

ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL PROJECTS WITH SMART CITY COMPONENTS SUPPORTED BY THE ESF

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Abstract

The article evaluates selected socially oriented projects from the perspective of the Smart City concept, which were supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). The aim of the research is to determine the extent to which these projects contribute to innovation, quality of life, sustainability, and can be considered innovative. The research evaluates these projects according to several criteria, such as the degree of innovation, contribution to quality of life, sustainability, and stakeholder involvement. Using a standardized scoring method, significant differences between individual projects were identified, particularly in the areas of economic and environmental sustainability and replication potential. Although all projects showed a high level of social sustainability and inclusiveness, most of them lacked long-term financial security and more consistent integration of environmental aspects. The results point to the need for systematic support for soft social innovations using Smart City approaches and highlight the differences between projects implemented by the public and private sectors. The study concludes that strengthening participatory planning, interdisciplinary cooperation, and institutional anchoring is key to increasing the strategic importance of socially oriented Smart City projects.

Keywords: Smart City, Social Innovation, Participation, Inclusiveness, Sustainability, Subsidy Policy

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Introduction

In global literature, the concept of a Smart City is defined as a city with advanced infrastructure consisting of sensors, electronic devices, and networks that support sustainable economic growth and ensure a high quality of life (Bakıcı *et al.*, 2012). According to Thompson *et al.* (2023), it is necessary to connect people, information, and urban elements to create a sustainable and competitive city based on innovation and an improved quality of life. Lee *et al.* (2022) emphasize that the transformation process must be individual, based on collective effort, and always reflect the socioeconomic agenda and local context, with open and interdisciplinary discussion being key.

Eyieyien *et al.* (2024) add that information and communication technology projects have a significant impact on community development and the promotion of social inclusion. The concept of Smart Cities therefore encompasses not only economic returns and environmental protection, but also social equality, inclusion, and quality of life for residents. When assessing the impact of projects, a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is used, with officials using demographic data to identify vulnerable groups and the city engaging residents through meetings or online platforms (Chen *et al.*, 2022).

Methodology

In order to achieve the set research objective, it was first necessary to identify projects that had received financial support from the European Social Fund. Three specific calls, numbers 18, 82, and 83, were selected from the data available on the official ESF website. These calls met several key criteria, primarily the fact that the projects had already been completed, which allowed public access to the relevant documentation and results. At the same time, these were projects that had been evaluated as innovative by the ESF managing authority. This selection created a methodological framework that made it possible to create a comprehensive data set for comparative analysis. A total of forty-two projects were included in the final sample. These projects represented a sufficiently broad base to capture the variability of approaches to the application of Smart elements in the social field, while also allowing for the creation of a comparative framework in which differences and common characteristics could be systematically monitored. To ensure

transparency and factual accuracy, it was necessary to establish a set of evaluation criteria that was applied uniformly to all selected projects. The evaluation was based on publicly available sources, in particular evaluation and annual reports, final documentation, and information published on the European Social Fund website.

Each project was assessed on several analytical levels, reflecting both methodological approaches and practical impacts. In the first phase, the degree of application of innovative methods and procedures was monitored. Subsequently, quality of life was examined as an indicator of the benefits of projects for target groups, in terms of the scope of impacts and focus on a specific group or the wider public. Another area was smartification, i.e., the presence of smart solutions in project proposals, their potential for replication in different contexts, and any legislative or advocacy overlap.

The replication potential was assessed not only on the basis of the officially declared area of operation, but also with regard to the possibility of transferring the solution to other regions. Sustainability was a separate dimension, which was assessed on three basic levels. The last area monitored was networking, i.e., the degree of stakeholder involvement, community participation, and the application of communication or marketing strategies. The evaluation was carried out using a point scale ranging from zero to three points, with zero representing non-fulfillment of the relevant criterion, one point representing partial fulfillment, two points representing a high level of fulfillment, and three points representing excellent results.

Results

The analysis showed that the degree of innovation varied significantly across individual projects. Approximately half of the projects evaluated implemented new methodological approaches, while the other half stuck to traditional models without any significant innovative elements.

A significant finding is the limited degree of replication potential. More than half of the projects were designed primarily for the local environment, and their transferability to other territories or contexts was low. Only a small proportion sought legislative or institutional anchoring, which limits their ability to bring about systemic change. This fact confirms the prevailing focus on short-term and specific interventions rather than broader reforms with a long-term impact.

