Social Innovation and Public Sector Performance: The Mediating Role of Social Cohesion and Digital Inclusion

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Abstract: Social innovation is increasingly recognised as a key driver of transformation in the public sector, particularly in addressing complex social challenges and improving the delivery of public services. However, the mechanisms through which social innovation generates a measurable and sustainable impact on public sector performance remain insufficiently understood. This paper examines the role of social cohesion and digital inclusion as mediating mechanisms between social innovation initiatives and improvements in public sector performance. It argues that the effects of social innovation are neither direct nor uniform, but are shaped by institutional and societal conditions that influence how innovative interventions are translated into outcomes. Drawing on the literature on social innovation and public governance, the study conceptualises impact as observable and relevant changes in the accessibility, efficiency, quality and equity of public services. The analytical framework is structured around a conceptual model that links social innovation initiatives to public sector performance through two principal mediators: social cohesion, understood in terms of civic participation, social capital and institutional trust; and digital inclusion, defined through access, skills and the meaningful use of digital public services. Methodologically, the study adopts a conceptual, analytical-interpretative approach focused on analysing institutional developments and the policy framework relevant to social innovation. The approach integrates a critical review of the literature with an examination of the governance framework and public policies, supporting the theoretical development of the proposed conceptual model. Through an analytical-interpretative perspective, the study seeks to identify the mechanisms through which social innovation is integrated into institutional processes and how these may shape outcomes at the public sector level, while also highlighting contextual variations and their dynamics. The proposed conceptual model suggests that social innovation may generate stronger and more sustainable impacts in contexts characterised by high levels of social cohesion and digital inclusion. Conversely, limited institutional capacity and restricted access to digital resources may constrain the effectiveness of innovative interventions. The contribution of the paper lies in developing a mechanism-based perspective on the impact of social innovation, shifting the focus from descriptions of innovation to the identification of the conditions under which it produces meaningful change. This perspective offers important implications for the design, scaling and institutionalisation of social innovation within the public sector.

Keywords: Social innovation, Public sector performance, Social cohesion, Digital inclusion, Public policy

1. Introduction

The increasing complexity of contemporary societal challenges has intensified the need for innovative approaches in public administration. Demographic changes, digital transformation, growing social inequalities, the green transition, and the pressures generated by multiple economic and social crises have highlighted the limitations of traditional governance models and administrative mechanisms based predominantly on state intervention. In this context, innovation has become central to institutional modernisation and strengthening the capacity of public administrations to respond to increasingly complex problems.

At the European level, the importance of innovation is reflected in recent strategic documents that regard it as a determining factor for competitiveness, resilience, and citizens' well-being. The New European Innovation Agenda emphasises that innovation is essential for strengthening Europe's competitiveness and ensuring the health and well-being of its citizens (European Commission, 2022). Similarly, the report Science, Research and Innovation Performance of the EU 2024 highlights the role of innovation ecosystems and collaboration among public, private, and civic actors in generating sustainable solutions to contemporary challenges (European Commission, 2024).

Within this evolution, social innovation has become one of the most dynamic and influential components of debates concerning the transformation of the public sector. Unlike traditional forms of innovation, predominantly associated with technological progress and economic competitiveness, social innovation simultaneously seeks to meet social needs and develop new collaborative relationships among individuals, organisations, and institutions. Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan (2010) define social innovation as "new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations". This definition highlights the dual character of social innovation, which generates both social value and institutional transformation.

Interest in social innovation has increased significantly over the past two decades. Nevertheless, the literature highlights that the term remains contested and characterised by considerable diversity in interpretation. Ayob, Teasdale and Fagan (2016) show that social innovation has developed as a concept influenced by different theoretical traditions and ideological orientations, which explains the absence of a universally accepted definition. Similarly, Rüede and Lurtz (2012) identify multiple meanings and uses of the concept, demonstrating that social innovation may be understood both as a process of social change and as an instrument of economic, community, or institutional development.

Alongside the development of the academic literature, European institutions and international organisations have begun to integrate social innovation into strategies and public policies. The report Empowering People, Driving Change, prepared by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) of the European Commission, considers social innovation to be a mechanism capable of generating effective responses to social problems that can no longer be adequately addressed through traditional state instruments (BEPA, 2011).

