

## SOCIAL INNOVATION MANAGEMENT IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs)

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**Purpose:** The aim of this article was to present the specific nature of social innovation management in NGOs, present models for social innovation and tools supporting this process, and conduct an empirical analysis of selected cases of social innovation in Poland and around the world. The article uses examples of NGOs with different territorial scopes and resources.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The objectives of this article are achieved by combining theoretical analysis with empirical research. The study primarily involves a literature review on social innovation management in non-governmental organizations, a comparative analysis of existing models and tools supporting this process, and case studies of selected social innovations in Poland and internationally. The approach is qualitative and exploratory, focusing on identifying the processes, practices, and conditions associated with implementing social innovations. The scope of the work encompasses both theoretical foundations in the field of innovation management and the NGO sector, as well as empirical material in the form of descriptions and analyses of actual initiatives.

**Findings:** Based on the research, it was concluded that effective social innovation management in NGOs requires a balance between flexibility and structured processes, as well as strong transformational leadership based on co-creation. It also demonstrates that organizational learning, collaborative networks, and cross-sector partnerships are key factors enabling the development, scaling, and sustainability of innovations. Furthermore, it was found that public policies and appropriate impact assessment tools significantly enhance the effectiveness and impact of social innovations.

**Research limitations/implications:** It should be emphasized that the study's limitations include the relatively small sample size of the analyzed cases, which prevents the results from being fully generalized. Furthermore, the lack of a uniform, measurable indicator of innovation effectiveness poses a significant barrier to assessing the effectiveness of social innovation management. At the same time, these limitations serve as an impetus for further, in-depth research on developing measurement tools and expanding the research sample.

**Practical implications:** The research indicates that, in practice, NGOs and collaborating organizations should strengthen their culture of co-creation, develop transformational leadership competencies, and build lasting partnership networks, which can increase the effectiveness of implemented innovations and improve the management of social projects. The results also suggest the need to implement measurable evaluation tools, such as SROI, which has a potential economic impact, enabling better resource allocation, increased transparency, and improved organizational credibility in the eyes of businesses and funding institutions.

**Social implications:** From a social perspective, the research highlights that more effective social innovations can contribute to improved quality of life, increased resilience of local communities, and strengthen corporate social responsibility through the development of cross-sectoral collaboration. They can also support the development of public policies aimed at simplifying grant procedures, ensuring stable funding, and more precise measurement of social impact. As a result, this work has the potential to contribute to increasing the effectiveness of systemic actions to solve social problems.

**Originality/value:** This article brings a new perspective on managing social innovation in NGOs, emphasizing the importance of balancing flexibility with structure, the role of transformational leadership, and cross-sector collaboration in scaling innovation. Its value lies in integrating a theoretical approach with empirical analysis and identifying practical mechanisms—such as SROI and digital tools supporting co-creation—that can significantly improve the effectiveness of organizational activities. This article is addressed to researchers of public management and social innovation, NGO practitioners, public policy makers, and business representatives interested in social partnerships.

**Keywords:** social innovation, management in NGOs, transformational leadership.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Today's societies are facing complex challenges, such as demographic change, the climate crisis, social inequality and digital exclusion. Traditional state institutions and market mechanisms often prove inadequate in responding to these problems (Mulgan, 2019). In this situation, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which, with their flexibility and proximity to local communities, are becoming laboratories for innovative solutions, are gaining particular importance. Increasingly, they are seen not only as implementers of public tasks, but as incubators of social innovation complementing and supporting the activities of social welfare centers.

The concept of social innovation focuses on innovative solutions and is defined as new ideas, services, models or practices that address unmet social needs better than the existing ways (Murray et al., 2010). Social innovation does not focus on generating financial profit, but on creating social value, increasing the quality of people's lives and promoting social inclusion as a community responsible to the society (Szejnwald, Chmielewski, 2018; Phillips et al., 2019; Phills et al., 2008).

In recent years, the issue of social innovation management in the NGO sector has become the subject of numerous studies (Hausner, 2015; Przewłocka, 2020). However, despite the growing significance of this area, the mechanisms for managing the innovation process in NGOs are still insufficiently understood. It seems particularly important to understand how these organizations combine limited tangible resources, social values and cross-sector collaboration to generate and scale innovation (Romanowski, 2019, Romanowski, Jasiczak, 2021).

