

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SMART SPECIALISATION: Opportunities for Atlantic Regions

Carla Nogueira¹, Hugo Pinto² & Fábio Sampaio²

CIEO – Research Centre for Spatial and Organizational Dynamics, University of Algarve. Portugal¹
Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra. Portugal²

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation is a concept that has been widely used, both in academic and political discourse, and implies the development and implementation of new ideas to meet explicit or latent social needs using shared and co-produced knowledge. It is a phenomenon whose analysis has increased considerably in the last decade but, nevertheless, some conceptual overlaps and fragmentations still persist. This is a cross-cutting trend in innovation studies. This highlights the need to develop a more multilevel approach to innovation. Smart specialisation strategies are an example of this type of multilevel approach and require the identification of strategic domains that anchor the economic and social development of the regions. This development must also meet the specific needs of each territory. This article starts from the analysis of five Atlantic regions to understand how the social innovation dimension is present in the strategies of smart specialization. The results suggest that while there is an effort to integrate social innovation as a strategic priority, innovation trends are still largely based on the development of high technology.

1. Introduction

The 2007 crisis has devastated many domains of public life, austerity has plagued various economies and social sectors, resulting in the necessity of finding a new way to solve social issues, social needs and social challenges. In this context, the dynamics of social innovation as a possible path for the economic and, above all, social restructuring of European regions began to be recognized. An example of this recognition is, on the one hand, the increasing interest in this subject by academic reflections and, on the other hand, the introduction of the concept into the political and strategic discourse of the European Union. Today, social innovation is one of the strategic designs for the EU.

In this sense, it is important to realize how the development strategies of the European regions reflect the issues of social innovation as a priority and as a mechanism for solving social needs and activating social and economic development. Today, European development strategies must be anchored in processes of smart specialisation. This means that regions should develop mechanisms to identify their strategic domains. Smart Specialisation Strategies emerged has a stepping-stone in the 2014-2020 period and suggests that regions should understand their capacities and select domains, technological or not, where they can excel compared to others. This means promoting a new paradigm of innovation where the idea that regions need to emulate successful models from more technology

intensive regions is abandoned, emphasizing the importance of mobilizing alternative paradigms of innovation to activate regional development, like for example, social innovation.

This article analyses the smart specialisation strategies of five Atlantic regions: Portugal, Spain, France, Ireland and UK and seeks to relate these two approaches and/or political processes in order to understand the innovation tendencies of these regions and how they recognize the social innovation domain as a priority for their development. In order to achieve this, it uses a mixed methodological strategy, based, in a first moment, on the data provided by the interactive platform EYE@RIS3 and, secondly, mobilizes content analysis techniques to deepen the data and provide a more comprehensive view of the results.

The text is divided as follows: in the first part this paper will arrange and organize the dynamic trajectory and current intellectual structure of the field of social innovation research, emphasizing its connections with smart specialization strategies; then, the methodological approach is explained. Subsequently, the main results of the study are presented. The paper ends with conclusions and policy implications.

2. Social Innovation and smart specialisation

2.1 The “fashionable” concept of Social Innovation

The concept of ‘social innovation’, although nowadays widely used and at the same time a “fashionable” term, still has some intrinsic doubts in its definition. The fast development of this research field during the last decade has created a multitude of concepts, definitions and research configurations, leading to a lack of clarity about the meaning, field of study and “jurisdiction“ of the concept (Van Der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016).

According to recent studies based on bibliometric analyses aimed to understand the increasing academic interest of this concept (Ayob et al., 2016; Van Der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016) is argued that it was in the last decade that researches in social innovation started growing exponentially and became more widespread, complete, precise and accurate. Although the social innovation concept has been mentioned and treated for some time by the scholars and by the academic literature, only in the last decade has it started to be more used and connoted to the use that is made of it today (Van Der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016).

Although there is an interest on the part of the stakeholders to know more about social innovation, why this interest? And why the need to spread social innovation measures? Nowadays, individuals are experiencing new challenges, new struggles, new ways of living and facing life and even the society. Every day there are social challenges to be overcome; today's needs are not the needs of yesterday, this because culture, customs and even the hermeneutics of what it is to live in a globalized society has new challenges, which translate into new social need policies. So the emergence of social innovation as a response to these new challenges and needs emerges as a goal—a solution to the new societal problems.

