Government Council for Social Innovation

Advancing Social Impact

POWERED BY 1Family Foundation

Public Perception of Social Innovation

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Government Council for Social Innovation Overview

Founded in April 2025, the Government Council for Social Innovation (GCSI) is a coalition of over 50 countries united around a single conviction: that social innovation is at the heart of public policy, finance and service delivery. GCSI's mission is to catalyse social innovation globally by advancing innovative and inclusive policies, strengthening cross-sector ecosystems, and building an enabling environment for the public good. In doing so, it creates the conditions for social innovation to move from promising practice to systemic change. This survey research aims to create an evidence base for future policy and practice.

Introduction

Social innovation develops new solutions, services and forms of collaboration that address collective challenges. These innovations are put into practice by organisations that place social or environmental purpose first, including associations, cooperatives, mutual societies, foundations, non-profits, and social enterprises. They fill gaps in social provision and take many forms, from not-for-profits providing care, training, housing and finance, to social economy companies, and collective institutions. These social innovators are a critical source of ideas, services, and employment, but have traditionally been excluded from public policy discussions.

That said, social innovation has slowly moved up the policy agenda. Over the last five years, major international institutions have each made formal commitments. National policy support for social innovation is slower to follow and will occur when there is sufficient public awareness and demand for action. Little information exists on levels of awareness, engagement and support. To address this data gap, GCSI has commissioned a digital survey that extends the pioneering 27-country Special Eurobarometer 567, Social economy in the life of Europeans, globally.[1] The survey is part of GCSI's broader effort to scale support for social innovation with governments via public agendas, financing mechanisms, and legal and policy frameworks.

The Policy Agenda

Formal International commitments, 2021-2023

European Union	**European Union** Social Economy Action Plan	**2021**
Council of the European Union	**European Union Council** Council recommendation on framework conditions	**2023**
International Labour Organization	**International Labour Organization** Resolution on decent work and the social and solidarity economy	**2022**
OECD	**OECD** Recommendation on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation	**2022**
United Nations General Assembly	**United Nations General Assembly** Resolution on the social and solidarity economy for sustainable development	**2023**
Government Council for Social Innovation	**GCSI Shaping the Future of Social Innovation** The Luxembourg Declaration	**2025**

[1] European Commission. (2025). *Social economy in the life of Europeans* (Special Eurobarometer 567). Publications Office of the European Union.ative start-ups.

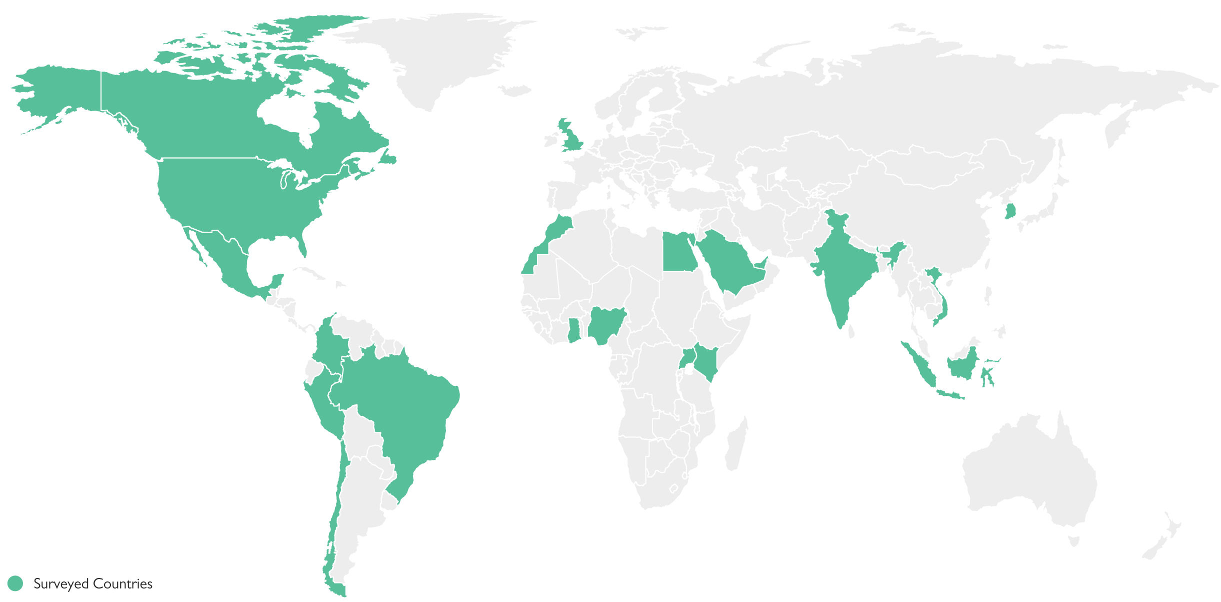
Methods and Report Structure

Work on social innovation runs deep at the micro level through awareness of individual organisations and innovators and through the burgeoning academic study of social entrepreneurship. Less is known about global public attitudes. This GCSI Social Innovation Study contributes to this agenda by measuring people's familiarity with and understanding of social innovation and the social economy; their personal involvement, engagement, and consumer support, as well as their views on the sector's impact and contribution; and the public support it should receive.

GCSI fielded the Global Social Innovation Survey through the Pollfish mobile survey platform in April and May 2026, reaching 7,848 respondents across 21 countries[2]. As an opt-in, digital-only mobile survey, the sample is made up of f smartphone users who chose to respond, rather than a representative sample of any national population. The sample therefore skews towards younger, better-educated and more urban respondents. Country samples (around 400 respondents each) are large enough for directional reads while regional means are more indicative and exploratory.

The report asks whether people back governments in supporting social innovation through legislation, education and direct funding. From there it tests whether respondents recognise and understand social innovation and the social economy. It then turns from recognition to experience, exploring the role of the social economy and innovation in their daily lives. The paper examines the interaction effects between awareness, understanding, engagement and public support, and variation across demographic groups and country contexts. A final section sets out conclusions and recommendations.

Map overview of the surveyed countries



[2] The 21 surveyed countries by region: Latin America (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru); Sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda); Middle East & North Africa (Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates); Asia-Pacific (India, Indonesia, South Korea, Vietnam); UK & North America (Canada, United Kingdom, United States)

Section I

Action & Government Support

Around the world, governments are moving from recognising social innovation and the social economy in a fragmented way to creating coherent structures to support it.[3] National strategies through dedicated laws and public financing are emerging where few existed a decade ago. For advocates and policymakers, the survey tests whether this agenda has a public mandate. The results show broad public demand for government action, alongside mixed views on how developed the sector is.