Therefore, the goals of this article are:

- identifying the specifics of social innovation management in NGOs,
- presenting models and tools to support this process,
- conducting empirical analysis of selected cases of social innovation in Poland and around the world.

The starting point is the assumption that managing social innovation in NGOs requires a specific approach that combines features of participatory leadership, project management, systems thinking and organizational learning culture.

The article is an original research paper. It is based on an analysis of the subject literature and case studies of three organizations: Ashoka, the Barka Foundation and the “Społecznik” Program. The analysis conducted is qualitative and exploratory – it aims to identify patterns of social innovation management and the factors that foster its successful implementation.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations of Social Innovation Management**

### **2.1. The Concept of Social Innovation**

The term “social innovation” is multidimensional and has evolved over the past decades. In OECD terms (2020), it means new solutions that address social needs in a more efficient, sustainable and equitable way than existing alternatives. Murray et al. (2010) define social innovation as “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new relationships or social collaborations”. In contrast, Phillips et al. (2008) emphasize that they are “a process, not just an outcome” – they involve the generation, development and implementation of new solutions by social actors.

Social innovation is distinguished, among others, by:

- goal – i.e. a solution to a social problem, not profit maximization,
- collaboration of multiple stakeholders – collective action is key to solving social problems, which are more effective and lead to innovative solutions than individual approaches,
- building on social values, such as solidarity, shared responsibility and social justice (Hausner, 2015).

A key feature of social innovation is the participatory nature of the process – solutions are created together with beneficiaries. In this sense, as Mulgan (2019) points out, social innovation is a manifestation of the democratization of innovation and a shift from the expert model to co-creation.

## 2.2. Social Innovation Management

Managing social innovation in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involves developing and implementing new strategies to address social needs, creating value for the community through stakeholder engagement. This process is crucial for NGOs dealing with complex social problems and seeking to increase their impact. Successful management of social innovation in NGOs requires a balance among: organizational flexibility and process formalization, transformational leadership, cross-sector collaboration and organizational learning capacity. These elements are necessary to create an environment conducive to innovation and ensure the successful implementation of new innovative ideas (Rojas et al., 2024; Shier, Handy, 2020).

The first element is organizational flexibility and formalization of processes. NGOs need to strike a balance between flexibility to adapt to new challenges and formalization of processes to ensure consistency of action among the procedures and processes in the structure of their operations (Bibu et al., 2012).

Another element of effective management is transformational leadership. Leadership plays a key role in driving social innovation in NGOs (Ravi et al., 2025). Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their teams to find innovative and effective solutions to social problems (Bibu et al., 2012). Such leaders play a key role in building a culture of innovation and encouraging employees to take risks and be creative (Blanco-Ariza et al., 2019).

Cross-sector collaboration, including with government and private entities, increases the capacity of NGOs to implement social innovations (Sadabadi et al., 2025). These partnerships can provide the additional resources, expertise and networks needed to scale innovative solutions (Jamroży, 2024).

The ability of an organization to learn is the essence of management. NGOs need to develop mechanisms for continuous learning and adaptation to remain effective in their social innovation efforts (Sujono et al., 2025).

This involves assessing the impact of their initiatives and using feedback to refine and improve strategies (Blanco-Ariza et al., 2019). While the focus is often on the internal capabilities of NGOs, it is also important to consider external factors, such as the political environment and funding, which can significantly affect their ability to innovate. These external conditions can facilitate or hinder the implementation of social innovations, which underscores the need for supportive policies, especially social policies and funding mechanisms, to enable NGOs to thrive in their innovative endeavors.

Moulaert and Van Dyck (2013) highlighted one more supporting element of social innovation, i.e. research, which should take the form of horizontal networks. Scientific, political and economic elites have always been closely intertwined, although patterns of interaction and influence are changing. Changes in the context, content and organization of knowledge production are reflected in an increasing emphasis on science driven by practical applications,

strong market influence, temporary knowledge alliances and heterogeneous research organizations. Linking the quality of innovations with the process of their implementation and evaluation will allow coordination of management activities ensuring their relevance and effectiveness in meeting social needs.

