

# background

This example is extracted from our Deliverable 1.1 (p. 48 – 56) “Social Innovations in Support of the EU-Missions” and the full version can be openly accessed here: <https://simissionfacility.eu/publication-announcement-d-1-1/>.

The deliverable focuses on the role and contributions of social innovation (SI) to the [five EU-Missions](#) (part of Horizon Europe 2021 – 2027): Beating Cancer, Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, Climate Change Adaptation, A European Soil Deal, and Restoring Our Oceans and Waters. To analyse these SI contributions to the Missions, an extensive literature analysis has been conducted to showcase the role of social innovation concepts within Mission relevant EU-funded projects. To complement this overview of EU Mission projects with cases of social innovations that contribute or could contribute to the EU Missions, the four social innovation databases (SI-databases) Social Innovation Match Tool, Social Innovation Driving Force of Social Change (SI-Drive), Critical Turning Points Database and Social Innovation in Energy Transition (SONNET) were reviewed additionally. Furthermore, mission-targeted projects are included as case studies in the deliverable to illustrate two examples of social innovation contributions for each of the five EU Missions.

The EU Mission on soils aims to restore the health of our soils by funding research, creating 100 living labs, increases citizen awareness and develop a framework for soil monitoring. Eight objectives have been formulated to achieve this goal. These are: reduce desertification, conserve soil organic carbon stocks, stop soil pollution and enhance restoration, prevent erosion, improve soil structure to enhance soil biodiversity, reduce the EU global footprint on soils and improve soil literacy in society.

To know more about this Mission, visit the [EU Mission: A Soil Deal for Europe Portal](#).

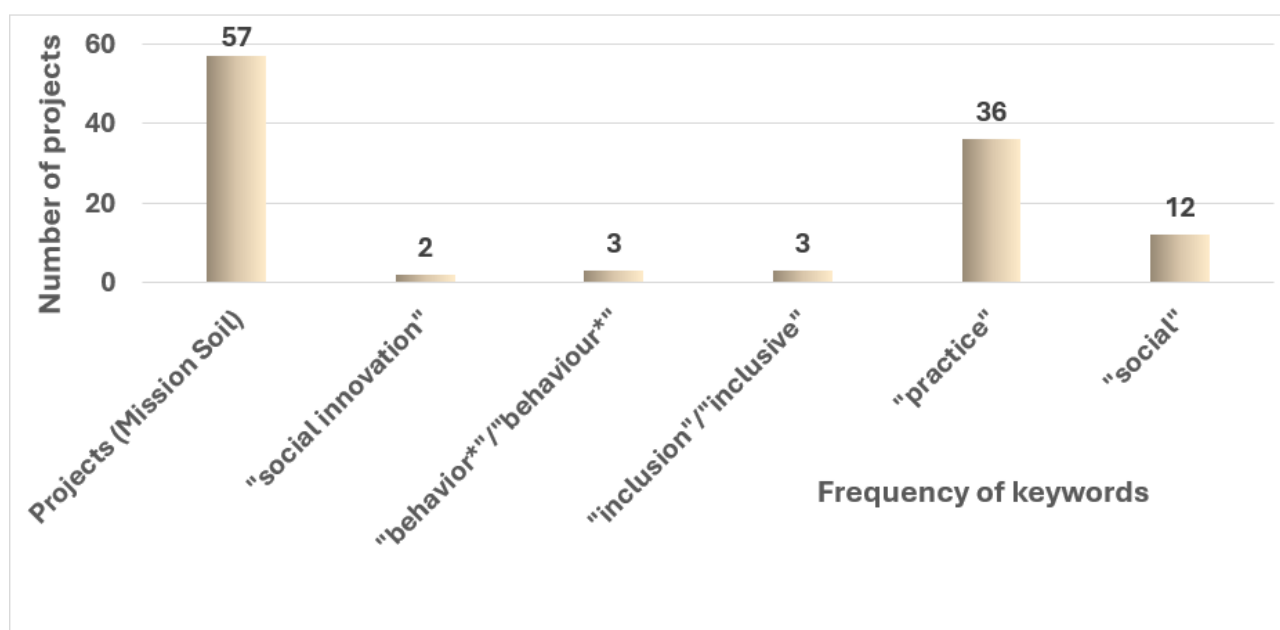
The following practical examples serve to demonstrate, what role social innovation plays in the EU-Mission on soils. Our goal with these examples is to make seemingly abstract social innovation (SI) concepts tangible through real-world cases. We aim to illustrate how social innovation (such as changes in practices and behaviours, the introduction of new ways of working and collaborating, and the reshaping of social and institutional relationships) can meaningfully contribute to achieving the EU Missions.