Murray et al. (2010), states that, existing structures and policies have found it impossible to crack some of the most pressing issues of our times such as climate change, the worldwide epidemic of chronic disease, and widening inequality. According to Comeau’s (2004), when there are crisis scenarios, the governments tend to privilege investment linked to increasing competitiveness to the detriment of the social sphere, as well as the potential and effective social exclusion associated with it. In these cases, and others, this can generate new needs and problems of a collective nature that end up

motivating social innovations.

The conceptualization of social innovation, in spite of its great diffusion, is still fragmented: there is a lack of comprehensive definition that is globally accepted. Although recent efforts to define and clarify its meaning, social innovation concept is therefore still considered rather ambiguous. The social innovation concept itself has been ambiguous due to a plurality of definitions, perspectives and research settings (Dawson & Daniel, 2010; Van Der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). The hermeneutics of the conceptualization of the concept itself is fragmented and dissipated. The literature remains fragmented, disconnected, and scattered among different fields (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

However, it is safe to highlight that social innovations are novelties that are social in both their ends and means. A measure of social innovation can't only have its innovation at the end. The methods by which the solutions are reached must also be innovative. To better understand the concept, it can be "deconstructed". First there is the 'innovation' – this refers to the ability to create and implement novel ideas which are proven to deliver value. Then 'social' – this refers to the kind of value that innovation is expected to deliver, that is, a value that is less concerned with profit and more with issues such as quality of life, solidarity and well-being. In that case, "social" refers to the needs of groups, communities or segments of society which are more vulnerable and less able to be involved or benefit from the value generated by the market economy (Advisers Bureau of European Policy, 2011). Focusing now on a more institutional definition, which also corroborates what has been said so far, the Guide to Social Innovation (2013), argues that social innovation is a tool that is able to integrate various stakeholders to address social needs and societal challenges. It has the "power" to solve social problems with fewer fundings. Thus, social innovation is a tool that can provide us with new, more efficient answers, able to deliver with fewer resources.

In this sense, social innovation might be regarded as the development and implementation of new ideas to meet explicit or latent social challenges and needs using shared and co-produced knowledge that are innovative in both their ends and their means. A social innovation can be a product, a technology, an idea, a process, and so on. That innovation can lead to productivity growth, economic performance and to the affordable access of quality goods and services creating livelihood opportunities for the excluded population, and on a long term sustainable basis with a significant outreach.

The social innovation concept has definitively entered the European Union Agenda. In addition, entrepreneurship and the knowledge-based society is at the core of Europe 2020 Strategy. Europe 2020, the EU's leading strategy, aims at a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. It also points to social innovation as one of the avenues to explore to attain its targets. Massey and Johnston-Miller (2016) takes the view that, at the European level, social innovation cuts across a range of policy areas and was developed under the Social Innovation Initiative with the aim of mainstreaming social innovation policies through the Horizon 2020 strategic framework for research and innovation.

In order to conclude this section corresponding to the contemporaneousness, relevance and dissemination of the social innovation concept, the growing research observed in the last years may be due to the increasing social changes that have brought new social needs and challenges to the social, cultural, economic and financial sphere, which can be translated into new opportunities (Advisers Bureau of European Policy, 2011). In conclusion, the recent research and interest about this subject can be explained, first of all, by the necessity that these new social needs and challenges bring to us, and second, by the growing interest that social innovation brings to partners, stakeholders, to the economy, to the society and therefore to the European Union.

2.2 Smart Specialisation – a multi approach to innovation

Like social innovation, the concept of smart specialisation also began to cause a lot of interest in the European Community. Despite its short life, (the concept was "discovered" in 2008), it began to have a significant impact on the political sphere. It is well known that the concept is one of the key elements of the Europe 2020 innovation plan (Foray et al., 2011). Therefore, the EU Commission has decided to build a smart specialisation strategy known as "S3", to support the region's efforts to devise and implement S3. These strategies aim to support regions in their struggle to achieve the goals of the Europe 2020 (Dubois et al., 2017). Thus, according to Richardson, et al. (2014), S3 is based in the region's need to differentiate themselves, through specialisation in sectors where they have a comparative advantage, if they wish to reach economies of scale and scope.