### **2.3. Specifics of Management in NGOs**

NGOs are a special environment for innovation management. Their structures are often flat, based on trust and volunteerism, which encourages flexibility and creativity, but at the same time makes it difficult to formalize processes.

According to Przewłocka (2020), Polish NGOs are characterized by:

- high level of community involvement,
- low level of management professionalization,
- limited access to stable sources of funding,
- being strongly embedded in local communities.

From a social innovation management perspective, this means that NGOs need to create hybrid management models that combine elements of formal planning with flexible response to change. Hausner (2015) notes that the key to success is “the ability to translate social ideas into organizational and project language”, which requires the managerial competence of the leader, while maintaining the social mission of the organization.

In this context, organizational culture plays an important role. NGOs that promote learning, experimentation and collaboration, are more likely to generate social innovations. The literature also emphasizes the importance of social capital, as a network of trust and relationships that enable the exchange of knowledge and resources (Putnam, 2008), supporting exchanges among stakeholders from different sectors of the economy.

In summary, the social innovation management in NGOs can be seen as a process of planning, organizing, directing, which aims to balance the social dimensions of activities – mission, values, participation, as well as the organizational ones – structure, processes, competencies, and the systemic ones – cooperation with other sectors and impact on public policies.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The purpose of the empirical part of this article is to examine how NGOs manage the processes of creating and implementing social innovations. The study is qualitative, and its method is case study (Yin, 2018). This method enables a deep understanding of the organizational, cultural and social processes taking place in NGOs and the identification of factors that foster (or hinder) innovation. Three organizations differing in scale of operation,

structure and cultural context were analyzed, namely: Ashoka – Innovators for the Public (an international organization), Barka Foundation for Mutual Aid (Poland, a national and European NGO), “Społecznik” Program (a local social program operating in the Zachodniopomorskie province).

The selection of organizations was purposive, as the cases represent different levels of maturity and scale of implementation of social innovation, which allows analysis of diverse management models. The data came from an analysis of the literature, public reports, the organizations' websites, in-depth interviews available from secondary sources, and research studies (e.g. Ashoka reports, Barka Foundation publications, and websites). The analysis used a source triangulation method to increase the reliability of results (Denzin, 2017). The analysis was carried out in four stages:

- Identification of the organization's goals and areas of activity.
- Analysis of the management structure and innovation process.
- Assessment of success factors and barriers.
- Cross-case comparison.

It should be emphasized that the study relies exclusively on secondary sources, which constitutes a significant methodological limitation. The materials analyzed largely take the form of institutional self-reports, which may entail risks of bias, selective data presentation, and the overrepresentation of success narratives. The absence of primary field research, such as original interviews or participant observation, limits the ability to verify declared practices and to conduct a more in-depth examination of informal organizational dynamics. Although source triangulation was employed to mitigate these risks to some extent, the findings should therefore be interpreted in light of the methodological constraints outlined above.

## **4. Case Studies**

### **4.1. Ashoka – a Global Ecosystem of Social Innovators**

Ashoka was founded in the US in 1980 by Bill Drayton. Its mission is to support “changemakers” – community leaders who create innovative solutions to global social problems. The organization operates in more than 95 countries and supports thousands of social entrepreneurs through grant programs, mentoring and networking (Drayton, 2019).

Ashoka's social innovation management model is based on four pillars (The Unlonely Planet 2022):

1. Selection of social innovators – through a global process of identifying individuals who have created new, effective solutions. According to Ashoka's definition, a social entrepreneur has the same structure as a business entrepreneur – in terms of mental

attitude, vision, action mindset and skills – but a social entrepreneur strives to improve the world. (Meehana, Shorters, 2006).

2. Building a fellowship – enabling the exchange of knowledge and experience between innovators (e.g. Ashoka Support Network, Next Now).
3. Leadership competence development – Ashoka trains leaders in management, strategy and social communication (e.g. Executive in Residence).
4. Cross-sector cooperation – building multiplier partnerships with companies and public institutions (e.g. The Ashoka Globalizer).

Ashoka uses the concept of “Everyone a Changemaker”, which assumes that every citizen can be an author of social change. Innovations developed by the organization often inspire public policies – such as educational programs on social entrepreneurship, and the creation of venture capital for social start-ups.

The study diagnosed the following success factors: strong visionary leadership, global support network, knowledge transfer and mentoring, culture of trust and organizational learning (economies of scale).

