



**Fostering
Social
Justice**

- Executive summary -

We're right here!

Empowering people, Developing communities,
Strengthening democracy

An IFS Paper on the role, impact, challenges and
recommendations of Neighbourhood Centres

#WeAreHere #forsocialjustice



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Executive Summary

Neighbourhood centres are a vital part of our social fabric, right across Europe. They play a unique role, working alongside local communities to unlock their power and tackle the most pressing economic, social and environmental challenges.

Indeed, through their work, neighbourhood centres give life to the European Union's core values: respect for freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for the human dignity of all.

However, they currently face huge challenges which are threatening their ability to maximise their impact. This White Paper is a call to action, which sets out:

- The vital role of neighbourhood centres
- The huge positive impact they have
- The challenges they face
- Policy recommendations to support their development

The vital role of neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres are essential institutions at the heart of communities across Europe. They come in different shapes and sizes, but they are united around three key principles:

- Focusing on disadvantaged people and groups
- Building local participation and control
- Using a community development approach to find flexible solutions to problems.

They provide a wide range of different services and activities, much of which is focused around five areas:

1. **Social research and planning** – gathering in-depth intelligence on local issues, enabled by their trusting relationships, and facilitating engagement with decision-makers
2. **Developing and delivering services** – working with local people to ensure there are tailored and responsive local services
3. **Community activities** – using local community spaces to provide social activities as well as specific services
4. **Individual advice and direct assistance** – offering crisis support for people who have fallen through the gaps in the welfare safety net
5. **Information, education and community advocacy** – ensuring local people have the knowledge they need to live fulfilled lives and control what happens in their neighbourhoods.

“Non-Formal Learning meets Social Justice”



The positive impact of neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres play a distinct role, working in partnership with the public and private sector. This enables them to have transformative impact in the short, medium and long term:

Short-term outputs - From gaining new knowledge and skills to building trust and confidence, there are many immediate benefits for citizens.

Medium-term outcomes - Neighbourhood centres support their communities to make significant changes in their lives, from greater self-esteem and improvements in their mental and physical health, to greater integration within neighbourhoods and increased community cohesion.

Long-term impacts - The work of neighbourhood centres helps drive a longer-term shift to a society where everyone has the opportunity and ability to live a good life and play an active role in society.

IFS and the IFSJ Project

This White Paper is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ “IFS Fostering Social Justice” (IFSJ) project supported by the “International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Houses” (IFS) and the “Federation des Centres Sociaux et Socioculturels de France” (FCSF). The IFS, and its 12 European partners who worked on this project, actively support neighbourhood centres and individuals and address the challenges of social justice, local democracy and migrant integration.

FCSF (France); NUSZ (Germany); Wiener Hilfswerk (Austria); ELETFA Segito Szolgalat Egyesulet (Hungary); LSA Bewoners (Netherlands); Enik Recovery College (Netherlands); Suomen Settlementtiliitto RY (Finland); Svenska Settlementförbundet (Sweden); Fundación Esplai (Spain); Dafni Kek (Greece); ARCS (Italy); Askovfonden (Denmark)