At the same time, innovation has also become a strategic priority for public administration. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines innovation in the public sector as "the implementation of something new in a given context in order to generate impact" (OECD, 2019). This perspective reflects an important paradigm shift through which innovation is no longer viewed as an isolated project, but rather as an institutional capacity necessary for the continuous adaptation of public organisations to changes in the economic and social environment.

In Romania, these developments are particularly relevant. In recent years, the process of administrative modernisation has been supported through the development of strategic documents that explicitly promote social innovation and innovation in the public sector. The National Strategy for Social Innovation 2026–2034 aims to develop a national social innovation ecosystem through strengthening competencies, developing impact measurement mechanisms, and stimulating collaboration among relevant actors.

However, despite the growing interest in social innovation, the mechanisms through which it contributes to improving public sector performance remain insufficiently explained. Much of the literature describes innovative initiatives and their outcomes, without systematically analysing the conditions that facilitate or constrain the transformation of public sector innovation into sustainable institutional outcomes.

Against this background, the study analyses the relationship between social innovation and public sector performance through a mechanism-based perspective. The paper argues that the impact of social innovation is neither direct nor uniform but is, rather, mediated by a series of social and institutional conditions that influence the capacity of actors to adopt, implement, and expand innovative solutions within the public sector. In particular, the research focuses on two mediating mechanisms: social cohesion and digital inclusion.

Within the study, social cohesion is analysed through the lens of civic participation, social capital, and institutional trust, while digital inclusion is conceptualised in terms of access to technology, digital skills, and the extensive use of digital public services. Public sector performance is defined as the ability of public institutions to generate public value through accessible, efficient, high-quality, and equitable services.

Methodologically, the study adopts a conceptual approach based on the critical and interpretative analysis of the academic literature and relevant public policy documents at European and national levels. This approach is oriented towards theoretical construction and the analysis of relationships between the main constructs of the study (Adèr and Mellenbergh, 1999). By integrating perspectives developed in the literature on social innovation, public governance and digital transformation, the study aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how social innovation may contribute to public sector performance in Romania through the theoretical mechanisms examined. The relationships proposed within the model are conceptual in nature and provide a basis for subsequent empirical testing.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Social Innovation and Public Sector Performance

2.1 Social Innovation: Conceptual Development and Contemporary Perspectives

Although social innovation has developed substantially over the past two decades, its origins lie in debates on social change, community development, and institutional transformation.

One of the aspects most frequently highlighted in the literature is the ambiguous and multidimensional nature of the concept. Ayob, Teasdale and Fagan (2016) argue that social innovation constitutes a "contested concept", the meanings of which have been shaped by different theoretical traditions and ideological

orientations (Ayob et al., 2016). Similarly, Rüede and Lurtz (2012) identify seven distinct categories of interpretation of social innovation, demonstrating that it may be associated both with social change and with social entrepreneurship, community development, or organisational innovation (Rüede & Lurtz, 2012).

Despite this conceptual diversity, one of the most influential definitions is that proposed by Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan (2010), according to whom social innovation represents "new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations" (Murray et al., 2010). This definition is particularly relevant because it captures the dual character of social innovation. On the one hand, it seeks to address social needs that are insufficiently met through existing mechanisms. On the other hand, it generates new forms of cooperation, participation, and collaboration among the actors involved.

The importance of the relational dimension of social innovation is also highlighted in the report Empowering People, Driving Change, prepared by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers of the European Commission. The report argues that social innovation emerges in situations where the traditional instruments of the state and the market are no longer able to respond adequately to social challenges and that the development of effective solutions requires the active involvement of citizens, communities, and civil society organisations (BEPA, 2011).

An important contribution to strengthening the theoretical foundations of the field is provided by the European SI-DRIVE project. Unlike approaches focused exclusively on products or services, SI-DRIVE conceptualises social innovation as a process of transforming social practices. From this perspective, social change results not merely from the introduction of an innovative solution, but from the modification of the relationships, rules, and mechanisms that structure interactions among actors (Howaldt et al., 2014; Howaldt et al., 2017).

