developments) and strategically aim to improve these environments for their constituencies. As we have seen, their aspirations range from including or re-integrating vulnerable people into the labour market to transforming larger institutional configurations such as gender, care, or parts of migration regimes in more equitable and inclusive ways. Through the comparison, we find that in spite of these variations, social innovations that address labour market and social policy challenges share a wide common ground and repertory of activities: promoting (more) personalised, flexible and needs-based support and services, hence offering learning opportunities for social policy and established social services and among neighbouring and peer initiatives, gathering knowledge (involving applied and transdisciplinary research), building of networks and ecosystems, raising societal awareness of their constituencies' challenges. Doing this, they identify and sometimes achieve changes in their institutional environments that support their activities. In other contexts, policies appear locked into keeping vulnerable groups, specifically asylum seekers and live-in carers, marginalised by prioritising the interests and concerns of their autochthonous and ageing constituencies. Hence, the pragmatic common ground should not be confused with harmonious consensus. Political conflict and contestation, and competition within social innovation ecosystems remain elements of societal learning.

8.2. How social innovations articulate megatrends

Generally, mapping social innovation on responses to megatrends is not an easy exercise since social innovations tend to respond to local problems or challenges in which various economic, political, technological, demographic and ecological developments overlap. Such developments contribute to both the challenges and to opportunities to local initiatives. Neatly distinguishing trends and impacts is thus

more of an analytical exercise than an adequate description of social innovation cases. However, the case studies shed light on dimensions of the megatrends that may be less observable in other perspectives.

8.2.1. Globalisation

Aspects of globalisation play a distinct part in the cases related to rural areas and those related to migration. Many rural areas are affected by deindustrialisation and outmigration, exposure to global markets for agricultural produce with challenges for smaller farms, and gaps in infrastructure and services, all of which "calls for rethinking the coherence between economic growth and social inclusion at various scales, from the local to the global" (Alberio & Klein, 2022, p. 4). As markets for labour, products and services globalise, they distribute prosperity and access unevenly. Existing welfare states and national and European policies do not automatically redress these inequalities. Recently, procedures to include this perspective into policies have been called "rural proofing" of policies.[57] Social innovations also promise to mitigate or overcome failures of the market or the state in ensuring prosperity, social inclusion and access to services to all (Jenson, 2015; Martinelli, 2013).

Migration itself is an instance of globalisation or transnationalisation as well as of demographic change. Indeed, the IG 24 case responds to the way the Austrian welfare state first turned to an (irregular) transnational labour market to fill gaps in the delivery of long-term care and then transformed this labour market into a highly asymmetrical market for services. In the German payment cards case, the global migration of asylum seekers is considered separately from the labour market. The policy logic of disincentivising immigration to Germany (or to specific regions of the country) in effect partly excludes this group of immigrants from the normality of a free use of cash in consumption.

However, globalisation brings other opportunities as well, such as an increased appreciation of the local or regional: an interest in regional food, tourism and nature, also in response to climate change (already noted by Castells, 1997). This can be considered a "global" trend in the consumption and cultural preferences of (often urban) middle classes (which may carry its own hypocrisies). For rural value and income generation of women farmers and gardeners (Hobotnica), contributions to social care (Care Farms) and the profile of restaurant "Numero Zero", these orientations towards the local and natural offer opportunities to create both economic and social value and retain it locally. Arguably, in the case of care

[57] https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/cross-cutting/rural-proofing_en

farms, the initiatives also broaden access to the healing and recovery potential of rural environments beyond the private consumption of retreats, wood bathing and other practices in the interest of mental health. The appreciation of local or regional qualities and the advantages of rural life can thus be connected to the empowerment of rural populations, if and when their needs (for income, information, support, appreciation, and connectivity) are prioritised.

8.2.2. Digitalisation

Among the social innovations investigated, digitalisation is rarely a central issue. We find varied uses of digital tools and media, in which the interfaces between the digital and analogue world are often important. The German payment card case is arguably the most digital-intensive one. Here, public administration digitalisation (of transfer payments) plays a part as well as the ease with which restrictions on uses of the money can be imposed both officially and unofficially (by supermarkets putting further conditions on payment card payments). Initiatives then work on reconstituting asylum seekers' access to cash on a footing equal to other consumers and in the process encounter various digital dysfunctionalities.

For the labour market access of people with disabilities as pursued by Aktywizacja, digital skills can make a difference and have been a focus of the foundation. Remote working may provide further opportunities to people with disabilities but may also keep workers (especially people who have been out of work for longer periods) from enjoying the social advantages of in-person contacts and collaboration. Digital technology dedicated to supporting people with disabilities or mental health conditions does not play a notable part in the case studies. Numero Zero relies on generic restaurant management software, and in the Belgian Care Farms case, digital support for client coordination or remote delivery of therapies is mentioned but does not appear to rely on specific innovations. Indeed, one of the benefits of recovering from burnout on a farm appears to be hands-on work and interaction with nature. For live-in care in Austria, some agencies use algorithmic tools to tentatively match carers and households, but practically actual matches are overseen by healthcare professionals.

The initiatives opposing current social policies respond to particularly digital forms of exclusion of their constituencies: in Austria, forms to apply for a benefit for the struggling self-employed during the Covid-19 crisis, for which live-in carers would have been eligible, were in German only, which contributed to the founding of IG 24. The complaints procedure to report and redress malfunctions of the payment cards in one region in Germany was overly complicated and in German only. This suggests that usability of digitalised public administration procedures is not a priority in the case of marginalised immigrant groups, even if the resulting exclusion is unintentional.