From the S3 perspective, regions are seen as essential for the development of specialised measures (Richardson et al., 2014). The smart specialisation, first involves the discovery of what makes a local knowledge base original and somewhat unique, and second, smart specialisation must not be associated with a strategy of the simple industrial specialisation of a particular region; instead, smart specialisation is about research, development and innovation and it might support innovation processes by aligning knowledge dynamics and the specific socio-economic, institutional and geographical conditions encountered in each region (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2013; Morgan, 2013; Foray et al., 2011).

Operationalize the S3 concept into practice requires collective action. It requires the so-called process of entrepreneurial discovery, that seeks to bring together and consolidate multiple entrepreneurial knowledge sets currently dispersed through a range of actors, such as firms, higher education institutions, independent inventors and innovators. Besides that, S3 also needs public policy interventions at several distinct stages in the identification, evaluation and target support for new, emerging lines of regional specialisation. In this sense, smart specialisation might be regarded as a multi approach to achieve innovation.

The outcome of the process should be more than a simple technological innovation but rather a structural evolution of the whole regional economy. In this sense, this innovation approach seeks to reflect what are the strategic domains of the regions, so as to enhance their economic and social development. This social and economic development, in turn, advocates responding to the specific needs of a given region or territory.

2.3 Social innovation and smart specialisation: What relationship?

There is an economic side to social innovation. Social innovation, in order to be globally accepted and applied, is not only a tool to respond to new social problems, but also a tool to address global challenges and ensure economic performance (Advisers Bureau of European Policy, 2011). The following study attest that there is a social side in smart specialisation that seeks the engagement, inclusion and empowerment of individuals in the activity that promotes regional specialisation and development.

Thus, according to the Guide to Social Innovation (2013), there is a great potential of social innovation in economic and regional development. This is because, in the same way that social needs then evolve, due to structural changes, there must be an adaptation of social policies and then find economic solutions in times of change in order to promote social and economic growth. It is indeed observable that there is a concern for social innovation in the economic sector, as well, with the training of specific locations to solve specific problems from new ideas. In this way, it can be verified that there

is a correlation between the two concepts (social innovation and smart specialisation). Therefore, it is appropriated and plausible to say that the smart specialisation can have its voice from some forms of social innovation, since, social and societal challenges call for specific answers that have to be found locally, and social innovation is able to mobilize local actors and create localised responses (European Commission, 2013).

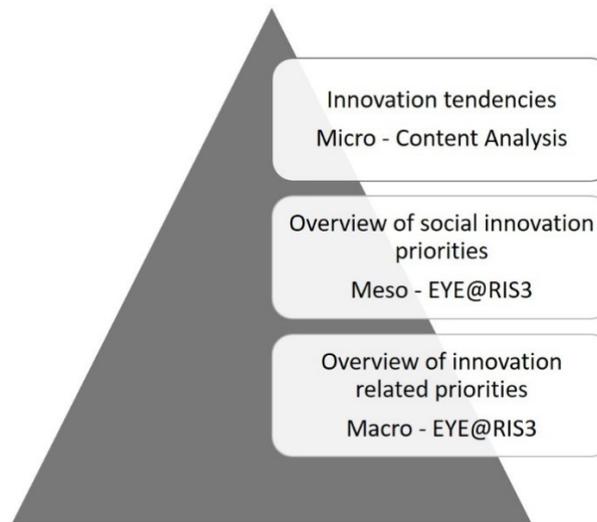
In conclusion, social innovation can combine both the solutions to social and economic problems; that being said, it's safe to say that there may be some regional forms of smart specialisation that can be "guided" by social innovation. Thus, the social problems, and how they can be solved, can be "smart" and at the same time "specialised". In a logic of smart specialisation strategy, the individuals and the society can specialise a region, in terms of new products and services that meet social needs, and since one of the "flags" of the smart specialisation is R&D and innovation, this can be achieved with some forms of social innovation. This line of thought, may also include new organisational models and social relations that meet social needs too. In addition, there are domains of specialisation that are usually public that are increasingly being privatized, such as health care, elder care, child care, education, etc, which may have an RIS3 base that, in turn, can be based on forms of social innovation that will fulfil various social needs. There is also have the social problems of sustainability and the environment that can and should be solved with prospects for social innovation, and in this way, specific sectors and domains can be created, which in turn can create a region's specialisation in these domains.