Examining the evolution of the concept, a gradual transition can be observed from a perspective centred on social change to one oriented towards governance and institutional development. While earlier approaches emphasised the capacity of communities to generate new forms of organisation and cooperation, contemporary approaches integrate social innovation into complex ecosystems that bring together public administration, academia, the private sector, and civil society. This evolution explains why social innovation is now considered a relevant instrument for modernising the public sector and enhancing institutional performance.

2.2 Innovation in the Public Sector and the Creation of Public Value

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines innovation in the public sector as "the implementation of something novel to a context in order to achieve impact" (OECD, 2019). This approach shifts the emphasis from novelty to impact. Thus, innovation does not constitute an end in itself, but rather an instrument intended to produce observable improvements in institutional and social outcomes.

The OECD approach marks a departure from traditional administrative models. Rather than being viewed as an exceptional activity or a one-off project, innovation is conceptualised as an organisational capability that must be integrated into the day-to-day functioning of public institutions. The Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) supports this perspective, arguing that public administrations must develop organisational cultures oriented towards learning, experimentation, and collaboration, capable of sustaining continuous processes of adaptation and transformation.

Building on the literature reviewed and the public policy documents presented above, the present study conceptualises public sector performance through four principal dimensions: accessibility, which reflects citizens' ability to make effective use of public services; efficiency, which concerns the relationship between the resources utilised and the results achieved; quality, which expresses the extent to which services meet the needs and expectations of beneficiaries; and equity, which refers to equal access to services and opportunities for all social groups.

This perspective marks a shift from an approach centred on individual projects to one based on ecosystems, networks, and co-creation processes. Consequently, the success of innovation increasingly depends on the capacity of actors to cooperate and to integrate resources and knowledge derived from diverse sources.

3. The Evolution and Institutionalisation of Social Innovation in the European and National Context

3.1 Romania's Transition: From Policy Adoption to the Institutionalisation of Social Innovation

In Romania, the evolution of the concept can be observed through two recently adopted documents: the National Strategy for Social Innovation 2026–2034 and the National Strategy on Innovation in the Public Sector 2026–2030.

The National Strategy for Social Innovation aims to develop a national social innovation ecosystem through strengthening competencies, facilitating access to funding, developing mechanisms for measuring social impact, and promoting collaboration among relevant actors.

In parallel, the National Strategy on Innovation in the Public Sector promotes the development of a modern, citizen-oriented administration capable of using innovation to improve institutional performance. The document explicitly introduces the quadruple helix model, defined as a collaborative structure involving public administration, academia, the private sector, and civil society.

Romania is currently in a stage of institutionalising social innovation, in which the emphasis is no longer placed exclusively on individual initiatives or isolated projects, but on the development of mechanisms and structures capable of supporting innovation as a continuous process of institutional transformation.

Initially associated with general processes of social change and community development, social innovation gradually became a public policy instrument, subsequently a mechanism of institutional transformation, and is currently a central component of innovation ecosystems and collaborative governance.

This evolution may be summarised as follows:

Period	Dominant Perspective	Main Objective
Before 2000	Social change	Transformation of communities
2000–2010	Response to social needs	Addressing social problems
2010–2020	Collaborative governance	Participation and co-creation
2020–present	Ecosystems and impact	Public sector performance and institutional resilience

4. Conceptual Framework of the Relationship between Social Innovation and Public Sector Performance

4.1 Collaborative Governance as an Institutional Transmission Mechanism

The analysis of the literature and strategic documents highlights that social innovation produces sustainable effects only when it is integrated into collaborative governance structures. The introduction of new ideas is not sufficient to generate institutional change if there are no mechanisms that facilitate cooperation among the actors involved.

The concept of collaborative governance describes the processes through which public and non-public actors jointly participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. Unlike hierarchical administrative models, collaborative governance involves the sharing of responsibilities and the integration of knowledge derived from multiple sources.

In the contemporary literature, this approach is frequently associated with the quadruple helix model, which promotes collaboration among public administration, academia, the private sector, and civil society. The National Strategy on Innovation in the Public Sector 2026–2030 explicitly adopts this logic and defines the model as a mechanism for stimulating innovation and creating public value.