# disclaimer

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## SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR SOIL

To analyse the role of social innovation in projects contributing to the EU Mission Soil, the projects listed in CORDIS as well as social innovations collected in the SI-Databases (SI-Drive, Critical Turning Points, SONNET, and SI Match) were scrutinised. The results of the sequential analysis of projects for the Soil Mission in CORDIS are shown in the following chart:



**FIGURE 1 BAR CHART OF THE RESULTS OF THE SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS FOR THE EU MISSION: SOIL IN CORDIS**

The analysis revealed that practice changes are an important element of almost 2/3 of all Mission Soil projects selected for funding. These relate to the need for changes in land and soil use practices, particularly concerning agriculture as requested by the call. However, most of these projects focus exclusively on the use of new technologies or/and technological processes to improve the quality and structure of soil. Changes in social, organisational or institutional practices are considered only implicitly, if at all.

It should also be mentioned that many projects use co-design, stakeholder consultations and other participatory methods to achieve more robust results. This inclusive approach is also encouraged by the calls. Some projects have a strong focus on communities and regions that are used as experiment and testing grounds. Living Labs fulfil an important function in this regard.

A few projects stand out in two respects:

Firstly, there are projects that deal with new business models that include elements relevant to practice changes.

Secondly, a few projects explicitly pursue the goal of improving society's perception of soil as an important resource for life and increasing soil literacy overall.

Many of the scrutinised projects focus on raising awareness about the diverse functions and properties of soils to stimulate a change of attitude towards soils, which should finally also lead to a change of behaviour of the targeted social groups (such as farmers, municipalities, regional planners, landowners, building developers and the society at large). The HUMMUS project (<https://www.humus-project.eu/>) for instance, works from an early stage on with partner territories to implement participatory processes and stimulate extensive dialogues on soil protection and soil health. The TERRASAFE project (<https://terrasafe.eu/about/>) takes a similar approach, although the focus here is clearly on the desertification and on identifying measures to prevent it. The aim is also to develop opportunities for new businesses.

The Gov4All project (<https://gov4all.eu/>), focuses explicitly on non-technological solutions and pursues a more socio-ecological systems approach, first examining personal and organisational drivers and then aligning goals and behaviours with effective collective action. Another promising aspect is the project's approach to exploring new governance and business models in living labs.

To exemplify how social innovations are taken into account by EU Mission projects the projects HUMMUS, InBestSoil and Gov4All will be further described.

Given the broadness of targets mentioned in the Soil Mission spanning from raising awareness on soil health to ensuring the long-term productivity of soils on all types of land by developing and using sustainable practices related to spatial planning, soil conservation and agricultural techniques, a broad potential of social innovation activities contributing to this Mission Area could be assumed. Thus, existing social innovation databases were further scrutinised.

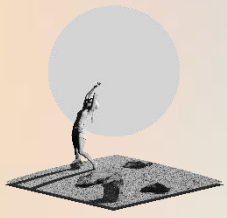
The ESF+ connected "Social Innovation Match" database, for instance, highlights 10 projects with a more or less explicit focus on soils, directly or indirectly related to the Soil Mission objectives (such as through organic food banks, circular economy, organic farm management, promotion of vegan cooking, reduction of litter, social entrepreneurship with a focus on marginalised groups integrated in organic farming, socially innovative investment practices, re-greening and urban gardening). Half of the identified projects overlap significantly with the Cancer and Climate change adaptation missions.

The SI-Drive database highlighted 12 cases with high relevance to the Mission Soil (two in the practice field "alternative and sustainable food", two in the practice field "community and capacity-building", one in the practice field "local production of energy") and five further cases with some relevance to its objectives.