For the empowerment of disadvantaged groups in our case studies, digital skills, connectivity and access to devices play a central part but rely largely on generic and incumbent digital tools. To reach spatially scattered live-in carers, provide information and advice to them, Facebook, chat and e-mail tools are the tools of choice. For the less connected, word of mouth (or plainly, the phone) remains relevant and initiatives consider these needs as well. Similarly, rural Serbian women benefit from tablets and basic connectivity also to connect with family and friends, access local information and support children's homework – and likely, also enjoy some digital entertainment. The initiatives' information provision, awareness raising, campaigning and lobbying work are also done through established social media and content management technologies.

8.2.3. Demographic change

Demographic changes in terms of ageing societies and migration (entangled with globalisation) play more of a part in some case studies than in others. Ageing matters directly in the case of IG 24, since live-in care in Austria has been one of the ways to deliver long-term elderly care "affordably" for both care recipients and public finance. Outmigration of younger age cohorts (and the better-skilled among them) generally affects many rural and South and East European areas and contributes to the ageing of local populations – and mobile workers and jobseekers also respond to changing opportunities in both their home regions and among possible destinations. The German payment card case is unique in the sample as here, public policies are aimed to discourage undesired immigration (or at least, independently of evidence, to demonstrate such efforts to native constituencies). Elsewhere, labour shortages in national and regional labour markets support the reasoning of initiatives that improve the labour market access of people with various disabilities or health conditions and may add weight to the interest representation of live-in carers in Austria.

8.2.4. Climate change

Climate change is a minor factor in most of the case studies analysed. In rural areas, along with globalisation it contributes to increased pressures on farming that require many farms to diversify their activities and incomes. As noted above (in section 8.2.1) climate change also contributes to the appreciation of the regional, the local, and interaction with nature. Both policy and consumer choices oriented towards sustainability then provide opportunities for rural and social entrepreneurship in agriculture and food production, tourism and hospitality.

This may also affect initiatives that support labour market inclusion: training for "green jobs", in spite of or because of these jobs' variety, is likely to play a larger part for skills and training provision in the future. However, the more labour-intensive and lower-skilled segments of current and emerging "green" labour markets, such as recycling, in many countries have already been a fertile ground for social enterprises for a while.

8.2.5. Interacting and embedded megatrends

Looking back at the "megatrends" through the insights gained from the case studies, some of their features and their interactions come into better focus. Globalisation and demographic change converge in migration to Europe and from rural, remote, and impoverished regions. They result in the emergence of new(ish) transnational markets for migrant labour and migrants' services, for example in elderly care, but also in tourism, logistics or agriculture where often, low-wage and precarious work combine (Bobek & Sandström, 2024; Lillie et al., 2022). Arguably, the transnational spread of voter and policy concerns over migration is by itself a global phenomenon. However, so is the transfer of ideas and policy values of social inclusion and progress, inequality and sustainability and of related consumption patterns, choices and fashions. The global travel of ideas and values provides opportunities for social innovations and enterprises to gain support and make products and services with social value accessible.

Digitalisation centrally supports and extends that travel of ideas. Initiatives using digital tools for information, communication and awareness raising can connect internationally as well as locally, with their constituencies, related initiatives, the policy sphere and society at large. For their target groups, this mitigates the social isolation that can result from working transnationally and precariously. Empowering individuals to be aware of their rights, options and entitlements happens centrally but not exclusively via digital tools.