From this perspective, collaborative governance may be interpreted as an institutional transmission mechanism through which innovative ideas are transformed into administrative and social outcomes. It facilitates knowledge exchange, resource mobilisation, and the development of solutions that are better adapted to citizens' needs.

4.2 Social Cohesion as a Mediating Mechanism

The first mediating mechanism examined within the model is social cohesion.

The literature on social innovation and community development highlights that civic participation, social capital, and institutional trust significantly influence the capacity of communities to adopt and sustain innovative processes. Communities characterised by strong social relationships and high levels of trust are more capable of mobilising resources and sustaining long-term collaborative processes.

Within the proposed model, social cohesion contributes to:

- increasing the legitimacy of public initiatives;
- facilitating cooperation among actors;
- reducing resistance to change;
- strengthening collective problem-solving capacity.

The importance of this mechanism is supported both by the literature on social capital and by European documents relating to cohesion and inclusion. Furthermore, the SI-DRIVE project highlights that the transformation of social practices and the development of new forms of collaboration constitute essential elements of social innovation.

In Romania, the relevance of social cohesion is amplified by the existence of persistent territorial and social disparities. Differences between urban and rural areas, varying levels of civic participation, and deficits in institutional trust may significantly influence the capacity of communities to participate in innovation processes and collaborative governance.

Based on these arguments, the study formulates the following theoretical proposition:

Proposition 1. Social cohesion positively mediates the relationship between social innovation and public sector performance.

4.3 Digital Inclusion as a Facilitating and Mediating Mechanism

The second mechanism examined is digital inclusion.

Digital transformation represents one of the principal priorities of both European and Romanian public administration. The development of electronic services, the use of data, and the automation of administrative processes are regarded as essential elements of public sector modernisation.

However, the literature and public policy documents highlight that access to technology does not automatically guarantee the effective use of digital services. The benefits of digital transformation depend on citizens' capacity to access and effectively use these services.

From this perspective, digital inclusion encompasses:

- access to digital infrastructure;
- digital skills;
- meaningful use of digital public services.

This approach is reflected both in European initiatives relating to the Digital Decade and in the National Strategy on Innovation in the Public Sector 2026–2030.

For Romania, the importance of digital inclusion is amplified by the persistence of disparities between urban and rural areas and differences in levels of digital skills. These disparities may limit the impact of technology-based innovative initiatives and may reduce the accessibility of digital public services for certain categories of citizens.

Consequently, digital inclusion should be interpreted not merely as an outcome of digitalisation, but as a condition that facilitates the realisation of the potential of social innovation.

Based on these arguments, the study formulates the following theoretical proposition:

Proposition 2. Digital inclusion positively mediates the relationship between social innovation and public sector performance.

4.4 Public Sector Performance as the Dependent Variable

Drawing upon the literature on public value and the OECD and national documents analysed, performance is assessed through four principal dimensions:

- accessibility;
- efficiency;
- quality;
- equity.

These dimensions reflect both traditional concerns regarding administrative efficiency and the contemporary orientation towards the creation of public value and social impact.

From the perspective of the present study, public sector performance should not be assessed exclusively through operational or financial indicators. It is also necessary to analyse the extent to which public services contribute to reducing inequalities, increasing citizens' satisfaction, and strengthening trust in institutions.

4.5 The Proposed Conceptual Model

Based on the arguments developed above, the study proposes the following conceptual model:

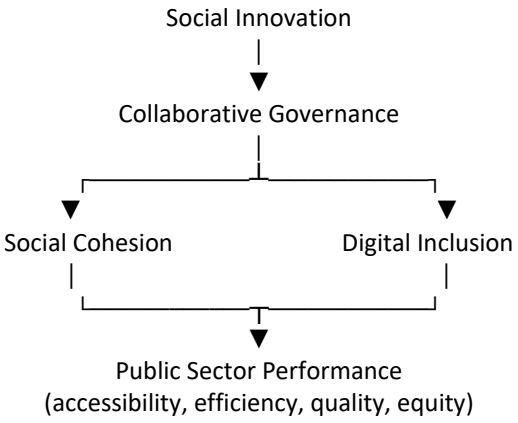


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual model

The model suggests that social innovation may generate stronger and more sustainable outcomes when it is supported by collaborative governance structures, high levels of social cohesion, and appropriate conditions of digital inclusion.