[3] Basile, I., Billimoria, J., van Eijk, B., and Klijn, V. (2026). *Global review of public financing mechanisms for social innovation* [Policy paper]. Government Council for Social Innovation (GCSI).

Public authorities must develop strategies, raise awareness and show value for money

The survey asked respondents how far they agree that public authorities in their country should develop strategies and legislation to support social innovation and the social economy. Support for government action is the survey's strongest signal: 90% back strategies and legislation, 90% back education and 83% back direct funding.

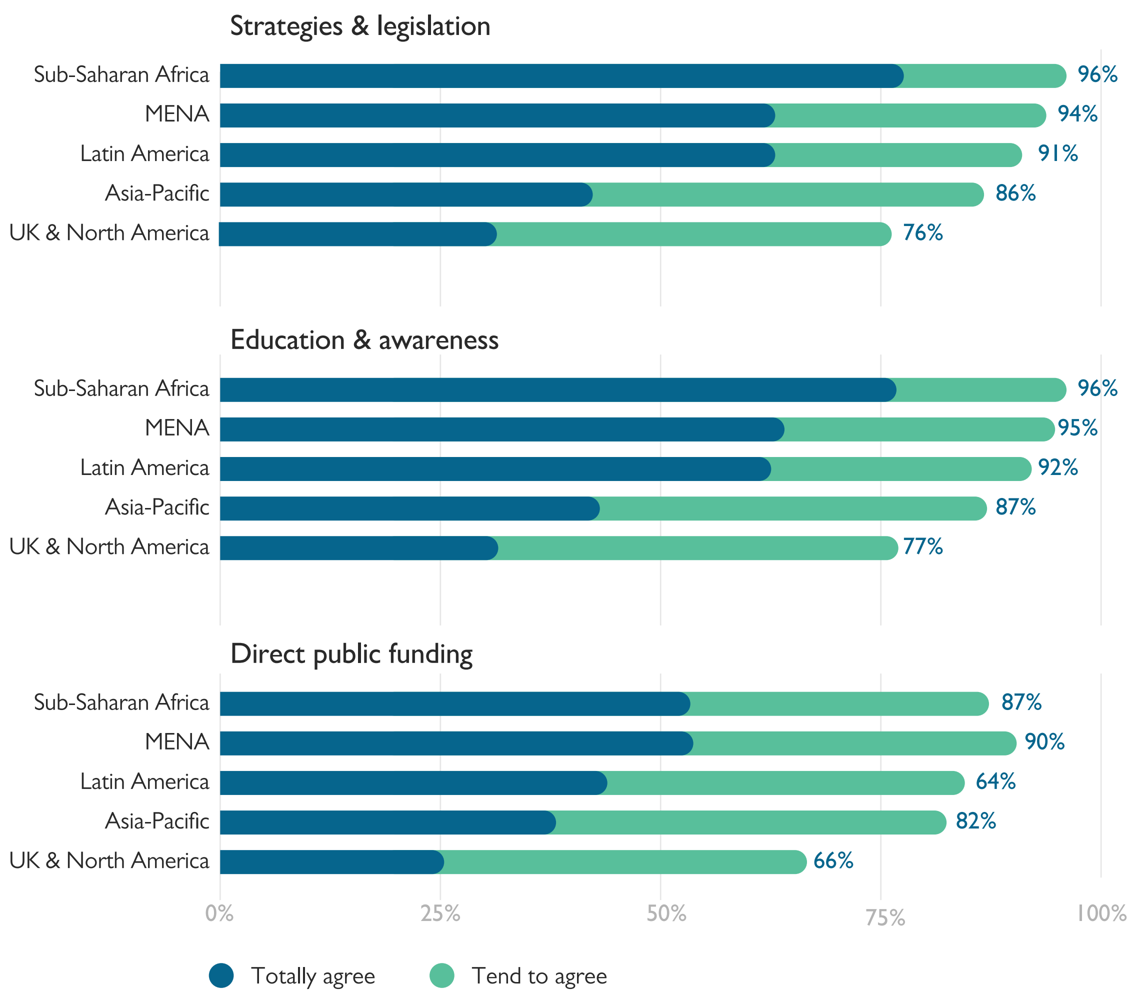
Overall support is high everywhere, but its intensity varies by region. Respondents in sub-Saharan Africa, MENA and Latin America are markedly more likely to totally agree that governments should legislate and set strategy. In Asia-Pacific, the United Kingdom and North America agree more often, taking the softer form of tending to agree. The pattern for education is almost identical.

There is the greatest variance in support for funding social innovation. Across all regions, there is an average drop in willingness to pay of around seven percentage points, with the largest drop and lowest support in the United Kingdom and North America, where just over two-thirds of the population show support. This may indicate the depth of respondents' conviction and shows that social innovation initiatives need to prioritise value for money.

Figure 1 – Support for government action, by instrument

Every region backs action, but conviction is strongest in Africa, MENA and Latin America

Share who agree public authorities should support the sector, split into 'totally agree' and 'tend to agree'; funding draws the least support everywhere.



Source: GCSI Social Innovation Survey (April/May 2026). Equal-country (unweighted) means, 21 countries, n = 7,848

Source: GCSI Social Innovation Survey (April/May 2020, unweighted means); Special Eurobarometer 567 (May 2025) as a comparator.