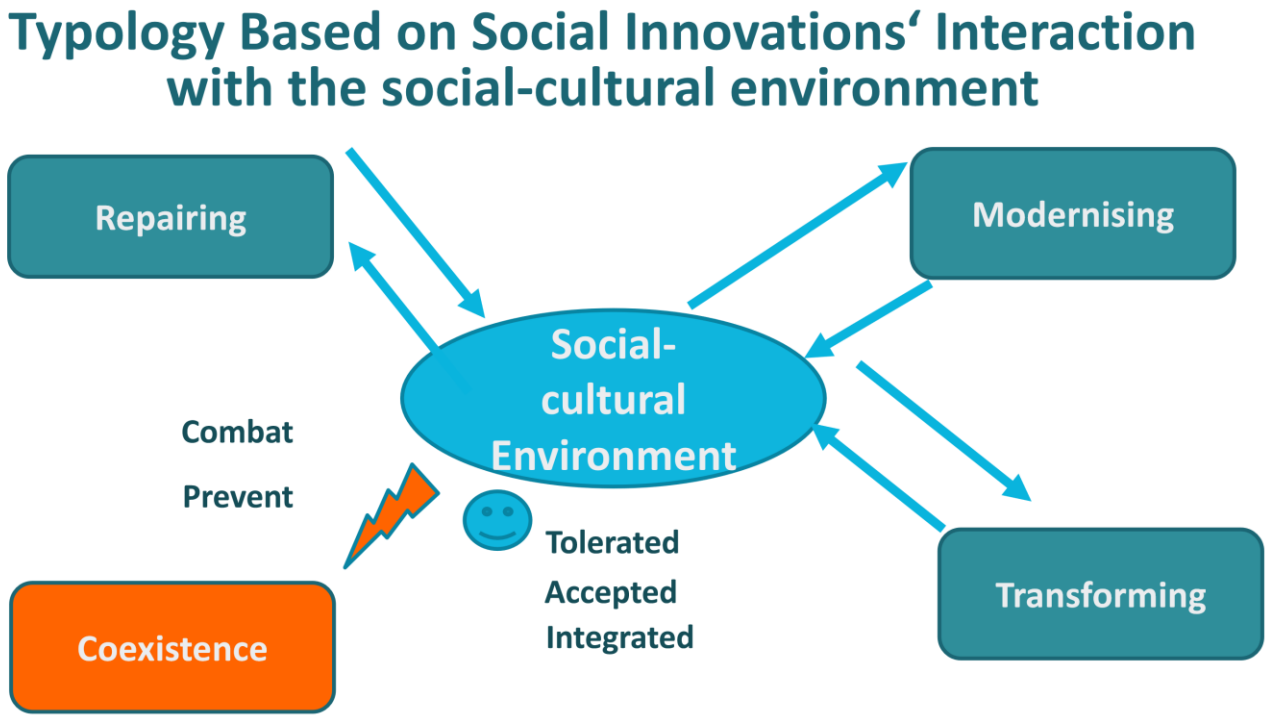
However, as we have seen, social innovations hardly ever address megatrends directly. They respond to problematic outcomes that emerge filtered through institutional arrangements, not least welfare regimes and social policies, through local conditions, resources and histories. They also respond to persistent challenges of contemporary human societies, communities and individuals: gender inequality, disabilities and health conditions that limit people's mental and physical capabilities and often carry social stigma, mobile working and the requirements of both paid and unpaid work in the analogue world, especially those of care work. This aspect has been emphasised by feminist movements and theories for a long time. It has been thrown into sharper relief through the Covid-19 pandemic when care and essential work generally gained visibility and transnational labour markets were disrupted. However, this did not impact

the current policy landscape in a sustainable way although concerns about crises in care and essential services contribute to the generalised sense of crisis and institutional erosion in many societies in Europe and the global North.

8.3. Types and practices of social innovations

To discuss the functions of social innovation in welfare states and labour markets, we can depart from a handy typology suggested by Howaldt (2017b) that can be applied to the institutional and political environment as well (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Typology of social innovations' interactions with the social-cultural environment (Howaldt, 2017)



Social innovations may aim to **"repair"** or fill gaps in social or labour market services where established market or state mechanisms do not deliver the service to particular groups. This is the first and most obvious function of the cases that promote labour market access and (re-)integration, Aktywizacja, Numero Zero, and the Care Farms. However, in order to be effective repairing, interacting with labour market, social and health services these initiatives almost inevitably deliver some **modernising** impulses to their welfare state counterparts: developing and delivering personalised and needs-based services to clients, adapting or advising on adapting work environments or regulation on spatial arrangements, they are advancing targeted, personalised and context-sensitive delivery of social services. They also make use

of creative recombinations beyond traditional boundaries of, for example, health and social services. Not least, all of them also raise awareness and advocate for the inclusion of their constituencies. This point of modernisation is especially elaborated in the analysis of the Hobotnica case in which services are delivered in a modular and holistic, needs-based way that is quite far from the focus of the institutionalised Serbian welfare state on cash transfers to the poorest populations. In the context of social innovations of social and labour market services, we do not find cases that merely coexist with these institutions.

Transformation of social policies and welfare states with an activist emphasis on combatting exclusionary social policies is the explicit target of Austrian IG 24 and the German payment cards initiatives. With a feminist agenda the Hobotnica initiative also has transformative aspirations, working to reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women and overcome its gendered, unequal division. Yet these cases, in the face of policy entrenchment and immediate needs of their target groups, also provide immediate support to their target group, raise awareness and advocate for their interest. For innovators and supporters with an activist outlook, the gap between transformative aspirations and practical work carries some frustrations.

In practice, in a context where social innovations in the shape of active labour market policies, programmes and subsidies supporting social inclusion or regional development have been partly institutionalised, not least through EU-level policies and programmes, there is considerable overlap between types of social innovations and their practices (see section 8.5).

8.3.1. Strategies

Since the initiatives investigated combine aspirations and aims on varying scales, their strategies are also multi-scalar and multi-directional. All cases combine immediate support to their constituencies with awareness raising, advocacy and combatting stigma in the wider society. All cases also connect the knowledge they are building with other bodies of expertise, collaborating with institutional practitioners, consultants in the field and applied and academic research, regionally, nationally and internationally. Hence, depending on the history of each social innovation, they are joining, developing, building and extending ecosystems of organisations working in the field, supporting institutions, policy spheres, and experts and brokers of knowledge. These ecosystems are not necessarily harmonious: competition for resources, social capital, reputation and struggles around the power to interpret interests, challenges and policy contexts play a part.

Labour market integration initiatives tend to be developed by collaborations of existing NGOs, labour market services, and professionals and associations in health and social care. They are “scaling up” their activities in several ways (BENISI, 2016; Deiglmeier, 2018; Gabriel, 2014): Aktivyzacja have expanded

their target groups and their services, also expanding connections with the regular labour market – in this case, in particular through the example of one large employer using their services, the Polish Post Office. Numero Zero networks with other restaurants to offer more employment options to its clients and also considers transferring the concept to other locations. In both cases this has entailed some adaptation of organisational structures, separating out social enterprise and non-profit activities and also led to some adaptation of regional regulation. The Care Farms especially connect actors and challenges that at first sight appear remote from each other: farms get to contribute to mental health care and rehab, involving multiple and especially diverse organisations and professions. Here, institutionalisation and some professionalisation of the healthcare innovation (in a wider context of healthcare paying attention to the social environment of patients) is at the core of the strategy.