Unlike approaches that treat innovation as a factor exerting a direct effect on performance, the proposed model highlights the existence of intermediate mechanisms that influence the intensity and sustainability of its impact.

4.6 Operationalising the Model: Indicators for Future Evaluations

Although the study is conceptual, the development of an analytical framework requires the identification of indicative indicators that may be utilised in future research.

Component	Indicative Indicators
Social Innovation	Pilot projects, innovation laboratories, partnerships, funded initiatives
Collaborative Governance	Number of actors involved, co-creation processes, cross-sector partnerships
Social Cohesion	Civic participation, social capital, institutional trust
Digital Inclusion	Access to digital services, digital skills, level of use
Public Sector Performance	Accessibility, user satisfaction, efficiency, quality, equity

These indicators are consistent with the impact measurement approaches promoted by the National Strategy for Social Innovation and the National Strategy on Innovation in the Public Sector and may provide the basis for future empirical research.

5. Implications for Public Administration in Romania

5.1 From Social Innovation Projects to Social Innovation Ecosystems

In this context, the National Strategy for Social Innovation 2026–2034 explicitly aims to develop a national social innovation ecosystem based on cooperation among public administration, academia, the private sector,

and civil society organisations. The document reflects European approaches that promote innovation ecosystems as mechanisms capable of facilitating the generation, testing, and scaling of innovative solutions.

For Romanian public administration, this orientation implies a redefinition of the role of public institutions. Rather than being perceived exclusively as service providers, public administrations must become facilitators of collaboration and co-creation processes. This role requires the development of institutional infrastructures that enable knowledge exchange, the transfer of good practices, and cooperation among different categories of actors.

In practice, this transformation may be supported through:

- the development of public innovation laboratories;
- the creation of regional social innovation networks;
- the establishment of permanent mechanisms for dialogue between public administration and civil society;
- the development of funding programmes oriented towards innovation and social impact;
- the promotion of experience-sharing among communities and local administrations.

5.2 Digital Inclusion as a Prerequisite for Public Innovation

Digital transformation is frequently presented as one of the principal directions for the modernisation of public administration. However, the analysis undertaken highlights that the benefits of digitalisation depend directly on the level of digital inclusion.

In the absence of access to digital infrastructure, the necessary skills, and the effective use of electronic services, digitalisation may reinforce existing forms of exclusion and reduce access to public services for certain categories of citizens.

This issue is particularly relevant for Romania, as European data on digital skills and the use of electronic public services indicate the existence of significant gaps in comparison with the European Union average, particularly with regard to the rural population and vulnerable groups.

5.3 Towards an Innovation Strategy Oriented towards Public Value

The analysis suggests that social innovation may become an important driver of the modernisation of Romanian public administration; however, its impact depends upon the existence of favourable social, institutional, and digital conditions.

In this regard, the primary objective of innovation policies should not be merely the introduction of new solutions, but the development of the administration's capacity to generate public value. This entails the provision of public services that are simultaneously more accessible, more efficient, more equitable, and better adapted to citizens' needs.

By integrating social innovation, collaborative governance, social cohesion, and digital inclusion into a coherent public policy framework, Romanian public administration can develop the capacity required to respond to the complex challenges of contemporary society and to generate sustainable long-term outcomes.

6. Conclusions

The economic, social, and technological transformations of recent decades have highlighted the need to develop new governance models capable of responding to the complex challenges faced by contemporary societies. In the context of contemporary economic, social and technological transformations, social innovation has gained relevance in both academic literature and public policy as a mechanism for addressing social challenges and modernising public institutions.

Based on this premise, the study set out to analyse the relationship between social innovation and public sector performance through a mechanism-based approach. Unlike approaches that treat innovation as a factor exerting a direct effect on institutional performance, the paper has argued that the impact of social innovation is conditioned by the existence of intermediary factors that influence the manner in which change is adopted, implemented, and institutionalised.