Social innovation is a driver of new and collaborative approaches

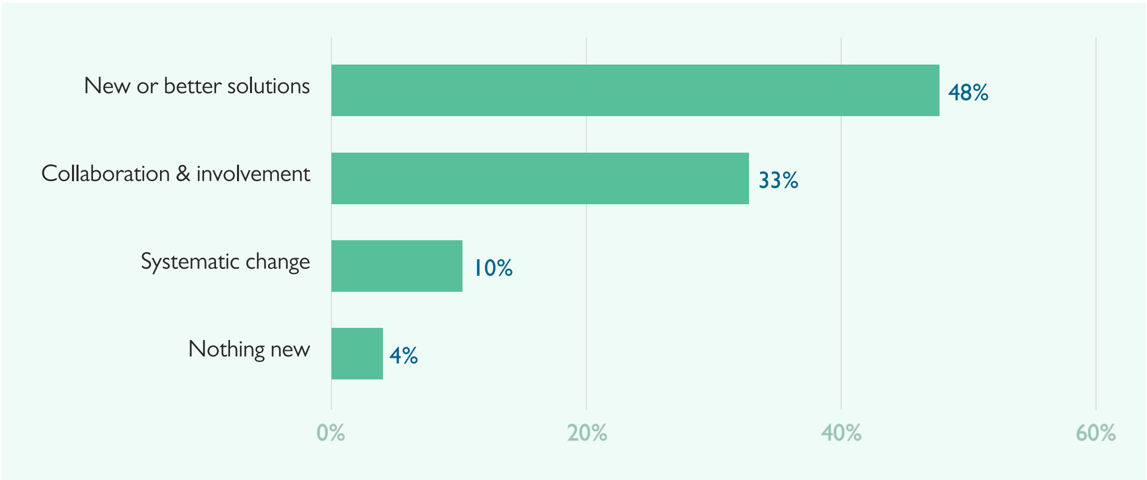
To complement the levels of support, respondents were asked what social innovation provides compared with existing ways of tackling social problems. This demonstrates the breadth of reasons and the rationale behind it.

The survey shows that respondents read social innovation primarily as improved problem solving, with 48% choosing new or better solutions. One-third of respondents prioritised the sector's ability to foster collaboration and bring people together. Only 10% saw the sector's goal as wider societal impact. Critically, only 4% reported seeing nothing new, demonstrating that most people identify some value from the wider sector.

Figure 2 – What social innovation is seen to provide

The public understands social innovation as better problem-solving

What people say social innovation mainly brings, compared with existing approaches (one answer)



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Address poverty first, then economic, service, and environmental concerns

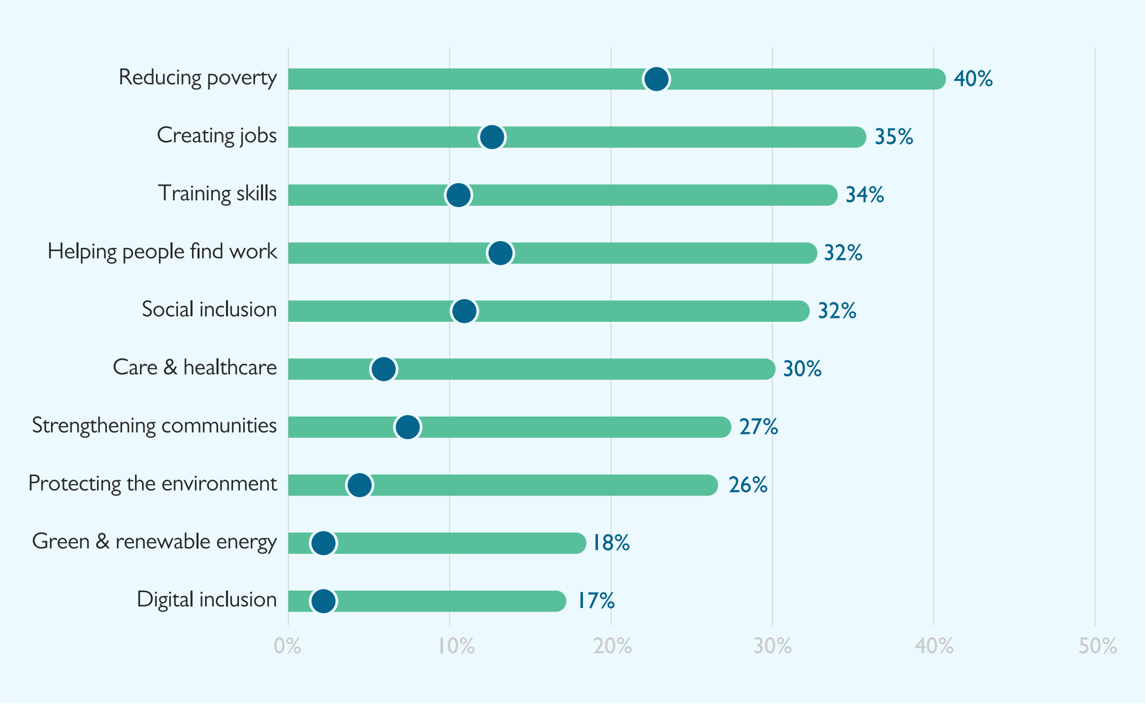
The survey asked respondents which single area represents the social economy's most important contribution in their country, choosing from a range of social, economic, and environmental goods. The forced-choice question reveals which benefit the public prioritises. In contrast, a companion multi-select question captures the wider set of benefits it also credits to social innovation and the social economy.

Reducing poverty is the sector's public identity. It is the most important contribution for 23% of respondents and ranks first in 18 of 21 markets. Only India, Indonesia and the UAE focus on employment outcomes instead. Across all contexts, economic benefits and providing services rank above environmental and green objectives. This gives the sector both a primary advocacy message and a set of complementary supporting messages that can be adapted to different countries.

Figure 3 – Most important contribution and wider benefits credited

Livelihood first, climate second

Dot = picked as the single most important contribution (Q18). Bar = also named as an area the sector helps (Q19, pick several)



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Regions differ sharply on how developed they judge the sector

Respondents were asked how developed they consider social innovation and the social economy to be in their country. While social innovation and the social economy are treated as comparable concepts across geographies, regions differ sharply in how developed and mature they judge the wider sector to be.