The barriers that Ashoka faces are primarily the risk of bureaucratization when scaling up, and the difficulty of measuring the social impact of innovations, which must be tailored to local needs.

#### **4.2. Barka Foundation for Mutual Help – Polish Model of Social Inclusion**

The Barka Foundation was established in 1989 in Poznań. Its mission is to support socially excluded people through vocational reintegration, education and social economy programs (Szejnwald, Chmielewski, 2018). Barka is considered a pioneer of social innovation in Poland, and its solutions – such as social integration centers and social cooperatives – have become components of public policies.

The Foundation's social innovation management process is based on three principles:

1. Participation – creating solutions together with the beneficiaries, i.e. program of community houses, or places for the recovery of people in extreme life situations. A key feature is that there is no separation between employees and customers using the service.
2. Self-help and solidarity – recipients become co-authors of change; Leaders become those in the communities who have risen from difficult life crises and now, on the basis of their life experiences, by setting an example, they help others to develop morally, socially, spiritually and professionally based on the ideas of mutual aid and self-help.
3. Systemic approach – combining social, economic and institutional aspects; the Foundation's experience, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, enables legal and financial support for the development of social programs in Poland (e.g. the Education and Reintegration Program on the basis of which the Social Employment Act was created, etc.).

Barka's innovation management model can be described as a “social laboratory” in which new ideas are tested in small communities and then, after evaluation, adapted nationally and transferred to EU countries. 27 entities have been established over the years as a result of Barka Foundation's programs becoming independent: 4 foundations, associations, cooperatives and foreign branches of Barka. (O sieci Barki). Examples of Barka Foundation's social innovations include: social cooperatives linking unemployed people and local governments, supported housing programs, or a system of reintegration through education and social entrepreneurship.

The study diagnosed the following success factors: Barka has leaders with a strong social ethos, the operation of an integrated support model helps network solutions internationally as well, and sustained partnerships with local governments and the business sector allow for growth – scanning the solution and funding statutory activities. The barriers identified during the survey include dependence on public funding, bureaucratic constraints in the subsidy system limiting design flexibility for innovation, and difficulties in sustaining innovation amidst progressive institutionalization.

#### **4.3. The “Społecznik“ program – a local network innovation**

“Społecznik“ is a program implemented in the Zachodniopomorskie Province since 2017, funded by the province government and coordinated by Koszalińska Agencja Rozwoju Regionalnego S.A. (Koszalin Regional Development Agency) (KARR). The current edition is entitled Społecznik with grade A! Program to Support Grassroots Initiatives 2025-2029 (O programie, 2025) The Program supports local leaders and community organizations through microgrants, training and networking. Its goal is to create social micro-innovations that respond to local needs struggling with issues ranging from neighborhood integration to environmental action.

The program management model is based on:

- flexible project management, projects tailored to the current needs of the local community,
- open call for ideas (crowdsourcing of innovations), the dedicated website announces calls for the following editions,
- cyclical organizational learning (evaluation after each edition, support and mentoring before and during project implementation – meetings of animators, dissemination of results).

The “Społecznik” program is an example of a bottom-up approach to social innovation, in which the management process is based on cooperation between residents, NGOs and the province government administration. The success factors include low barriers to entry due to easy access to funding, networking of local players, and open communication and promotion of good practices. In turn, the main barriers are limited financial resources (in the current edition, the amount of support is PLN 6000) and human resources, dependence on the political priorities of local authorities, and the lack of a long-term strategy for scaling innovation.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of the three cases shows that managing social innovation in NGOs depends on a combination of three factors: leadership, organizational culture and networking.

**The Role of Transformational Leadership.** Leadership plays a key role in driving social innovation in NGOs. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their teams to find innovative solutions to social problems (Bibu et al., 2012). In all the organizations analyzed, the key role is played by leaders – visionaries capable of inspiring, connecting stakeholders and translating social ideas into concrete actions. In Ashoka it is the leader of the global network (Drayton), in Barka it is the founders Barbara and Tomasz Szejnwald, and in Społecznik – it is local social animators. Such leaders play a key role in building a culture of innovation and encouraging employees to take risks and be creative (Blanco-Ariza et al., 2019). Transformational leadership fosters a culture of innovation in which members of the organization feel a shared responsibility for change (Bass, Riggio, 2006). NGO leaders are more likely to act as facilitators of innovation rather than managers in the traditional sense.