The analysis of the academic literature and European and Romanian public policy documents has highlighted a significant evolution in the concept of social innovation. While in earlier approaches it was associated primarily with processes of social change and community development, social innovation is now integrated into complex

governance frameworks, innovation ecosystems, and institutional development strategies. Documents produced by the European Commission, the OECD, and the SI-DRIVE project demonstrate that social innovation is increasingly perceived as a strategic instrument for creating public value and strengthening institutional resilience.

Within this context, the study proposes two key mechanisms that may mediate the relationship between social innovation and public sector performance: social cohesion and digital inclusion.

On the one hand, social cohesion facilitates participation, collaboration, and the development of trust between citizens and institutions. Communities characterised by high levels of social capital and civic participation provide more favourable conditions for the implementation and scaling of innovative initiatives. In such contexts, co-creation and collaborative governance processes benefit from greater legitimacy and a stronger capacity to mobilise collective resources.

On the other hand, digital inclusion influences citizens' capacity to participate in digital transformation processes and to benefit from innovative public services. The analysis highlighted that access to technology represents only one component of digital inclusion, alongside digital skills and the effective use of electronic public services. In the absence of these conditions, the benefits of digitalisation may be distributed unequally and may contribute to the amplification of existing forms of exclusion.

The principal theoretical contribution of the study lies in the development of an integrated conceptual model that proposes a theoretical explanation of how social innovation may influence public sector performance through social cohesion and digital inclusion. The proposed model contributes to extending the existing literature by shifting attention from the mere description of innovative initiatives towards the analysis of the mechanisms that explain the production of institutional and social change.

The practical contribution of the research is particularly relevant for public administration in Romania. The analysis of the national strategies on social innovation and innovation in the public sector highlights the existence of a favourable framework for the institutionalisation of innovation and for the development of collaborative ecosystems involving public administration, academia, the private sector, and civil society. However, the analysis suggests that the success of these initiatives depends significantly on the capacity of public authorities to strengthen social cohesion, reduce digital divides and develop effective mechanisms for impact assessment.

From a strategic perspective, the study's conclusions indicate that public policies oriented towards innovation should not focus exclusively on the introduction of new solutions or the digitalisation of public services. Equally important is the development of the social and institutional conditions that enable the potential of innovation to be realised. In the absence of adequate levels of civic participation, institutional trust and digital inclusion, even the most promising innovative initiatives may have a limited impact.

The research also presents a number of limitations. First, the study adopts a conceptual approach based on the critical and interpretative analysis of the academic literature and public policy documents, without empirically testing the relationships proposed within the conceptual model. Second, the analysis focuses on the Romanian context and on recent strategic documents, which may limit the extent to which the conclusions can be generalised. Third, the indicators proposed for operationalising the model are indicative in nature and require validation through further empirical research.

Consequently, future research should seek to empirically test the relationships identified within the conceptual model. Quantitative studies conducted at the regional or local level could assess the influence of social cohesion and digital inclusion on the performance of innovative public services. Furthermore, comparative analyses between Romania and other Member States of the European Union could contribute to identifying the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of social innovation in public administration.

In conclusion, the paper argues that social innovation may become an important driver of public sector performance in Romania; however, its effects are neither automatic nor uniform. The impact of innovation depends upon the existence of social and institutional mechanisms that facilitate the transformation of innovative ideas into outcomes that are meaningful for citizens and communities. Understanding these mechanisms is essential both for the advancement of scientific knowledge in the field of social innovation and for the design of public policies capable of generating public value and sustainable development in a context characterised by rapid change and complex challenges.

Ethics Declaration: This study is based exclusively on the analysis of academic literature, policy documents, and publicly available strategic frameworks. No human participants, personal data, or sensitive information were involved in the research. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence tools were used to support language editing, text structuring, and manuscript preparation. All conceptualisation, interpretation of sources, critical analysis, verification of references, and final decisions regarding the content remain the sole responsibility of the author. The author reviewed and validated all generated content prior to submission.

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