The final assumption about this subject may be that, the correlation between the two concepts is not easy and is rarely made, and may be somewhat "dichotomous". But if the two concepts are thought, as both having a social and economic dimension, it is noticeable that there is a strong correlation and interconnection between the two. The social innovation can be used and spread from the logic of the smart specialisation strategy; in addition to this, the S3 can be implemented in certain sectors and domains of the regions from a logic and measures of social innovation that can bring a differentiation of the regions, achieving in this way the smart specialisation, and then, create competitive and economic advantages.

3. Methodology

The study was carried out based on the analysis of 5 case studies. The selected cases are European regions of the Atlantic Area, namely: Portugal, Spain, Ireland, United Kingdom and France. The selected cases met two main criteria: on the one hand, being an Atlantic Area region and, on the other hand, being in the process of developing, in an incipient or consolidated way, their smart specialisation strategies.

This study is based on a qualitative approach in order to address two main goals. On the one hand, it seeks to understand which are the most present dimensions of innovation in the smart specialisation strategies of the Atlantic regions and, on the other hand, to perceive in detail the contours of the acknowledgement and identification of social innovation as a priority domain for social and economic development of these regions. In order to respond to the two identified objectives, the methodological approach was divided into three stages.

Figure 3.1 – Methodological Approach

Source: Own Elaboration

In the first stage, we sought to understand how the regions under study incorporated the different dimensions of innovation in their development strategies (macro), focusing the analysis on the insertion of priorities related to social innovation (meso). This first step was conducted using the platform EYE@RIS3¹. This platform is an online and interactive database created by the Smart Specialization Platform (S3P), which aggregates the innovation related information across Europe and that arises from the need to support European regions in the development process of their RIS3, helping strategy development and implementation.

Although originally designed to assist member states in developing their innovation strategies, the information and outputs the platform aggregates can be used by researchers. The data available on the platform comes from the national and regional public managers and from European Commission staff, who encode the data based on the approved RIS3 documents. The goal of using this platform was to access to an overview of regions' priorities. Although it allows access to the information processed in an open and interactive way that allows several combinations of variables and dimensions, the use of this platform must be done in a cautious way and allied with other methodological steps that allow to corroborate and deepen the results.

In order to overcome this limitation, the second methodological stage comprised sub-regions of the countries under analysis. The sub-regions analysed were selected for being part of the partnership consortium of the European project “Atlantic Social Lab” and are: Centre and North of Portugal, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Aquitaine and Brittany in France, Galicia and Asturias in Spain and Ireland. The second phase focused on an in-depth approach of the RIS3 final documents (micro), which were analysed through content analysis, using the software Nvivo.

This process was conducted through the creation of categories related to innovation and then the information was codified into the categories created.

¹ <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/map>

4. Results

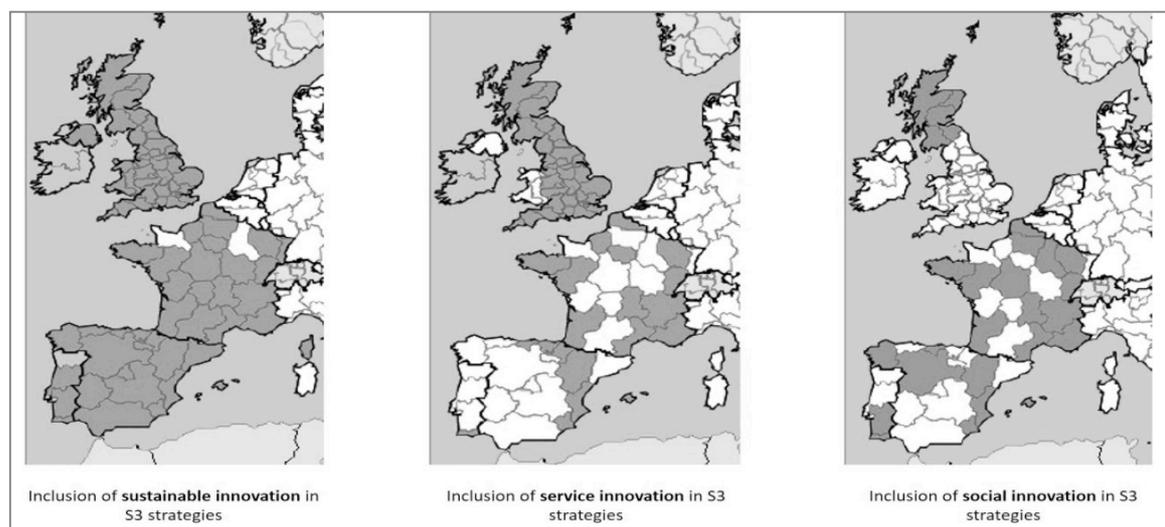
4.1 Innovation Tendencies of Atlantic Regions

Innovation is a strategic goal for all European regions, which should outline their strategies anchored in development that gives priority to research and innovation. However, the concept of innovation presents an excessive conceptual fragmentation, which is also reflected in the definition of strategies and the identification of priorities related to innovation.