**The Significance of Organizational Culture and Learning.** The literature emphasizes that innovative organizations are characterized by a culture of experimentation, openness and learning (Senge, 2013). NGOs need to strike a balance between being flexible to adapt to new challenges and formalizing processes to ensure consistency and accountability in their operations (Bibu et al, 2012). This balance allows NGOs to innovate while maintaining the necessary structure to effectively implement and scale new solutions, which is required for a culture of experimentation.

The results of the analysis confirm that Barka and Społecznik, due to limitations, develop organizational learning through small-scale solution testing and iterative improvement. At Ashoka, on the other hand, knowledge management is key – the creation and diffusion of good practices between countries and the transfer of ready-made solutions into the international social space.

**Networking as an Infrastructure for Innovation.** All the organizations analyzed operate in local, national or global networks. They provide an “infrastructure for social innovation” (Nicholls, Ziegler, 2019), enabling the exchange of knowledge, resources and inspiration. Each of these organizations shares knowledge and experience in creating and implementing social innovations. It also strengthens interpersonal relations especially among the excluded.

In NGOs, networking often replaces formal organizational structures, and social capital becomes a key management resource.

**Barriers to Managing Social Innovation.** The most frequently cited barriers refer to several areas, i.e.: finance, related to the lack of long-term funding sources; organization, due to limited managerial competence; institutional issues, including a rigid legal framework and lack of systemic incentives for innovation; and cultural ones, related to aversion to risk and experimentation.

However, these barriers should be situated within a broader geopolitical and macroeconomic context. Since 2024, organizations in Central and Eastern Europe have faced reductions in international funding, intensifying competition for public resources, inflationary pressures, and political instability. These conditions disproportionately affect small and medium-sized NGOs with limited institutional capacity.

These barriers underscore the need for the development of an ecosystem to support social innovation, involving cooperation between public institutions, the private sector and the research community. All of these institutions together will allow social innovation to be better matched to current needs.

In this context, evaluation tools such as the Social Return on Investment (SROI) method serve not only as instruments for measuring impact but also as strategic tools for demonstrating organizational sustainability and effectiveness. An illustrative example is a training program for individuals excluded from the labour market in France, evaluated in 2025, which showed that each unit of investment generated substantial social value, including enhanced vocational competencies, improved employment prospects, and positive spillover effects for local communities (Murtada, Hutchinson, 2025). Similarly, in NGOs such as the Bagázs Association, SROI supports not only evaluation processes but also strategic decision-making and more efficient resource allocation, reflecting the growing maturity and practical relevance of this approach (Révész et al, 2025).

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Managing social innovation in NGOs requires a combination of flexibility and structure – effective organizations put planning processes in place, but retain the ability to adapt and respond quickly to emergencies (such as the Covid-19 pandemic, or the war in Ukraine).
2. Transformational leadership and a culture of co-creation are key to generating innovation and better matching solutions to the needs of innovation beneficiaries.
3. Organizational learning and networking act as a mechanism to drive continuous innovation while supporting effective social solutions.
4. Cross-sector collaboration (NGO-business-government-universities) is essential for the scaling and sustainability of innovation.
5. Public policies should support social innovation through stable funding, simpler grant procedures and systemic mechanisms for assessing social impact (e.g. SROI – social return on investment).

In this context, the latest reports highlight the growing role of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in co-creating and scaling social innovations. According to the 2024/2025 reports (e.g., *AI for Impact: Strengthening AI Ecosystems for Social Innovation*, or *AI for Impact: The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Social Innovation*), AI can generate substantial social value, yet ecosystems supporting AI applications focused on social outcomes remain underdeveloped, emphasizing the need for stronger collaboration between technology organizations, funders, and NGOs. Furthermore, over 70% of social innovators have already implemented machine learning in areas such as health and the environment, providing a reference point for future technological support of social innovation.

In future research, it is worth focusing on measuring the effectiveness of social innovation management and the role of digital technologies, especially AI technologies and machine language, in the process of co-creating innovation in NGOs, and assessing the social return on investment (SROI) as a key indicator of the effectiveness of social innovation.

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