Institutionalisation and scaling are more of a challenge in the Hobotnica case which was initiated in a collaboration of national experts in gender-responsive planning with a regional women's organisation. Since project-based funding of the initiative ended, its various elements are being regrouped: the municipality is exploring ways of taking over parts of the services and the methodology of needs-based shaping and reshaping of services, following feminist and action research methodologies, is being transferred to other projects and target groups. The project and experience also feed further into wider national debates on gender equality.

The transformational initiatives of IG 24 and those opposing the German Payment Cards are more bottom-up, but also build on earlier initiatives and networks. They connect ambitious political visions of abolishing social policies with exclusive effects with immediate practical help to those affected. In contrast to the other cases' varied scaling activities, IG 24, in exploring alternative arrangements of long-term elderly care and pursuing possibilities for piloting, see the most realistic pathway in localising their visions.

8.3.2. Opportunities, constraints and challenges

Social innovators in our study see opportunities arising from a combination of economic and normative and cultural changes: increasing public awareness of and policy initiatives on issues of inclusion, mental health, and sustainability provide opportunities already and all initiatives work to further increase that awareness. This awareness stretches across the social spheres of the state and policy, civil society, and the market and includes personal/political issues such as mental health, or local, sustainable consumption that provide (inter-)institutional and market opportunities. The more transformational initiatives (Hobotnica, IG 24 and Payment Cards) emphasise aspects of social justice, human rights and dignity specifically in their respective contexts.

For labour market initiatives and IG 24, national, regional and also transnational labour shortages can be considered opportunities to include marginalised groups into the labour market, mobilise and upgrade their skills or accelerate their (re-)integration, or to widen opportunities and alternatives for the precariously self-employed. However, labour shortages can also entail work intensification and stress for workers in the respective sector, which may render some work environments less amenable to people with disabilities or mental health conditions. They may also bring limitations in the capacities of socially innovative organisations or their public administration counterparts to support and take on board social innovations even though these can offer some gains in effectiveness in the longer run.

The institutional landscapes of support of social innovations and enterprises also provide opportunities, funds and other resources. They do not necessarily come under headings of social innovation, but all cases except the German payment card initiatives utilise programmes in active labour market policies, public health, regional development or applied research on the national, European or international level. It is not just the larger and more established organisations that use such programmes: IG 24, started only in 2020, have an impressive portfolio of research and practice collaboration with national and European funding. Indeed, IG 24 and Hobotnica were established already in collaborations of experts (social scientists in IG 24 and consultants in Hobotnica) with local practitioners and activists (live-in carers in IG 24 and a women's association in Hobotnica). Hence, they had professional and professionalising social innovators on board at their inception who are skilled in navigating the infrastructure of programmes and projects that through international organisations, EU and national funding of varied origins can provide resources to support varied objectives of the initiative.

However, project-based funding presents challenges as well: it makes for discontinuous funding, requires considerable efforts in fitting activities, budgets and organisations themselves into the requirements of programmes, and may distract capacities from immediate work on the ground. This limits project-funded organisations' strategies and creates its own frustrations and imbalances. Numero Zero and its project network are seeing themselves as somewhat locked into an experimental pilot status which gets in the way of institutionalisation.

In the Hobotnica case especially, an interplay of engagement and precarity comes into focus: the very flexibility of the service and support offers to rural women made for uncertain and on-call work for the professionals involved in delivering the services. Ironically, marginalisation and disadvantage thus are addressed through more precarious work and services. Professionalisation and institutionalisation of social innovations may thus be associated with less than favourable working conditions for the professionals.

IG 24 also rely on project funding for their activities and some of their core team move between volunteering and employment that is contingent on available project funds. They plan to use recent funding from private philanthropy to regularise employment of some team members. They also redirect some advising and counselling of live-in carers to the neighbouring, professionalised and publicly funded project "Curafair".

Other challenges of the cases involved consist in navigating legal requirements (for example, the relations of for-profit and non-profit activities), limitations to growth due to labour cost and staff turnover at Numero Zero, and due to limited capacities and limited awareness of doctors and healthcare professionals of Care Farms. In both the transformative cases that directly oppose particular policies, IG 24 and Payment Card initiatives, the political entrenchment of these policies forms a severe constraint to which both cases react with more localised and diversified strategies.

8.4. Impacts

8.4.1. Making labour markets more inclusive

The labour market initiatives in our sample manage to integrate people with disabilities or mental health conditions into the labour market, to retain them in their jobs and shorten spells of unemployment or recovery. Numero Zero and Aktivyzacja both provide training and go beyond offering a secondary labour market and enable clients' transfers into the primary one, building networks of actual and potential employers and spreading knowledge on inclusive workplaces. Logically, for all labour-market related cases this entails awareness raising and combatting the stigma attached to disabilities and mental health conditions. With both these activities, the labour market initiatives are the organisations most committed to expansion and upscaling in various formats: expansion at Aktivizacja, expansion and institutionalisation as a healthcare option for the Care Farms, networking and travel of the idea at Numero Zero.