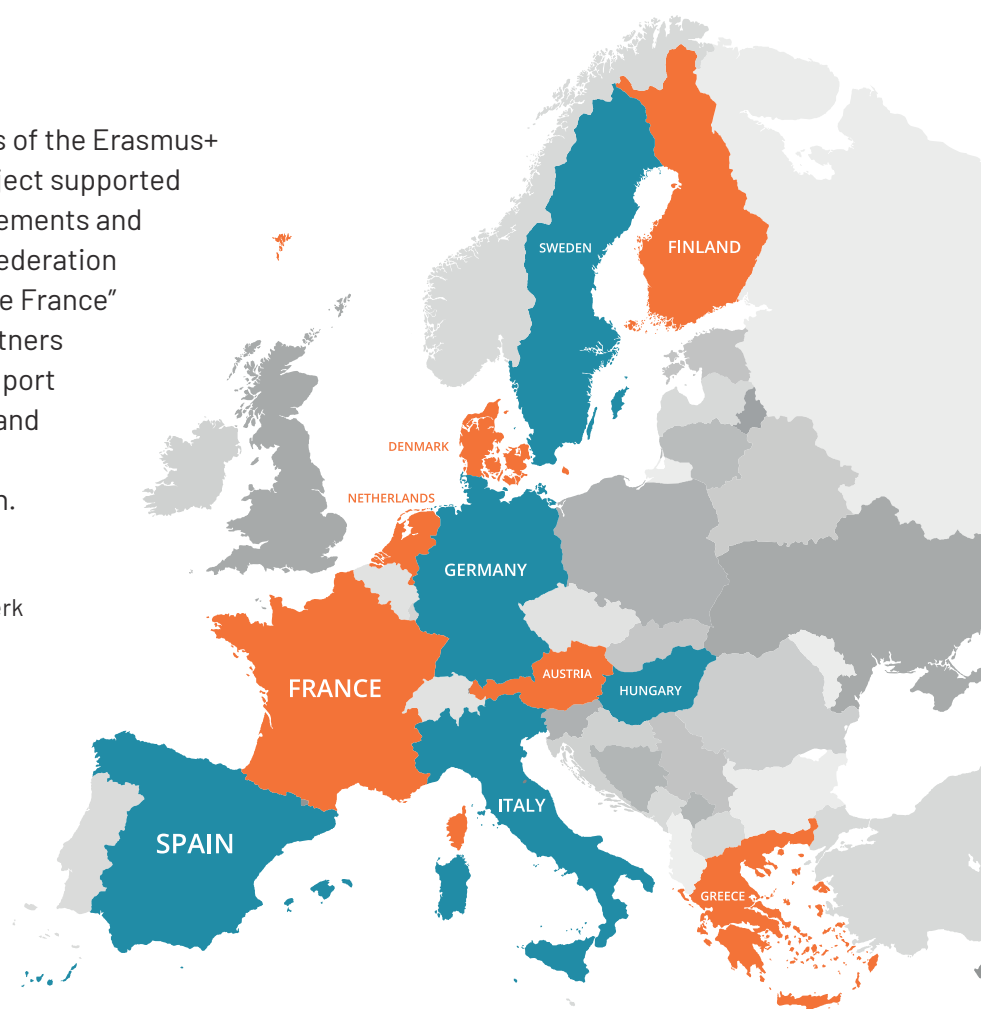
The challenges neighbourhood centres face

Neighbourhood centres are playing their transformative role despite huge challenges:

A lack of consistent funding across Europe - while some countries have supportive funding structures in place, in many countries there is little or no national financial support for neighbourhood centres. This is not sustainable and risks the ability of neighbourhood centres to keep realising their positive societal outcomes.

A lack of recognition - neighbourhood centres’ role as an essential part of the social safety net is often underestimated or ignored. This means that decisions and plans are often made in isolation from the communities and individuals which they most impact.

A risk to community spaces - as cities and towns expand, there are existing community spaces which are at risk of redevelopment, and new developments often don’t have community spaces built into planning processes.



Our policy recommendations

We have developed a series of policy recommendations to tackle these challenges head on, and ensure neighbourhood centres are at the forefront of creating a more socially-just Europe.

Ahead of the European elections in 2024, we call for recognition - at all levels of governance across Europe - of the vital role of neighbourhood centres and the value they bring.

Policy makers can signal this recognition and support neighbourhood centres by:

- 1. Promoting the non-formal learning provided by neighbourhood centres and continuing to support national and international exchange programmes.** Policymakers must continue to promote and provide appropriate funding in future EU budgets to promote lifelong non-formal learning for all.
- 2. Securing access to good quality local community spaces open to all.** Policymakers should adopt a political resolution inviting Member States to protect and provide community spaces as well as the funding needed to run them.
- 3. Securing long-term and sustainable core funding for neighbourhood centres based on trust.** The EU should share best practice examples for national agencies, and national and municipal governments, of how funding can be distributed simply to neighbourhood centres to address local needs.
- 4. Supporting local "knowledge alliances", where local residents, civil society organisations, academia and local decision-makers contribute to information sharing and gathering about local needs.** Policymakers should support and dedicate specific resources to initiatives aimed at collecting local knowledge driven by civil society and to integrate this local knowledge into the design of EU laws impacting citizens.
- 5. Securing and implementing a structured dialogue and consultative processes at EU level, to collect and use on-the-ground knowledge produced by neighbourhood centres.** The EU should invite an umbrella body for neighbourhood centres in Europe (such as the EFS) to be part of existing structures for dialogue on the role of civil society in Europe. Policymakers should also invite Member States to include representatives of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels, and draft guidance for this based on international good practice.
- 6. Directing EU funds to NGOs in countries where public funding is missing.** The new EU parliament must renew the CERV programme in the next budgeting period and make it easier and quicker to access, with the funding extended to cover a 5-year period. The EU should also work with European NGOs to pilot existing propositions from civil society in Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary) to create a new programme to support neighbourhood centres in eastern Europe where there is not enough national support and where they are not eligible to bid into other funds.

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