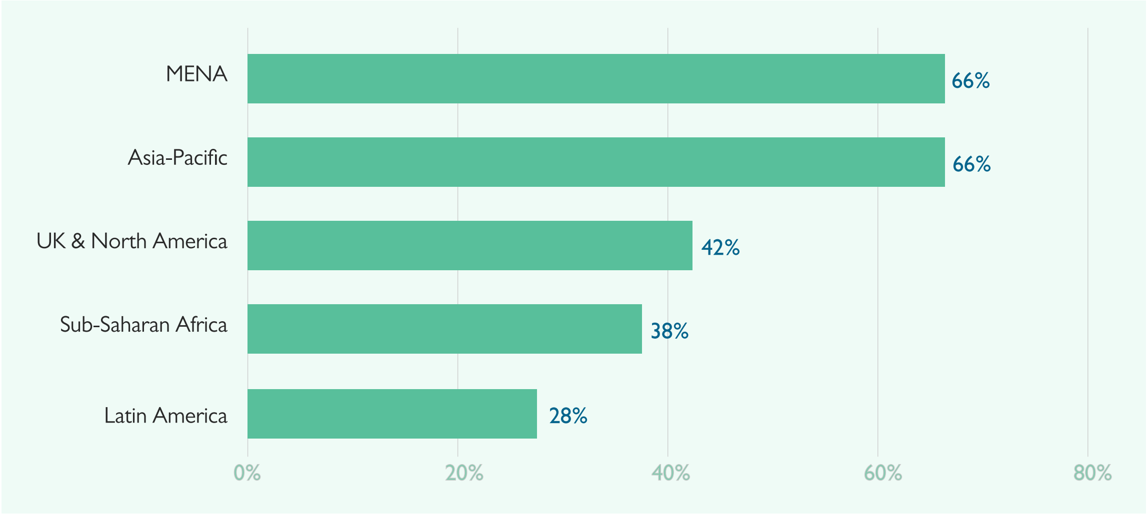
Asia-Pacific and MENA are the most positive, with two-thirds (66%) judging the sector well or very well developed. The United Kingdom and North America sit under 50%, while Latin America drops to 28%. Perceived development is not directly connected to support. Latin America and Africa back government action at over 90% while judging the sector as least developed.

The judgement is critical because it affects how government support could be positioned: through foundational interventions, by highlighting emerging initiatives in contexts perceived as underdeveloped, and by scaling and amplifying successful initiatives where development is judged to be high.

Figure 4 – Sector seen as well or very well developed, by region

Regions judge the sector's maturity very differently

Share who see the social economy and social innovation as well or very well developed



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Section 2

Definitions and Awareness

There has always been social innovation and the social economy stemming from local community problem solving through collective global movements. Only recently have governments and institutions become diligent about naming this sector, measuring it, and systematically building policy to support the wide range of activities. The survey asks whether people know these terms, understand their definitions, and were previously aware of them.

Recognition runs far ahead of understanding

Respondents were asked whether they had heard of the term 'social economy' and 'social innovation'. Asked unprompted, this measures awareness beyond policy and practitioner circles. The definitions are thereafter shared with respondents and questions about whether they know what the term means. They are finally asked whether they are familiar with the term after having seen the definition.

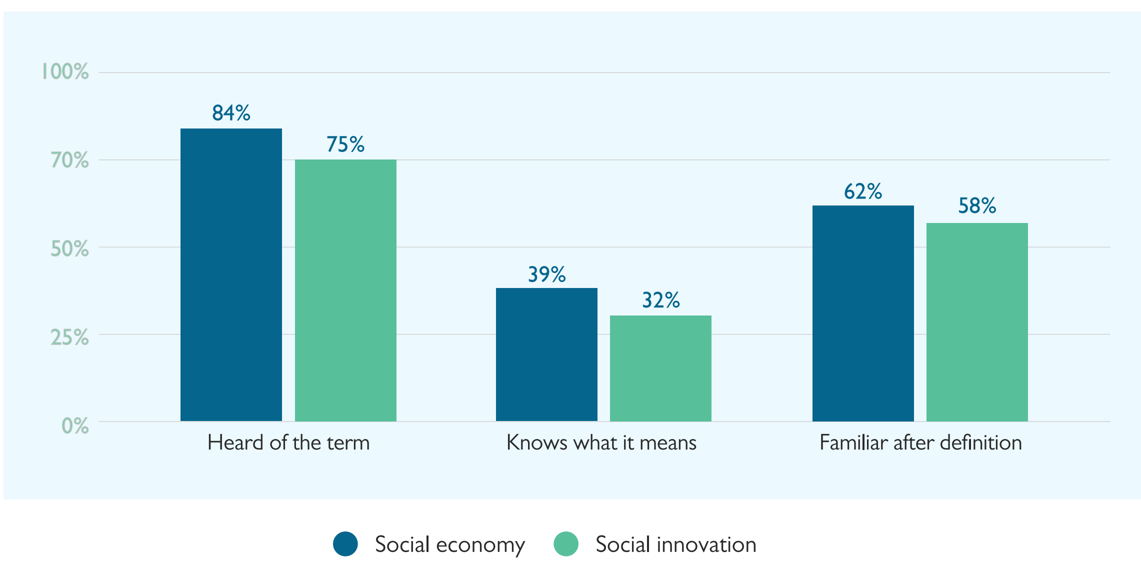
Awareness outpaces understanding. Of those surveyed, 84% have heard of the social economy, but only 39% know what it means. The same gap appears for social innovation, one step lower: 76% heard, 32% know. Once a definition is shown for both, claimed familiarity roughly doubles (63% and 58%).

This gap between familiarity and recognition suggests either respondent overconfidence, or that current definitions are not clear enough to build genuine understanding. Understanding rises steadily with education, from 26% among those with secondary education to 51% among those with a master's degree or higher, and is lower still among the small number with only primary education. People involved at least monthly are more than twice as likely to know what the sector is, at 55% compared with 23%.

Figure 5 – Recognition, understanding and familiarity, by term

Awareness outpaces understanding

Share who have heard the term, know what it means, and feel familiar once shown a definition



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Defining social innovation

Social innovation means developing, evolving and deploying new or adapted approaches to tackling challenges facing people and the planet, focusing on both how solutions are developed and the results they achieve. Social innovation typically involves new or improved solutions, such as services, practices, policies, or models; collaboration between different actors, such as citizens, civil society, businesses, and public authorities; a shift in how problems are understood or addressed, rather than simply delivering services differently.

Defining the social economy

The social economy is made up of organisations that put people, communities, and the environment first, not profits. Their main aim is to create a positive social or environmental impact. These organisations are typically private and independent from public authorities; reinvest most of their profits back into their social or environmental mission, rather than distribute them to owners or shareholders; and are managed in a democratic or participatory way, involving members, workers, or users in decision making.

To assess the link between understanding and general awareness of the types of institutions, respondents were shown a list of associated organisational forms. The list makes the definitions more concrete: people may not recognise the terms 'social innovation' and 'social economy' and yet still know their organisations well.

The public knows the community-rooted sector and barely recognises the market-based one. Associations (69%), non-profits (60%), and cooperatives (57%) lead recognition; social enterprises (40%), inclusive businesses (29%), and B-Corporations (22%) trail in every region. Only 4% could not identify any. This suggests that public understanding of social innovation is rooted in charitable or community action, rather than market-based and more innovative forms of social action. It strengthens the case for new legal rules and forms, certifications, and incentives that make these newer forms more visible and credible.