IG 24 and the organisations in its network as well as Hobotnica similarly aim to widen the options of their constituencies, live-in carers and rural women respectively, towards employment, more informed and empowered self-employment, or generation of further income sources. This again, is combined with (psycho-)social and legal support.

8.4.2. Improving inclusion in the welfare state

Improvements in inclusion in the welfare state are happening through all initiatives. In particular, they develop individualised and holistic formats of social service and support that are based on assessing the needs of their target groups who are generally marginalised and frequently hard to reach (Ewert, 2023).

This is a continuous learning process of initiatives who may or may not use explicit co-creation methodologies with their constituencies. In engaging with their institutional environments of social policy and social, labour market, or healthcare services, they also feed their knowledge and learning into policy and public administration – which do not always have the absorptive capacities (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) to make effective use of these insights. From the Hobotnica case, Avlijaš (in this volume) concludes that it is not just a lack of capacities of (especially Eastern European) welfare states that constrains the potential of social innovations. If these initiatives aim to fill gaps in social services or render them more flexible, the rigidities on the institutional side generate extra hidden burdens or costs on service providers, as flexibility and coordination needs are not recognised in the budgets.

Still, local and incremental institutional changes are possible: Numero Zero achieved a change in the rules for the use of buildings dedicated to healthcare in the region, and Hobotnica convinced a municipality to assess citizens' needs for it to take over parts of their offers. Both Numero Zero and the Care Farms especially address a well-known challenge in user-centered health and social services: overcoming their historically and institutionally distinct domains.

8.4.3. Challenging exclusive policies

As we have seen, the most transformative cases directly oppose and challenge social policies that they consider unjust and exclusive: the politically entrenched governance of live-in care in Austria that leaves carers in precarious and low-paid self-employed positions and poorly represented in the institutions of the Austrian social partnership, and the delivery of benefits to asylum seekers through payment cards that limit cash withdrawals and generally, constrain these immigrants' free use of money they receive. Both cases do not see many political successes on these main objectives but settle for immediate help to those affected: advice, information and counselling in the case of IG 24, and offering workarounds to the payment card system and access to cash (plus the opportunity to point asylum seekers to other sources of support) in Germany. In addition, they cultivate wider networks of both knowledge building and progressive policy, and try to raise awareness, mobilise and lobby for their objectives.

8.5. Varying aspirations and converging practices

In sum, the typology suggested by Howaldt (2017) and similar distinctions of types social innovations according to their incremental or disruptive strategies and aspirations (for example Wright, 2010) can be applied to the cases investigated in this report, but it appears that in spite of their varying aspirations,

many of their practices converge on a pragmatic middle ground where impacts beyond the original objectives can be achieved:

Transformative initiatives provide direct information, support and advice to marginalised people while opposing policies that further marginalisation. The marginalisation of their target groups is intersectional, through gender, regional disadvantage and migration. Those filling gaps in social services develop and integrate new, more tailored services to constituencies that by definition have varying needs. From both ends of the continuum, individualised and holistic services are being pursued.

The experience from these practices then can feed into established social services and policies through collaborations, trajectories of joint projects, building of networks, upscaling, and also through political contestation and debate. In this process, initiatives stem from and further develop networks, communities of practice, and (not always harmonious) "ecosystems" that divide and recombine "repair" "learning" and "transformative" functions.

Yet the support of marginalised and poor people, like these groups themselves, is especially vulnerable to political neglect, cutting of public budgets, and increasingly, resentment of more vocal, native groups with the power to vote and the resulting political opportunism. In addition, the partial institutionalisation of social innovation in the shape of project-based work, with its circumscribed timelines of both funding and impact assessment and frequent requirements to deliver pre-agrees numerical KPIs is at odds with the time, capacities and patience required to sustain open-ended social learning and practice.

Hence, realising social innovations' impacts in the varied directions and on the varied scales explored here requires some commitment and openness of social innovators' institutional counterparts and collaborators. This may result from genuine interest and shared values, or from recognition of social innovators' potential to contribute to problem solving and to the development of win-win configurations in cross-domain policy fields such as regional development, urban regeneration, or public health. Current multiple crises suggest that there is no lack of opportunities and needs to creatively address these challenges. The evidence of the cases explored here shows that the common ground of context-sensitive, multi-level practices on varied scales and the variety of functions of social innovations both require and enable nimble and open-minded strategies on both sides of social innovators and institutions, with still a clear focus on social progress.

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9. Appendix: the case study reporting guideline

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This document was developed by the ZSI team and discussed with all contributors. Instead of providing detailed interview guidelines which would have needed to be translated and adapted to each case, this document focuses on the shape the reports should take to be as comparable as possible while still leaving research teams the space to do justice to each case's particular logic (cf. Holtgrewe et al., 2015).