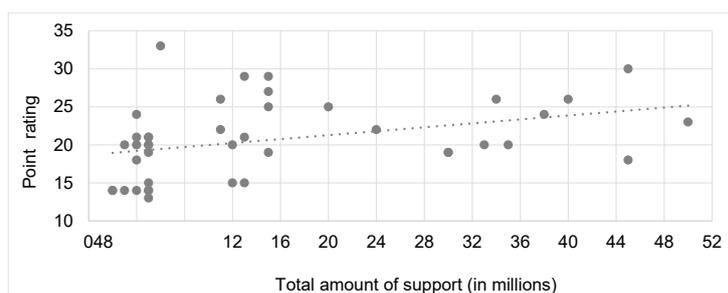
The area of sustainability revealed fundamental disparities between the individual dimensions. While social sustainability was rated highly positively in all projects, economic sustainability represented a significant deficit. Most projects remained dependent on grant funding, without creating alternative sources of income or partnerships with the private sector. The environmental dimension was almost completely neglected, indicating insufficient integration of environmental aspects.

Stakeholder participation and public involvement were also important aspects. Although most projects declared participation, active involvement was limited. Projects that managed to effectively combine interdisciplinary cooperation, community planning, and participatory decision-making achieved demonstrably higher levels of success and had greater potential for long-term sustainability.

I: Summary table of project quality assessment according to selected criteria

	Evaluation criteria	Average score	Projects according to evaluation in %				Dispersion
			0	1	2	3	
Quality of life	The general public	0,86	71,4	0	0	28,6	1,88
	Target group	2,21	26,2	0	0	73,8	1,78
Innovation	Replication potential according to ESF	1,43	52,4	0	0	47,6	2,3
	Predicting the future portability of solutions	2,57	14,3	0	0	85,7	1,13
	Institutional and legislative anchoring	1,1	59,5	0	11,9	28,6	1,89
	Methods and approaches	1,64	35,7	7,1	14,3	42,9	1,84
Sustainability	Economic sustainability	1,57	47,6	0	0	52,4	2,3
	Environmental sustainability	0,43	85,7	0	0	14,3	1,13
	Social sustainability, contribution, and inclusiveness	3	0	0	0	100	0
Networking	Working with stakeholders	2	33,3	0	0	66,7	2,05
	Involvement of local communities	2	33,3	0	0	66,7	2,05
	Project marketing	1,88	14,3	11,9	45,2	28,6	0,99

Source: own processing



1: Comparison of subsidy amount with project scoring

Source: own processing based on data from Esfcr (2019); Esfcr (2020a), Esfcr (2020b); own processing

A comparison of public and private sector projects revealed some differences. Projects implemented by the public sector scored higher, particularly in the areas of innovation and institutional anchoring. At the same time, they achieved better results in terms of economic sustainability and community participation. Conversely, the private sector had a broader impact on the public. Overall, it can be said that the public sector is characterized by a more systematic approach, while the private sector works more flexibly.

Discussion

The results of the analysis showed that the social projects examined were exclusively soft, non-investment interventions, whose main contribution was working with target groups and using participatory methods. These approaches represent an important counterbalance to the technocratically oriented concept of Smart City, which is usually associated primarily with infrastructure and technological solutions. Although the projects met the ESF's conditions for innovation, their systemic impact was limited, mainly due to weak economic and environmental sustainability and low replication potential. Insufficient interdisciplinary cooperation and limited involvement of the private and civil sectors further weakened the possibilities for long-term anchoring of the results. In the future, it will be necessary to strengthen interdisciplinary links, develop alternative financing models, and systematically integrate environmental aspects so that socially oriented Smart City projects become a stable part of public policy.

Conclusion

These projects confirmed the importance of socially oriented approaches within Smart City, especially in the area of inclusion and working with target groups. At the same time, it became clear that their long-term impact is limited by insufficient sustainability and weak institutional support, which underscores the need to seek new financing models and more systematic links with broader public policies. Soft social projects are an integral part of the transformation of cities into smart cities, and it is essential to treat them with the same importance as investment projects in order to avoid a one-sided focus on hard infrastructure. They are one of the drivers of change and, therefore, deserve our full attention.

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