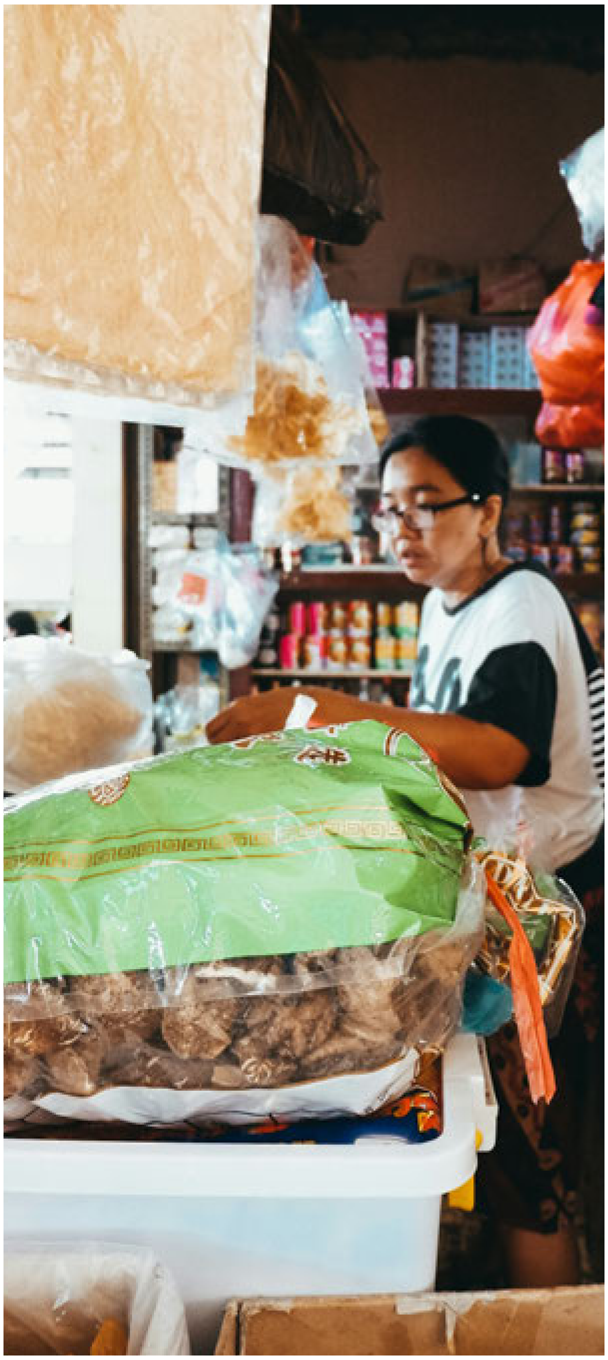
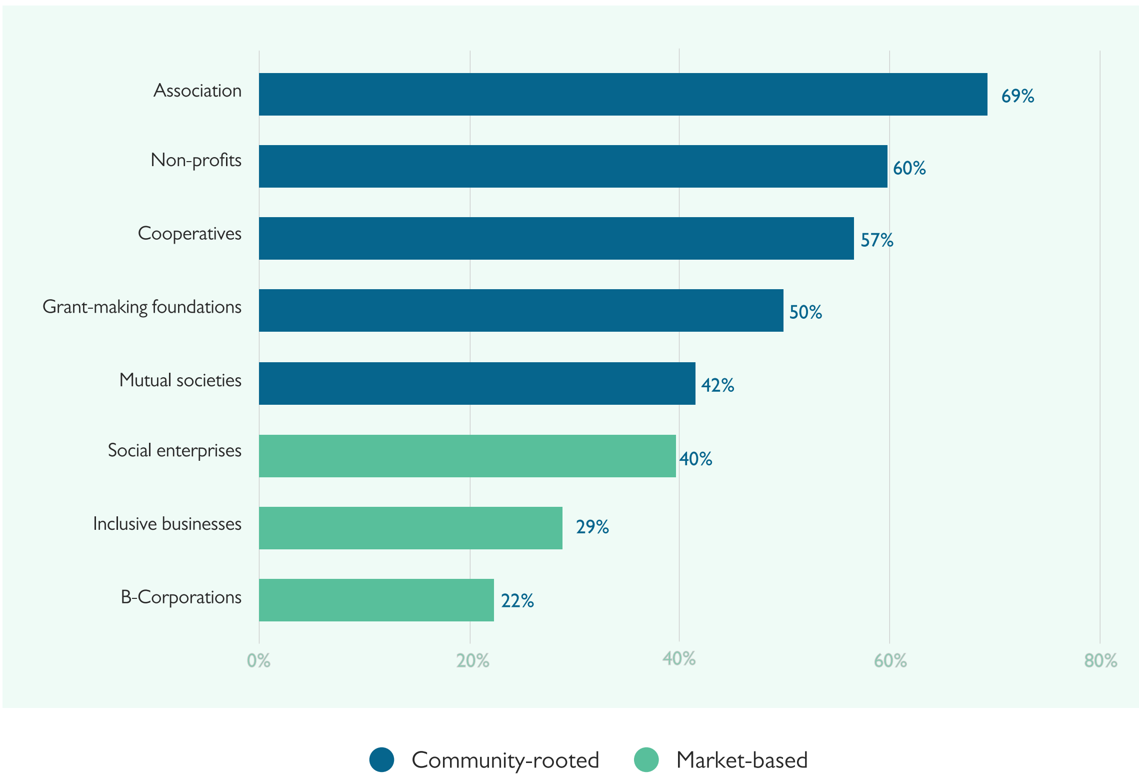


Figure 6 – Which organisational forms people recognise

The public knows the community-rooted sector, not the market-based one

Share who recognise each type of organisation (select all that apply)



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The public claims economic as well as charitable roles