9.1. The research process

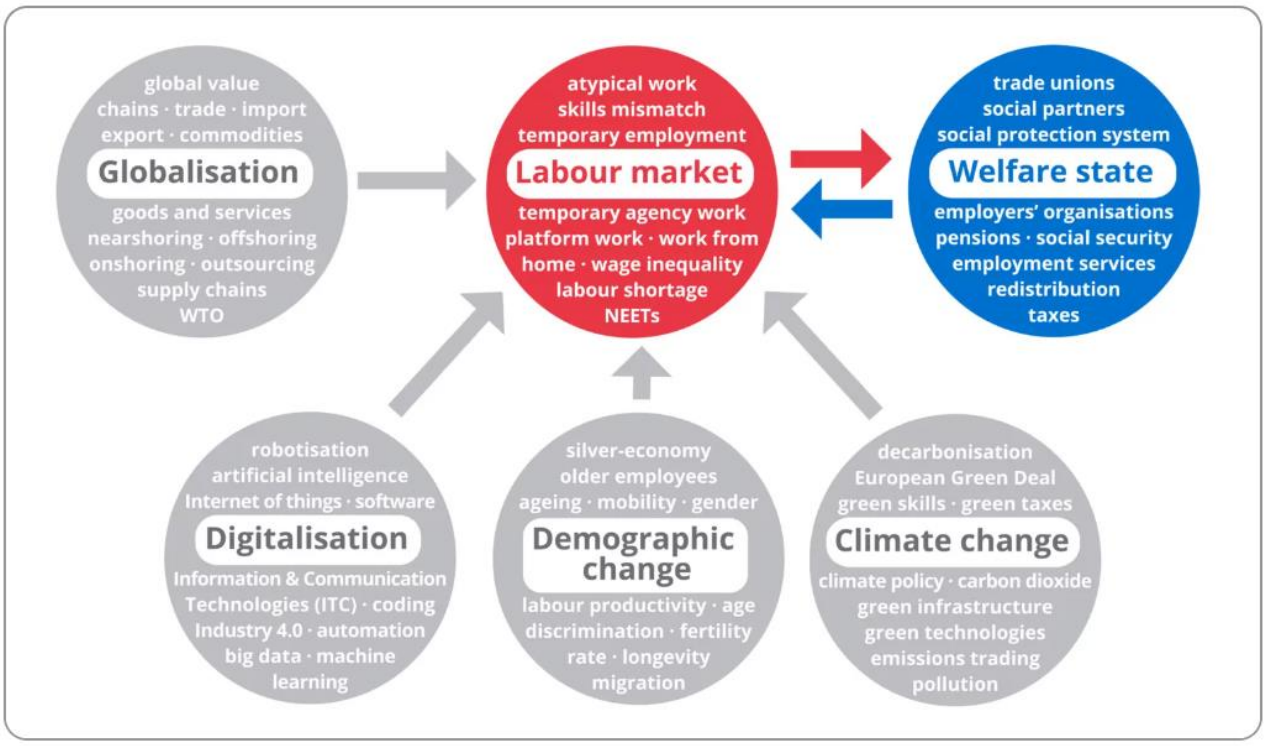
The case studies will be the basis for writing the synthesis report. This "comparative report on lessons from social innovation experimentation" will consist of all six case studies in separate chapters and one or two chapters (overview and conclusions, most likely) comparing cases within and across the thematic fields and integrating the findings. A meaningful synthesis of the certainly very rich material will only be possible if the cases are presented in a standardised way and comprehensive information is given under each heading. This reporting guideline provides the headings for the reports and the research question that should be answered under each heading.

Your report should aim for 20-25 pages in the WeLaR format. In your report, please include some (short) verbatim (anonymised) quotations from the interviews[58] to convey the 'flavour' of the case and to illustrate the respondents' views on important points of the case study. These should not take the place of description and analysis but rather add value by bringing characteristics of the case or the situation into focus.

We suggest a structure for the description of the case studies which is based on WeLaR's model of trends and (long-term) impacts. The report should follow the guideline for easy comparability and integration of findings. The guideline can also be used to devise interview guidelines and to code individual interviews or research materials. Some suggestions for interview questions are provided in the "boxes".

[58] Unless interviewees disagree with being quoted verbatim, then paraphrase.

Figure 7. WeLaR's model of megatrends and impacts (may also be shown to interviewees)



Please keep in mind that the somewhat linear logic of „megatrends" and „impacts" is to some extent challenged by the case study approach. Our focus is more on interaction with actors making sense of megatrends, pursuing their aims, and achieving intended impacts or encountering emergent ones.

A case study asks HOW questions in a "real life" context with a particular focus on action and agency in the respective context. "Megatrends" in a local, regional, or national SI case will generally materialise in a more local and specific way. Globalisation may mean factory closures, digitalisation teaching digital skills or setting up online tools – or changes in accessibility of local services. Demographic change can mean migration from rural areas, immigration, or demand for elderly care, and so on. In any case, the "megatrends" represent challenges and opportunities, are recognised, and acted upon - by whom, for whom, with whom and how?

Social innovations come in all sizes, with all kinds of aspiration – filling gaps in services or interest representation, "repair" of institutions, extension, reform, transformation.

So, the general questions are:

→How does the social innovation in question address which developments (megatrends and resulting changes) in the LM and / or the welfare state?

→Why in this way, with which aspirations, strategies, results, impacts, or constraints?

How case studies relate to other types of WeLaR findings (yours or colleagues') is to be found out. The easiest is to illustrate findings with them – but we hope to go beyond that, add depth, raise further questions, investigate social dynamics.

9.2. Chapters of the report

9.2.1. The "story" of the case

An overview of why it is interesting and basically a summary. *Maybe best written last.*

What is the case, what is its context

- What is the case about: the challenge(s) it is responding to - "solution(s)" it aims to provide – basically, how you introduced the cases in the meeting on March 14th, 2024.
- Origins ("history")
- Size, resources, funding sources
- Actors involved (initiators, alliances, promotors, stakeholders & networks), also professionals, volunteers
- Governance and its development
- Clients & target groups (also intersectional, e.g. vulnerabilities)
- Level of intervention (local, regional, national, transnational)

How does it fit into the WeLaR square of "megatrends"?