From the above mentioned SI Databases, the "Regionalwert AG" project was recognised as a socially innovative business innovation in the format of a citizen-owned joint-stock company that support businesses ranging from organic farming and food processing to trade and catering. In addition, "Soil Walks", a method for initiating public dialogue and preparing participatory planning processes with a special focus on soil sealing is showcased.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. the AgroSolidarity case in Colombia

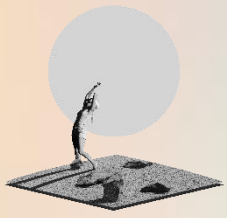


**About the Project:** HuMUS (Healthy Municipal Soils) facilitated the deployment of the Mission Soil at the local level by engaging municipalities and regions across Europe to identify challenges and co-create solutions to protect and restore soil health together with local communities. At its core, the project was a comprehensive, systemically operating participatory soil literacy initiative. The three-year project, which concluded with its final conference on 21 November 2025, implemented three main activities: (i) the creation of experimental spaces for social dialogue on soil health, involving public and private actors; (ii) the promotion of a shared understanding of soil health and the implementation of co-assessment exercises addressing soil challenges, considering both biophysical and socio-economic dimensions; and (iii) the enhancement of knowledge sharing among municipalities and regions.



Testing the quality of soil (photo: Landwirtschaftskammer Nordrhein-Westfalen)

HuMUS supported 14 internal and 20 external pilots, selected through a financial support to third parties mechanism (cascade funding), to establish participatory processes for the co-creation of Territorial Management Agreements on soil health. The 34 HuMUS pilots confirmed the replication potential of the methodology developed by the project across additional 18 replication sites. This approach, inspired by the organic district multi-stakeholder model developed by the Region of Tuscany, could serve as a foundation for future Living Labs or Lighthouses under the Mission Soil.



**The Role of Social Innovation:** The social innovation focus of HuMUS was on advancing participatory governance for soil health management at local level. A total of 34 Territorial Management Agreements were established across 26 regions from 13 EU and 3 non-EU countries. Local stakeholders from the so-called Quadruple Helix were involved in multi-stage decision-making processes. The challenges addressed included soil erosion, water storage capacity, soil compaction, loss of organic carbon, soil pollution, soil sealing, soil biodiversity, and more.

HuMUS also invested in educational and capacity-building activities, as well as in the exchange of best practices through peer learning. A Soil Steward Training Programme was developed to facilitate and moderate regional and municipal dialogues on soil health. The training programme is free on any charge and available in six European languages (EN, IT, FR, DE, ES, BG) on the project website. In summary, HuMUS was a project focused on soil literacy grounded in scientific evidence, governance experimentation, and the co-development of Territorial Management Agreements to initiate further actions promoting soil health. Beyond raising awareness and fostering changes in understanding,

HuMUS contributed to the integration of soil health into local policy agendas and planning instruments, supporting municipalities and regions in embedding soil health into their strategic plans and operational frameworks.

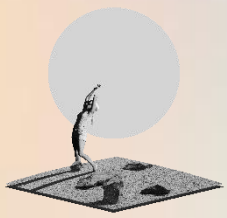
**More information:** <https://www.humus-project.eu/>



Meeting of the HuMUS consortium photo:  
(HuMUS)

*The end of the HuMUS project is the beginning of the implementation of the Territorial Management Agreements at local level, a process that requires structured monitoring, stable financial support, and a progressive extension at the geographical scale in order to maximise its impact on territorial policies.*

Annalaura Vannuccini, ANCI Toscana



**About the Project:** Gov4All (Governance and business models for living labs: rural regeneration hubs for tackling soil health challenges in the Mediterranean region) started in June 2024 and implements the following tasks:

- 1) Exploration of regional needs and drivers as well as suitable governance models for operating multi-actor co-creation processes.
- 2) Establishment of a network of five agro-innovation hubs to be sustained by underlying business models.
- 3) Definition of harmonised regional baselines for 7 out of the 8 indicators found in the Soil Mission Implementation plan.
- 4) Testing concrete practice shifts for better soil management in more than 75 commercial farms across the living labs.
- 5) Facilitation of the diffusion of innovation through various communication and dissemination actions.



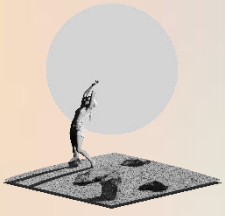
Planning activities in Gov4All (photo: Gov4All)

*Changes occur more likely  
when hearts and minds align.*

Tristano Bacchetti De Gregoris, Project  
Coordinator of Gov4All

**The role of social innovation:** The project's starting point is to foster awareness that both soils and humans are embedded within social-ecological systems and that no organisation or solution alone is capable of sustainably transforming the system towards healthy and sustainable soil practices. Therefore, the project aims to develop enabling governance structures in each of the five regions to manage this transformation. Several partners from the quadruple helix are involved in developing a shared vision for the territory in which they operate. This vision goes beyond a narrow soil science focus. It rather perceives soil as one, however foundational element for rural development. This necessitates also the identification and development of suitable business models affecting the broader value chain, that support healthy soils rather than to degrading them. The underlying social relationships and associated experiences that emerge from the joint co-design works in the living labs, which is guided and supported by the project, promote more holistic perspectives, new approaches to solutions and changes in awareness, which can lead to changes in attitudes, mindsets and practices.