An analysis of smart specialization strategies allows to perceive which are the tendencies of innovation of the regions under analysis. In this sense, this paper sought to understand how the regions of the Atlantic incorporated the priorities related to innovation in their RIS3. The S3 priorities in Europe are defined in the tool through three categories: Economic Domains, Scientific Domains and EU Policy Objectives. The last category is composed of ten EU policy areas each with a set of various sub-categories - corresponding to the so called 'Societal Grand Challenges' identified in Horizon2020 and the headline policies in the Innovation Union Flagship Initiative, including Creative and Cultural Industries, KETs, Social Innovation and the Digital Agenda (www.s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu).

For this analysis only the categories and subcategories of EU policy objectives that were directly related to innovation were selected. In this sense, 3 policy objectives related to innovation were identified: sustainable innovation, service innovation and social innovation. The following figure shows how the regions under study incorporate each of these innovation domains in their RIS3 which gives an overview of the innovation related priorities and which domains the regions consider to be more strategic for their development and consequently more present in their strategies.

Figure 4.1 – Atlantic Innovation Tendencies



Source: Own elaboration using EYE@RIS3

From a macro perspective, the first aspect that is possible to perceive is that there is a predominant tendency in the analyzed regions of the incorporation of strategic lines associated to sustainable innovation. The sub-priorities of this dimension of innovation are directly related to the development of high technology. Although there are efforts in theorizing and reflection that place innovation as a multidisciplinary process that is not always associated with technological development, there are still some shortcomings in this regard. This predominant trend, when compared with the other dimensions of innovation under analysis, allows to understand that there is still a trend to associate the

dynamics of innovation with high-technological development.

Another aspect that is important to highlight is the similarities between service innovation and social innovation. In fact, the existence of strategic priorities codified within these two dimensions of innovation is well balanced. This may be related to the conceptual fragmentation that has already been addressed and that, on the one hand, can represent a potentiality because it allows a greater theoretical baggage to analyse the phenomena but on the other hand, it represents a limitation due precisely to these overlaps between concepts that surpass the theoretical scale and are also reflected in the definitions of development strategies.

4.2 Social Innovation in Atlantic Regions

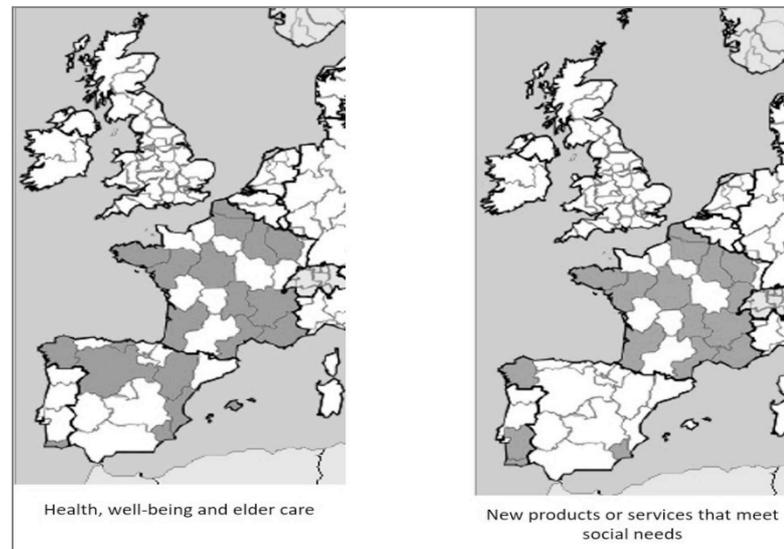
One of the main goals of this study was to understand how the Atlantic regions incorporate the social innovation into their smart specialization strategies. The insertion of priorities in RIS3 allows to have an overview of the strategic paths of the regions and in this sense, the analysis of the insertion of social innovation gives some insights in order to apprehend if the regions under analysis identifies this dimension of innovation as a strategic priority for its development. So the meso level methodological step focused on the specific analysis of social innovation. In this sense, it was verified the insertion of the different sub-priorities provided in the platform. Table 4.1 shows these sub-priorities.