- Which ones are being addressed, which ones matter indirectly

Key impacts and ways these are being addressed or shaped

- Changes over time – new challenges and opportunities, unintended consequences, changing policy contexts … (this may be followed up under the different headings, but maybe ask the question generally at first).

9.2.2. Methodology and some practical hints

How was the case selected, accessed, how many interviews (at least 4 to 6) with whom (if possible, with different participants/stakeholders [59] to obtain a holistic perspective).

For example,

- founder and/or general director,
- person in charge of day-to-day operations or a local service,
- an important cooperation partner and/or public authority working with the case, such as local labour market services, a local politician supporting it.
- and if one or two clients or end-users can be interviewed that's very welcome, too.

Other ways of data gathering? Documents, studies commissioned, evaluation reports are of course also welcome. Any field research, also participation in events, conferences etc.? *If you can get observational data, even if it's just a tour of the premises, or spend some time in a meeting, a training or whatever, do it and take good fieldnotes, also atmosphere, etc.!*

Before you start the interview, have the interviewee sign the consent form (English version prepared by ZSI, please translate), in which they will find information about the WeLaR project and the handling of their data. You should obtain the consent of the interviewees again at the beginning of the interview recording (recording with a cell phone is possible or use a recording device). If they don't want to be recorded, take notes (works best with two interviewers) and write up as soon as possible after the interview.

For transcription, transcription software can be used (depending on language, dialects, background noise etc.) but generally requires a readthrough and copyediting of transcripts. Or have it transcribed manually (can also be outsourced). No need for our purposes to transcribe each "hm" etc. or stay very close to dialects. Literature on transcription (rules) – that can be used in case you do not use a transcription software - can

[59] Please remember that we also want to invite these stakeholders to WeLaR events, for example the expert café or a dedicated webinar. Therefore, it would be good to get their feedback on further activities and we need to make sure that we involve and invite them.

be found in footnote [60]. For the analysis of the data, we recommend software such as MAXQDA – but with some 4-6 interviews it can also be done with MS Word or even pen & paper. To code interviews, we suggest a mixture of given codes (headings of this guideline) and open coding for emerging findings and issues. Further information can be found in footnote [61].

Initial questions

We have provided you with some interview questions as suggestions, but you are welcome to adapt them to your case:

Initial interview questions (examples) – these can of course be adapted to your respective case[62]

To get the conversation going, questions from section 9.2.5 can also be asked early in the interview.

I. What is your role in the organisation / initiative? *(always a good one to start)*

II. Can you provide an overview of the organisation / project / initiative you're involved in? What challenges does it aim to address and what solutions does it offer? For whom? target groups?

III. Could you explain the origins and history of the organisation / project / initiative? Who initiated it, who was involved, who supported or promoted it over time? How is the initiative set up in terms of governance? How do you make decisions (formally, informally)?

IV. *Then, the social innovation question (section 4) may be best to ask first. depending how the interview goes, it may well work best to ask the section 3 questions first, then section 2. You can shuffle questions according to what has been said before. A good colleague of Ursula's and excellent interviewer used to cut up interview guidelines and stick each question on an index card to put aside when answered.*

[60] Kowal, Sabine, and Daniel C. O'Connell. "Transcription as a crucial step of data analysis." *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* 7(5), (2014): 64-79. https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/925510/mod_folder/content/0/Kowal_O%C2%B4Connell%20Transcription_Flick%20ed_Handbook%20%282013%29.pdf

[61] Williams, Michael, and Tami Moser. The Art of Coding and Thematic Exploration in Qualitative Research. *International Management Review* 15(1), (2019): 45-55. http://www.imrjournal.org/uploads/1/4/2/8/14286482/imr-v15n1art4.pdf

[62] For reasons of comparison, we ask you to make sure that you ask the questions in bold in the interviews. It is up to you to ask the questions that are not marked in bold.

9.2.3. Megatrends

Which megatrends play a part in the case how, directly, indirectly?

Some will be addressed directly, the case responding to them, others may intervene, some may not matter so much. Keep in mind that megatrends may represent challenges but also opportunities – for example "Green" activities responding to climate change (and to public / political attention paid to climate change). However, "megatrends" may be too abstract to directly ask about them, so we agreed that questions about megatrends need to be asked in a way clearer linked to the respective case – then assign explanations to "megatrends" when coding the data.

Globalisation

For example, in the rural social innovation literature, many challenges (gaps in infrastructure, "left behind" regions, also demographic change due to outmigration of young people) are associated with globalisation, deindustrialisation of rural areas (plus some austerity, liberalisation and centralisation policies that lead to gaps in infrastructures and social services).

Digitalisation

Response to skill gaps, employment opportunities, also maybe skills to access remote services. Also, non-trivial uses of digital tools for the case's operations, outreach etc.

Demographic change

This may not just affect the labour market but also the side of social services, "clients", gendered divisions of labour etc.

Climate change

How and where is it addressed or are impacts visible.