**More information:** <https://gov4all.eu/>



**About the Project:** The goal of the InBestSoil project, which started its work in January 2023, is to create a business model-based framework for investments in soil health preservation and restoration. To this end, a system for the economic valuation of ecosystem services provided by healthy soils has been developed and the effects of certain measures and practices on soil health have been investigated. The project uses 7 lighthouses and 2 living labs, which provide several study areas across four biogeographic regions from Europe (boreal, continental, Atlantic, mediterranean), and different land uses (agriculture, forest, urban, mining).

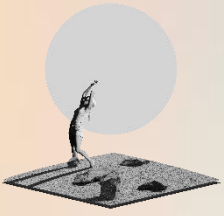


Farmer looking at soil (photo: InBestSoil)

**The role of social innovation:** A major focus of the InBestSoil is the analysis of existing business models and practices and experimentation with new ones designed to enable public and private organisations to assign an economic value to their soil health measures and to facilitate incentives for investment in soil health. To this end, co-design approaches were applied to introduce the abstract concept of soil health into business activities without causing significant damage to business operations but improving their sustainability. At the time being, the project classifies what these either existing or new business models look like. Some are based on savings on fertilizers, while some include the introduction of new products. Others are engaging in new markets like carbon credits or trying to leverage the added value of certifications. Some are not profit-driven but create value through educational offers. In addition to a change in attitude towards the economic and social value of soil, improved business models are in some cases leading to changes in social practices, new interactions to create synergies, new forms of cooperation that benefit various partners and tapping into new markets for instance through the establishment of carbon credit agreements. With the help of living labs,

*Our objective is that good soil health practices are also profitable, so they can thrive and spread*

Mr. Andrés Rodríguez Seijo, Project Coordinator of InBestSoil



communities of practice are established and organised to facilitate the dissemination of results and putting them into practice.

**More information:** <https://inbestsoil.eu/>



### Regionalwert AG

“Regionalwert AGs” are citizen-owned joint stock companies, which support businesses ranging from organic farming and food processing to trade and catering ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regionalwert\\_Aktiengesellschaft](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regionalwert_Aktiengesellschaft)). The economic model of Regionalwert AG is subsistence farming, but not conceptualised for individual farms, but rather entire regions that provide for their own food supply. Producers at various stages of the value chain are brought together with consumers and shareholders. Citizens and organisations (such as companies, churches and foundations) can purchase restricted registered shares, which are subject to trading restrictions. All shareholders are known to the public limited companies by name, and shares are not traded on the stock exchange but are only issued by the respective public limited companies.

Two partnership models exist: first, businesses that are interested in the network but do not currently require capital can become partners by paying a licence fee. Second, Regionalwert AG can provide financial support to businesses that require capital. From a social innovation perspective, Regionalwert AG represents an alternative organisational and institutional model for financing and governing regional food systems.



### Soil Walks

The Soil Walks project was developed by the Technical University Vienna, the Environmental Agency Austria and Wallenberger & Linhard Regionalberatung KG in collaboration with pilot communities (<https://soilwalks.project.tuwien.ac.at/>). It

raises awareness on the issues of land use, soil sealing and inner-city development and planning. Soil Walks are a method for initiating public dialogue and preparing participatory planning processes. During soil walks, current challenges and opportunities relating to land use in general and specifically for the community are discussed with the population and interested parties. It is a low-threshold participation format in which citizens can participate spontaneously during the walks too. To support communities with hard data, a data dashboard was developed to visualise key figures on land use and sealing in Austrian municipalities and regions. Soil Walks reconfigure planning practices and governance processes by shifting citizen participation from formal consultation settings to open, place-based and accessible formats. The initiative hereby establishes a social innovative practice that forges new social relations between planners, local authorities and citizens, enabling spontaneous and inclusive engagement in discussions on land-use decisions

(see <https://soilwalks.project.tuwien.ac.at/dashboard/>)

# contact

Do you have any follow-up questions or would like to connect with us?

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 Email us: SIMF@ZSI.at

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