Table 4.1 – Sub-priorities of Social Innovation in the EYE@RIS platform

EU policy objective /Priority	Sub-priority
Social Innovation	New products or services that meet social needs
	New organizational models & social relations that meet social need
	Social innovation with regard to health, well-being and elder care
	Social innovation with regard to child care
	Social innovation with regard to education, skills and training
	Social innovation with regard to environmental issues
	Social innovation with regard to social inclusion

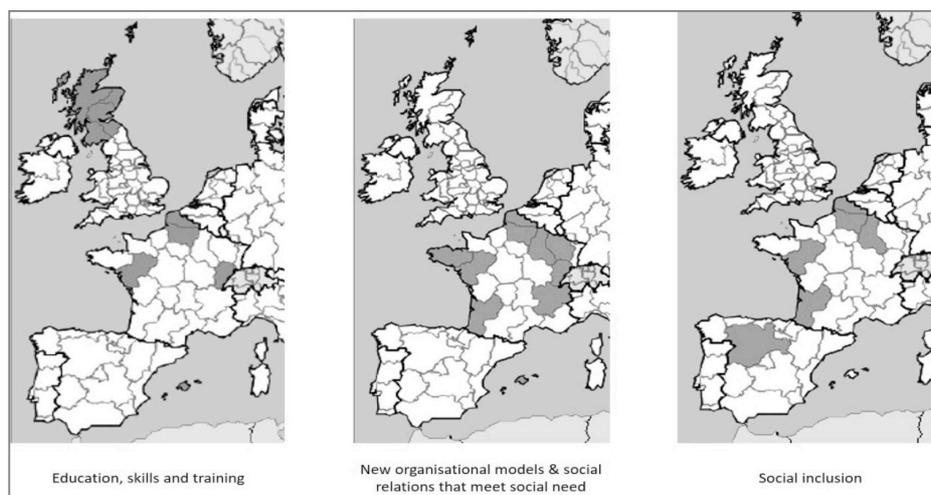
Source: Own elaboration

Of the seven sub-priorities foreseen on the platform it is possible to acknowledge that there is a pronounced discrepancy with respect to its insertion. There are sub-priorities that are largely coded in the RIS3 of the Atlantic regions while others have almost no insertion. These data allow to achieve a better understanding of the dimensions of social innovation that these regions consider the most important to address in order to build a development strategy that encompasses the improvement of social and economic environment.

Figure 4.2 – Social innovation sub-priorities more addressed in the Atlantic Regions

Source: Own elaboration using EYE@RIS3

As it can be seen in figure 4.2, the social innovation sub-priorities highlighted by the Atlantic regions as the most important in their development strategies are related to the development of new products and services that aim to meet social needs and health, well-being and elder care. One of the most codified sub-priorities is related to strategies aimed at developing ideas that seek to meet social needs. The insertion of this sub-priority is relatively easy to understand, since it clearly has general contours that allow a greater suitability of the strategies to the specific needs of the regions that may not be equated with any others of the seven identified in the platform. The health, well-being and, above all, the need to develop strategies that advocate care for the elderly are crucial in societies that are demographically aging, as is the case in the European Union. In this sense, it is possible to verify that the Atlantic regions acknowledge this need and are committed, through their development strategies, to fill it in order to overcome this transversal social problem.

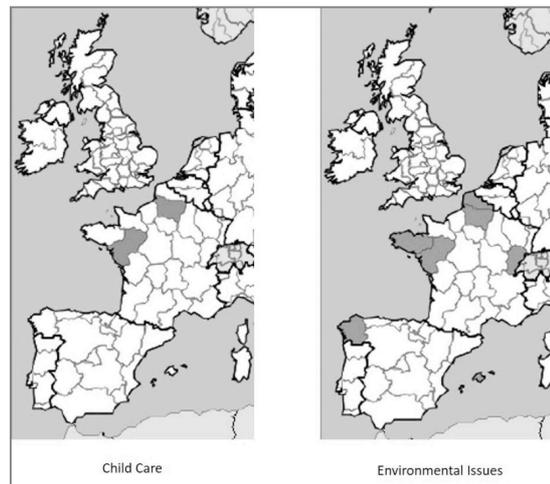
Figure 4.3 - Social innovation sub-priorities medium addressed in the Atlantic Regions