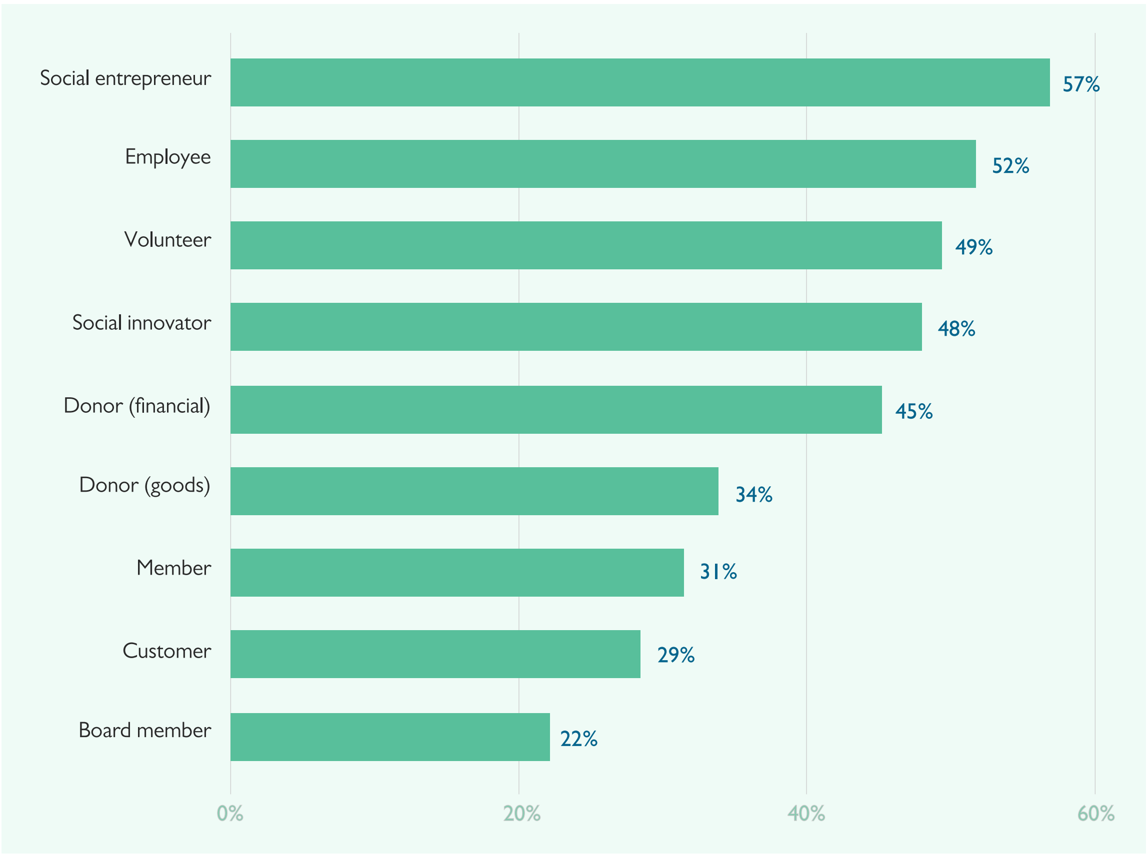
Respondents were also asked which types of involvement they recognise, ranging from being a social entrepreneur, through employment, volunteering, and board membership, to donating and being a customer. This question examined how respondents view different roles within the wider sector.

A striking 57% identify as social entrepreneurs and 48% as social innovators. The public sees economic as well as charitable roles: employee (52%), member (32%) and customer (29%) sit alongside volunteer (49%) and donor (45% financial and 34% goods).

Figure 7 – Involvement roles claimed

The public recognises economic and charitable roles

Share who see each role as part of the social economy and social innovation (select all)



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Section 3

Social Economy and Innovation in Daily Life

Most people encounter social innovation and the social economy long before they hear the term. A local community centre offering childcare, training, or recreational programmes, a mutual bank or insurer they trust, or a housing and sports association they are part of. The sector reaches daily life as community, services, goods, and support. Understanding how respondents have engaged with the sector provides a vantage point to understanding their knowledge and support.

A majority engaged monthly

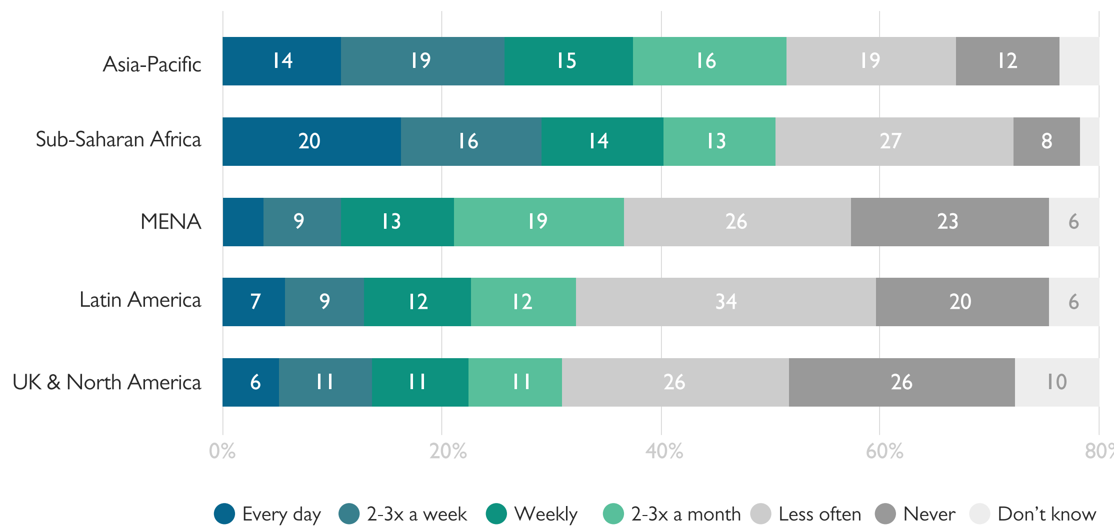
Respondents were asked how frequently they are currently involved with social economy and social innovation organisations. Frequency, from daily to never, measures connection and presence in people's lives.

Involvement is regular for half the connected public: 51% engage at least monthly and only 17% never do. Regular contact leads in Asia-Pacific (64%) and sub-Saharan Africa (63%) and is lowest in the United Kingdom and North America (39%), and Latin America (41%). Involvement peaks among 25–34s (58% monthly), falls to 38% at 65+, and is higher in cities (53%) than in towns (37%).