"Megatrends" interview questions

V.	**You've described the challenge the initiative responds to as … (*If this hasn't been explained before*:) how does this play out in your context? How would you say it fits into a view of major social changes?**
VI.	**How do other changes *(such as globalisation, digitalisation, demographic change, and climate change)* affect your project / initiative? Or: is structural change (of industries and services) / immigration/out-migration/population ageing/changing demographics / digitalisation / climate change an issue in your context?**

9.2.4. Impacts

For our purposes, the labour market and welfare state will appear as both context and a target of action for social innovation!

Social innovations generally *aim* to achieve specific impacts, so intention and aspiration play a part here. However, there may be further positive or negative impacts, unintended consequences, emerging opportunities.

In cases where programmes and public initiatives play a part, they may set themselves specific targets which may also be evaluated. In that case, a common evaluation approach distinguishes „outputs" (measurable and countable things such as # of training participants), „outcomes", that is, effects for the target groups or beneficiaries (results of that training, better skills in …) , and „impacts" in the sense of effects on the wider community, place, society. *However, ours is not an evaluation as such, more a reconstruction.*

- Which impacts does the case pursue, what has been achieved? Low-hanging fruits, difficulties, "mission creep", changes made?
- It would be generally interesting to know whether an evaluation has already been carried out and what the results were (hard facts).

Labour market

- Context (national, regional, target groups) – this will likely overlap with welfare state information, if for example labour market services are involved
- Labour supply
- Labour demand (client side where appropriate, also public procurement, services provided), for example, networks and reputation for job placements
- Institutions, interest representation, interfaces with social partners
- Changes in skills, employment, perspectives – anticipated and materialised?

Welfare state and public finance

- Function and changes: Provision/extension of social services, complementarity, "repair", reform?
- Prevention / mitigation of unfavourable impacts of megatrends? (also, potentially?)
- Governance and funding sources generally (developments, challenges, adaptations over time?) – any insights on impacts on public finance in terms of cost, savings, "social return on investment"

- Interfaces with public authorities, private sector, NGOs, civil society, networks – supporters, promotors, allies, adversaries?
- Policies / Politics (also power dynamics, conflicts of interest, maybe "winners and losers"?)
- "Beyond" problem-solving: empowerment, democratisation (if applicable) – and its limitations

"Impacts" interview questions

VII.	**What are the key impacts of the organisation / project / initiative, and how have they evolved over time?**
VIII.	**Have you encountered changes in policy contexts and societal needs? How has the organisation / project / initiative adapted?**
IX.	Have there been any unexpected or unintended consequences or emerging opportunities?
X.	Do you monitor outcomes and impacts in some way? How?
XI.	**How does the organisation / project / initiative interact with the labour market (*or another relevant context*)? Did it achieve changes in terms of qualifications, employment, and prospects? For your clients, in the local economy, or through policy?**
XII.	Have there been changes in both supply and demand in the labour market? For example, public procurement and service provision?
XIII.	**In what ways does the organisation / project / initiative contribute to the welfare state and public finance? Where do you see its focus: provision of services that aren't provided otherwise, filling gaps, reaching underserved, or excluded groups, "repairing", reforming of social services? Something else?**

9.2.5. Social innovation

- Opportunities and constraints
- Prerequisites of success / risks and challenges
- Mobilisation of knowledge and support, collaborations (e.g. with universities or training and education facilities), networks (any connections with / on the European level) – *also with a view to Interviewees' / organisations' / stakeholders' interest in involvement in WeLaR (we're thinking of WPs 7 and 8 there!)*
- Aspirations and strategic outlook
- Communications and visibility
- Process dynamics: institutionalisation, adaptation, modes of collaboration, participation?

- Transferability and scalability: not just getting bigger but adding on, integrating, complementary social innovations needed or developed – *however, many social innovations are local and modest in their outlook and level of operations*.

Social innovation interview questions [63]

XIV.	**How does the organisation / project / initiative interact with public authorities, policymakers, private sector, and civil society?**
XV.	**Is participation of your target groups / clients etc. a subject for you? How does it work? Where is it difficult?**
XVI.	**Has the organisation / project / initiative encountered any governance or funding challenges, and how did you meet them?**
XVII.	What are the opportunities and constraints faced by the organisation / project / initiative? In what regards do you feel you've been successful, and why? Any disappointments?
XVIII.	**How does the organisation / project / initiative mobilize knowledge, support, and collaborations, including any connections on the European level?**
XIX.	How does it communicate its goals and ensure visibility?
XX.	**What are the aspirations and strategic outlook of the organisation / project / initiative? Are you looking to expand, add other services or activities? What would it take to achieve further goals?**
XXI.	How would you summarise the "history" of the organisation / project / initiative? Can you think of an image that describes it?
XXII.	**Anything we haven't talked about or that you would like us especially to keep in mind?**

9.2.6. Conclusions

- What's new, what's surprising, what does the case stand for, what's to be learned from it.

Also: how does it relate to WeLaR's general outlook? What is to be learned from the case – also for WeLaR at large? *You may want to refine conclusions after the comparative meeting planned for September 2024.*

[63] In interviewing, we recommend asking the social innovation interview questions first, together with the initial questions.

WeLaR is Horizon Europe research project examining the impact of digitalisation, globalisation, climate change and demographic shifts on labour markets and welfare states in Europe. It aims to improve the understanding of the individual and combined effects of these trends and to develop policy proposals fostering economic growth that is distributed fairly across society and generates opportunities for all.

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