Source: Own elaboration using EYE@RIS3

The sub-priorities moderately addressed in the smart specialisation strategies of the Atlantic regions under analysis are those that are related to education, skills and training, new organisational models and social relations and social inclusion. Ireland and Portugal have none of these sub-priorities

identified in their development strategies. UK and France acknowledge the importance to strengthen the education, skills and training sector which they consider to be one of the main foundations for a society capable of developing innovative dynamics and thus fortifying the economic and social environment, by increasing competitiveness and generating knowledge and added value. France is the only region under analysis that considers the improvement of new organisational models and social relation as an important vector for their development.

Figure 4.4 - Social innovation sub-priorities less addressed in the Atlantic Regions



Source: Own elaboration using EYE@RIS3

The social innovation sub-priorities which are less codified in the development strategies of these regions are related with child care and environmental issues. France is one of the European regions with the large number of sub-priorities codified in its regional strategies, emphasizing also the importance of these two sub-priorities in specific sub-regions of the country. Galicia, in Spain, also highlighted the importance of developing initiatives that seek to respond to environmental issues. The low insertion of this dimension may be related to the fact that the discussion on environmental problems is driven mainly by macro perspectives that advocate the development of sustainable high technology that might be already codified in the EU policy objective “sustainable innovation”. This makes it possible to realize that there is scarce recognition of micro approaches in fulfilling environmental needs.

4.3 Innovation Tendencies in a Micro Approach

The use of the platform has some limitations. The fact that the information contained in the platform can be inserted by the regions themselves can be translated into some factors that can condition and skew the validity of the results. Information update mismatches, informatics errors, insertion difficulties, and inadequacies when coding the domains are some of the limitations that may occur. Acknowledging these shortcomings, it was decided to develop a more in-depth analysis of the smart specialization strategies of the regions under analysis, in order to validate the previously presented data.

In this sense, the final RIS3 documents of some European sub-regions were collected and content analysis were conducted. The selected territories are regions of the countries previously analysed and are partners of the Atlantic Social Lab project consortium: Centre and North of Portugal, Scotland and Northern Ireland in UK, Aquitaine and Brittany in France, Galicia and Asturias from

Spain and Ireland. The documents were explored using content analysis techniques through *NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QSR International Pty, Ltd., version 11.1, 2015)*. Content analysis can be understood as a qualitative technique focused on the interpretation and the interconnection of certain explicit or latent dimensions of analysis in all types of written documents (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this case, the categories were created based on the strategic domains related to innovation identified by the European Commission and present on the EYE@RIS3 platform, as well as taking into account the latent dimensions that emerged from the documents under analyse (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 - Categories created for Content Analysis

Category	Description
Policy related innovation	Priorities related to the improvement of specific local policies and/or governance models
High Tech related innovation	Priorities related to the development of advanced technologies, in several strategic domains (biotechnology, blue growth, transports, aeronautics, etc.)
Sustainable related innovation	Priorities related to the sustainable development of assets and to water and energy efficiency. It includes the eco-innovation priorities
Public services related innovation	Priorities specifically related with the improvement of security, public health and well-being
Traditional sectors related innovation	Priorities that acknowledge the potentialities of the traditional sectors of the region and aimed its development and connection with other priorities
Cultural related innovation	Priorities related to the digital agenda, cultural and creative industries and with the regional history and heritage

Source: Own Elaboration

Another technique used was the quantification of qualitative information - it allows to verify the prevalence of a certain idea among the documents and to suggest the amplitude and relevance of a given topic in the analyse (Namey et al., 2008). Subsequently, the next step was to identify the occurrence of categories in the text, and finally, the interpretation and accounting of these occurrences. In this sense, the text was codified into categories and after this process, it was verified the weight of each category in each of the cases (sub-regions) under analysis. The results obtained are summarized in table 4.3.