Figure 8 – Frequency of involvement, by region

Half the public is involved at least monthly, but frequency varies sharply by region

How often people are involved with social economy and social innovation organisations



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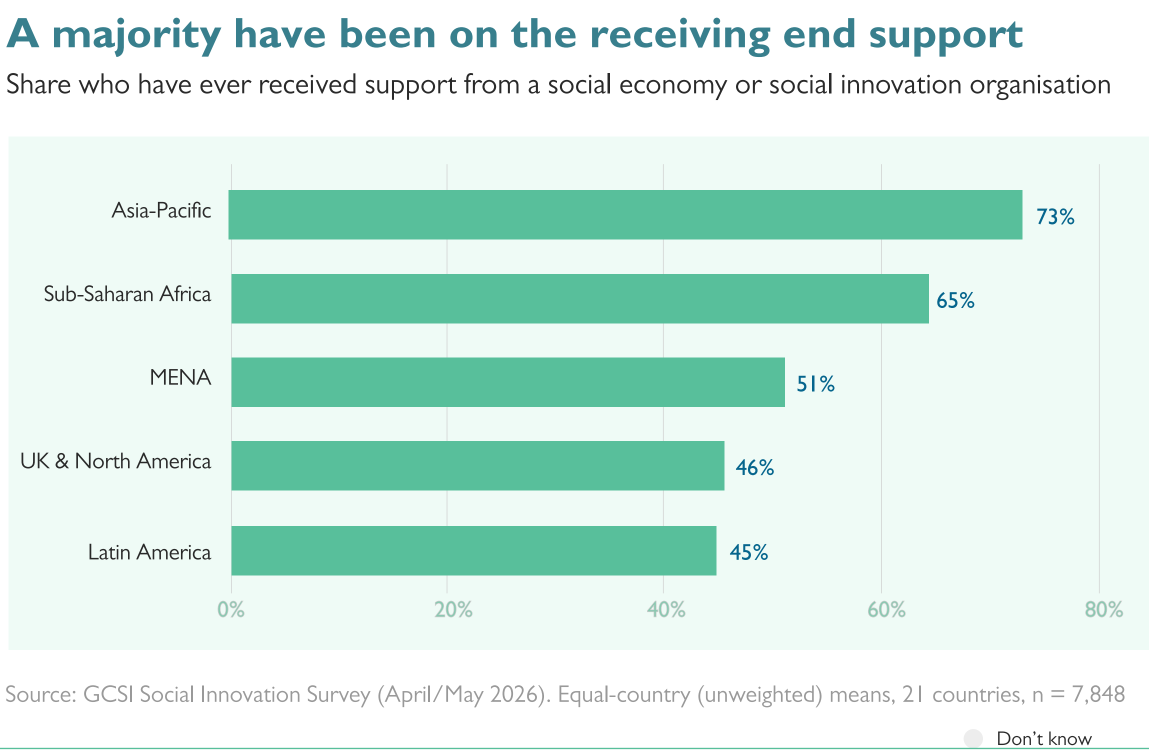
Across diverse areas of support

Respondents were asked what kinds of support they have received from social economy and social innovation organisations. A majority (56%) have received some form of support. Reach is highest in Asia-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa and lowest in Latin America and the United Kingdom and North America; 41% have never received support. For comparison, the EU27 figure from the Special Eurobarometer is considerably lower at 33%.

Figure 9 – Received any support, by region.



Source: GCSI Social Innovation Survey (April/May 2020, unweighted means); Special Eurobarometer 567 (May 2025) as a comparator.

Types of support varied widely.

Education and health lead support, but a quarter report none

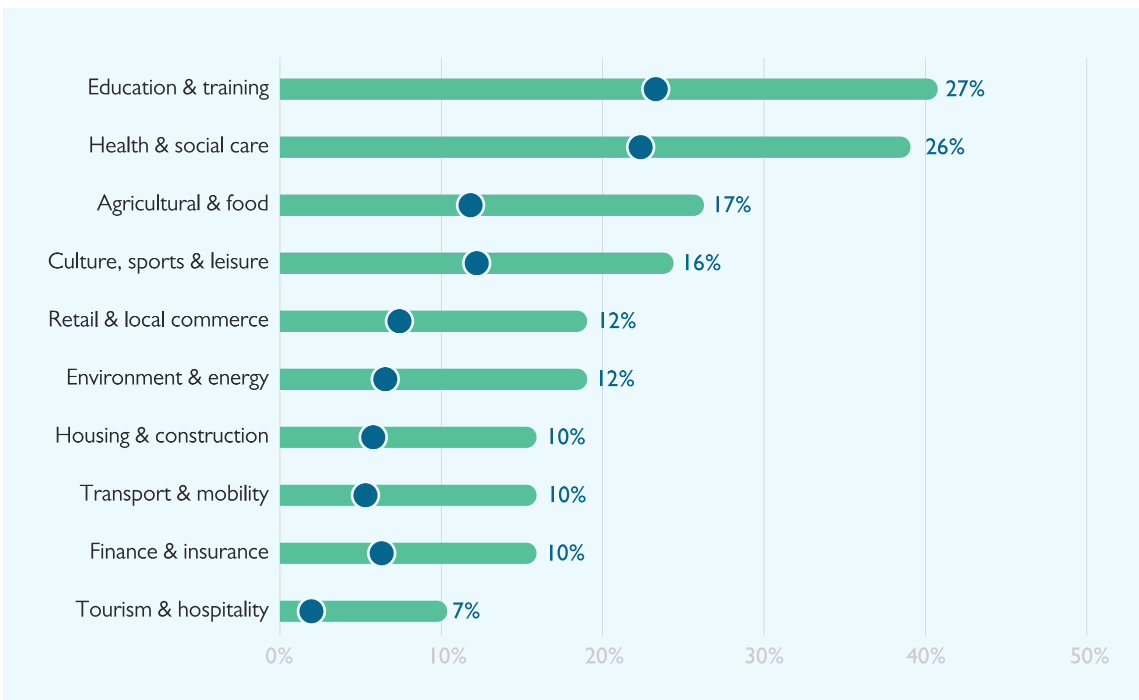
Respondents were asked which parts of the social economy they had received support from, both from the main source and at some point previously.

Respondents most often identified education and training (16% main source; 27% any contact) and health and social care (15%; 26%), followed by a range of other support types. No support was received by 18% of respondents, and a further 8% could not say whether they had.