Table 4.3 – Innovation related priorities in S3 strategies of the Atlantic Regions

Innovation Related	Centre (Portugal)	North (Portugal)	Scotland (UK)	Northern Ireland (UK)	Aquitaine (France)	Brittany (France)	Galicia (Spain)	Asturias (Spain)	Ireland
Policy related innovation	x	x	-	x	x	xx	x	xx	xxx
High Tech related innovation	xxxx	xxxx	xxxx	xxxx	xxxx	xxx	xxx	xxxx	xxxx
Sustainable related innovation	xxx	xx	xxx	xxxx	xxx	xxxx	xxxx	xx	xxx
Public services related innovation	xx	xxx	xx	xxx	xxxx	xxx	xx	xxx	xxx
Traditional sectors related innovation	xxx	x	-	x	x	x	xx	x	-
Cultural related innovation	xx	xx	xxx	xx	x	x	-	-	xxx

Source: Own Elaboration

The number of crosses represents the weight of each category in the smart specialization strategies of the sub-regions identified in the table. As is possible to see the in-depth content analysis allows corroborating the data collected and analyzed through the platform. In fact, there is a cross-cutting trend across all the Atlantic regions considered which is reflected in the primacy of the inclusion of priorities that regard high technology related innovation which means emphasizing the need to develop advanced technologies, in several strategic domains, like biotechnology, blue growth, transports, aeronautics, among others. In line with the results presented by the platform, it is possible to consolidate the idea that priorities related to the development of products, processes and models that seek to address the consequences of climate change and unsustainable use of resources are one of the priorities of the Atlantic regions.

Priorities related to the improvement of specific local policies and/or governance models, codified as policy related innovation, along with cultural related innovation and priorities that acknowledge the potentialities of the traditional sectors of the region and aimed its development and connection with other priorities are the least foreseen in the development strategies of these regions. This may be related to the fact that they are transversal areas whose development and dynamization can be supported by the increase in other areas.

In general, these exploratory and descriptive data provide insight into what are the priorities that the regions under analyse consider as priorities for their economic and social development. Smart specialisation strategies require a multilevel and bottom-up process, based on the acknowledgement of the strategic actor's perceptions, regarding the difficulties and potential of their territories with respect to innovation. Considering that this process occurs based on these premises and taking into account that

these data result from the analysis of these strategies, it is possible to infer that these are the priorities that the actors consider as more priority in order to fill the difficulties and maximize the potential of their territories.

5. Conclusion

Social innovation is a phenomenon that has gained an increased interest in recent decades, placing it as one of the strategic objectives for the development of the European Union. Although this acknowledgement has been reflected in a greater number of academic contributions that seek to clarify the intrinsic meaning of the concept, some difficulties still remain in its definition. This increased visibility of the domain of social innovation turns out to be one of the contributing factors to these difficulties. Social innovation is a “buzz-word” and its definition and heuristic value is not yet consolidated.

This problem is transversal to innovation studies and is witnessed an excessive conceptual fragmentation. This may represent a potentiality because it allows to have a greater conceptual baggage to analyze the subjects but at the same time it ends up to be a limitation because the boundaries between the concepts are not always clear and mainly because this fragmentation is not only conceptual but is also reflected in the definition of strategies. Studies that seek to analyse social innovation through smart specialization strategies make this tendency clear.

The results on the innovation tendencies of the Atlantic regions are an example of this issue, namely through the existing differentiation between social innovation and service innovation, when in literature it is possible to understand that service innovation is one of the essential dimensions of social innovation, not different types of innovation. Another aspect that the results show is that although there is an effort on the part of the analysed regions, innovation strategies still emphasize high technological development as the main path to innovation. However, technological innovation and social innovation can be seen as an interrelated process, this because social innovation refers to a large revitalization of the social aspects involved in any kind of innovation, technological innovation included.

Specifically, in relation to the dimensions of social innovation that are most commonly found in the smart specialization strategies and, consequently, those that the regions consider the most important to address are those related to the development of new products and services that aim to meet social needs and health, well-being and elder care. The primacy of these dimensions rather than others may be related to the fact that the former is a more transversal dimension and the second is one of the main challenges of the EU.

These exploratory data allow to have an overview of the innovation trends and a perception about the importance of the different dimensions of the concept of social innovation for the Atlantic regions under study. However, it should be stressed that social innovation is primarily related to the response to social needs. These social needs can vary in scale and consequently, the responses of social innovation also end up being perceived in different ways, in different scales. This results are a preliminary step towards a more in-depth analysis, namely to counteract this data with a mapping of the real needs of the regions under analysis in a more micro and detailed approach. The specific mapping of these needs, together with the general trends presented in this paper, can help governance actors to restructure strategic lines of action and to promote incentives that have the potential to dynamise the social innovation sector in order to better enable it to effective response to social needs.

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