Figure 10 – Support received, by sector

Livelihood first, climate second

Dot = main source of support (Q16, one answer). Bar = ever receive support from this sector (Q17, pick several)



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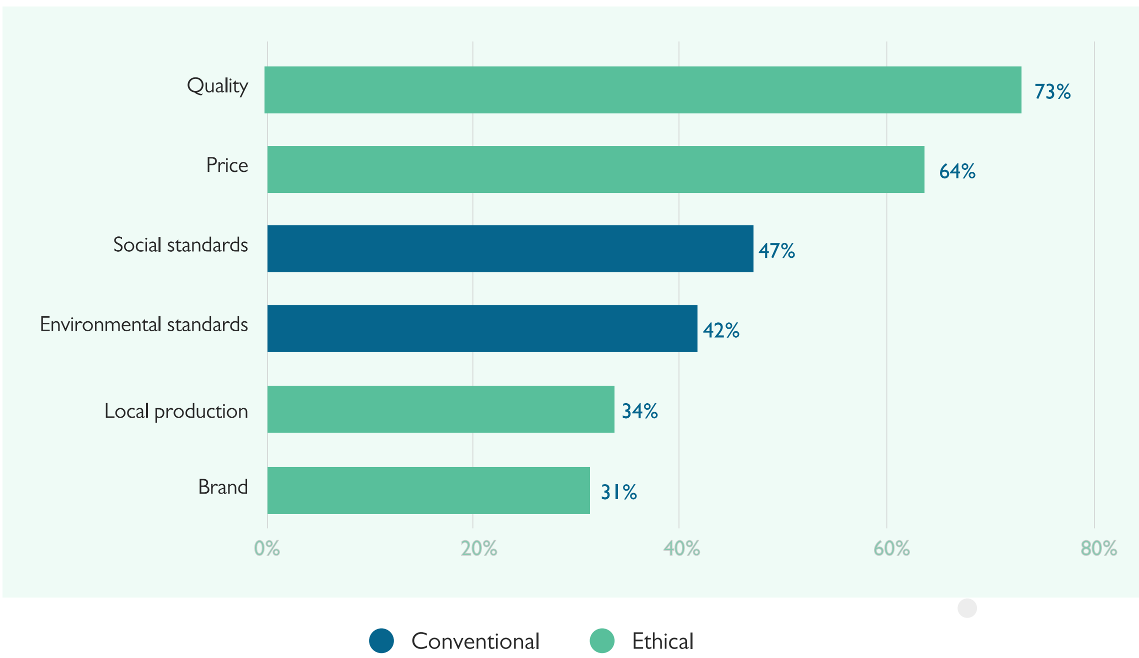
Purchasing choices reveal emerging social values

Respondents were asked how important a range of factors are when they buy goods and services. Purchasing choices reveal an emerging set of social values underlying consumption. While quality (73%) and price (64%) are most important when people buy goods and services, social standards (47%) and environmental standards (42%) follow close behind. This is ahead of brand (32%) and local production (34%). Conviction on social and environmental standards is strongest in sub-Saharan Africa (63%) and weakest in the United Kingdom and North America, and Asia-Pacific (38/39%).

Figure 11 – Importance of factors when buying goods and services

Ethical standards now rank close behind price

Share rating eaching factor 'very important' when buying goods and services



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Driving understanding and support for social innovation

Initial analysis has identified key drivers of understanding and support at the cross-national level, with further machine-learning work to follow at the demographic level. Three entry points stand out for deepening public support and engagement.

The first is to target those already involved and supported. For example, people involved at least monthly are nearly twice as likely to see the sector as developed (60% vs 33%) and 13 points more likely to totally agree that governments should legislate (63% vs 50%). A critical challenge may be broadening awareness of the breadth and connections in the sector, with many social institutions not making beneficiaries aware of their social purpose.

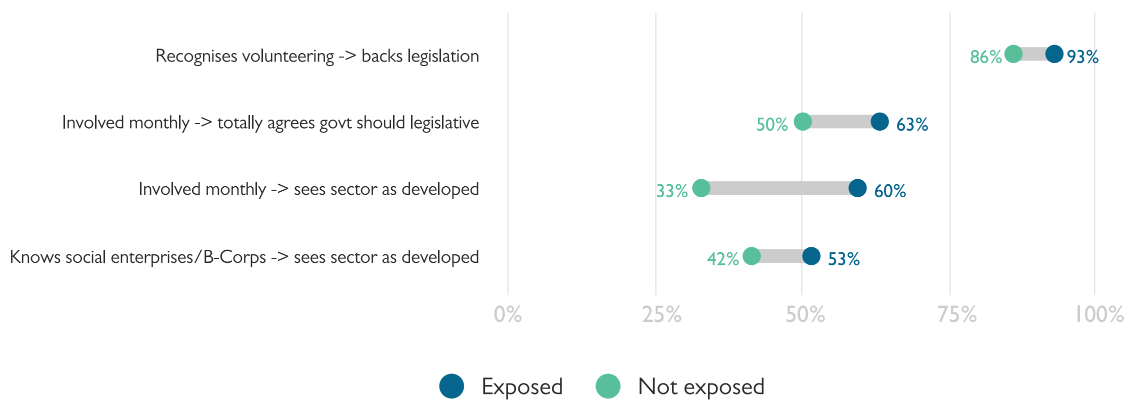
A second approach is to amplify market champions. People aware of social enterprises and B-Corporations are 10 percentage points more likely to see the sector as developed and are more likely to support public action. Supporting social enterprises as viable organisations, and turning their customers into advocates provides another route to widen support.

Volunteering is a third lever, with 49% identifying volunteerism as a critical role. Those respondents are aware of volunteering back legislation more strongly than those who are not (93% vs 86%), with the same gap on education (93% vs 87%), a narrower one on funding (86% vs 80%).

Figure 12 – Impact of variables on understanding and support

Contact with the sector lifts both understanding and support

Share reaching each outcome, among people exposed to the entry point vs not



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Conclusions

The public mandate for government action on the social economy and social innovation is close to universal: 90% back legislation and education and 83% direct funding. That mandate needs strengthening. Most people know the concepts of the social economy and innovation but do not fully understand them. The study shows that engagement with the sector — receiving support and dealing with social enterprises and B-Corporations — is a key driver of both support and understanding.

Governments should harness this public support and build on existing engagement, tailoring their strategies for action to local perceptions of the sector's level of development. Specifically, they should pursue targeted advocacy and public engagement strategies that demonstrate the sector's importance and impact in people's daily lives, using tools such as public awareness days and volunteer initiatives, and promoting the contributions of social enterprises and innovators to community wellbeing. In doing so, they can raise public understanding of social innovation and translate it more effectively into policy and action