

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation
ESF+ Social Innovation+ Initiative

Community of Practice on Social Innovation

Work Programme



CoP	SOCIAL INNOVATION
Programme year	2023
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Social Innovation and transnational cooperation is an imperative.

ESF Social Innovation+ 2022–2027 aims at facilitating transnational cooperation to boost the transfer and scaling up of innovative solutions aimed at reducing inequalities across the EU, especially in the policy areas of employment, skills and social inclusion.

Transnational cooperation activities, including mutual learning and capacity building, will be organised in the framework of the following Communities of Practice (CoPs): (1) Employment, Education and Skills, (2) Social Inclusion, (3) Social Innovation, and, at a later stage, (4) Migrant integration and (5) Material deprivation (Ex FEAD community). Mutual learning activities will also be organised and supported within the EU-Roma network and the network supporting the implementation of the ALMA initiative in the Member States.

The ambitious objectives of the ESF Social Innovation+ action must be placed in the very challenging societal context of 2022. The European economy was slowly recovering from the Corona pandemic resulting in an overheated labour market and new work patterns. The social and interpersonal consequences of the lockdowns and stress caused by the pandemic are not yet completely understood. The recovery process stopped abruptly in February 2022, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Millions left the country looking for a safe haven, budgets for military equipment boomed, and policy agendas shifted dramatically across the globe. An unprecedented energy crisis, high inflation, rising poverty and interruptions in the industrial supply chains challenge the EU societies and our way of living.

An additional layer of complexity was added on top of the numerous challenges pre-dating this crisis, such as the lack of personal assistance schemes and supported decision-making, or affordable and supported housing; also lack of effective family support, availability of long-term care services, limited access to the labour market for people excluded from society, and shortage of staff in social services. Social budgets are under pressure, and inclusion is rarely on top of the political agenda. While there is evidence that social protection schemes and social services play an important role in mitigating the effects of the crisis, many societal actors and institutions, despite being on the frontline, are geared down to a survival mode.

The pre-crisis policies of the EU provide a solid framework to address the social innovation and social inclusion challenges ahead. The work of the CoPs will connect the ESF+ regulation and funding to the wider policy context and assist in refocusing when needed.

These policy frameworks especially relevant for the Social Inclusion CoP are:

- European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan
- ESF+ regulation and Common Provisions Regulation
- EU Semester
- Child Guarantee
- EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- The Care Strategy
- European Platform on Combatting Homelessness

Although the post-corona era, the war, and the rising poverty risks bring extraordinary challenges, they also create the needed sense of urgency regarding social renewal and innovation. 'Business as usual' will no longer work. Rethinking local development, having everybody on board and at work, equipped with the skills of tomorrow, is a necessity. Participatory approach should be the instrument for achieving that.

Social Innovation, transnational cooperation, and EU funding are part of the answer in such difficult times, and they will help ESF+ Managing Authorities (MAs) to better address societal challenges in their national and regional programmes. By bringing together experts, practitioners, researchers, decision- and policy-makers, innovators and entrepreneurs, who share common concerns or interests, the CoP activities will allow actors to identify proven solutions that can be

upscaled and transferred across Europe. The best initiatives in the fields of employment, education, skills, and social inclusion could thus be spread across more regions, so that more people could benefit from them.

Expanding the best initiatives in the fields of employment, education, skills, and social inclusion, in order to benefit to more people and territories. The work done by the CoPs should contribute to the best possible use of the ESF+ budget.

Rationale

To respond to contemporary societal challenges, we need new solutions, which put citizens in the centre of the action. **We need social innovations: solutions which are social in their ends and in their means¹**, with a potential to create positive social change. The **EU has been promoting social innovation** since the early 2000s, through various policies and programmes, notably in the framework of the ESF and EaSI² during the 2014-2020 programming period, achieving important results and impacts which contribute to improve people's living and working conditions³.

Innovation is not an objective per se, but a process to overcome an existing or future problem, expected to achieve better positive social results and impact than the existing solutions. In addition, innovation is relative, and what is a common practice in one territory can be new and bring about social change in another context facing similar social needs (transfer). Small scale innovations should be upscaled and mainstreamed into public policies once tested positively (upscaling).

However, several **barriers** remain to unlocking the full potential of social innovation, such as the insufficient common understanding of social innovation and social experimentation, or lack of expertise and knowledge about models tools and practices in many ESF+ bodies. In addition, there is a **persistent gap between the 'demand' for new solutions from policy-makers at all levels**, including ESF+ Managing Authorities, and the **'offer' of successful results from social innovations and social experimentations** funded by ESF and EaSI, as well as from other EU programmes (Horizon Europe, Erasmus+...) and national or regional programmes in the Member States or even outside the EU. Policy-makers and funders, who could benefit from these innovative solutions and scale them up into public policies, seem to have no access to the relevant and sufficiently convincing information about the results of social innovation and experimentation.

The **ESF+ regulation provides renewed and enhanced support for social innovation and social experimentation, with opportunities** to overcome many of those pitfalls:

- **Member States** are required to dedicate at least one priority to social innovation in their own national/ regional programmes with a higher ESF+ cofinancing rate (article 14.4.).
- At the EU level:
- The ESF Social Innovation+ initiative will **support the transfer and scaling up of social innovations through a dedicated Grant scheme. In addition, it will facilitate peer learning and knowledge production via the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation**. The Centre will offer mutual learning, capacity building and networking activities for ESF+ Managing Authorities and other relevant stakeholders, including Communities of Practice on Employment, education and skills, Social inclusion, and Social innovation. It will cooperate closely with National Competence Centres for Social Innovation (NCCs).
- **Social experimentation projects** will continue to be funded under the Employment and Social Innovation strand (EaSI) of the ESF+ to support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and to respond to the emerging needs on the ground (article 25.c). This work is now supported by the newly created **EaSI National Contact Points (NCPs)** which provide guidance, information and assistance (article 26.C.ii)
- Six **transnational projects⁴ (TPs)** are currently working on setting up **NCCs** in 25 countries, driving social innovation at all levels.
- **Social Innovation Match (SIM) will be a new EU database** designed to increase the visibility of social innovation initiatives, promote best practices, and facilitate partnership-building for transnational cooperation.

The CoP activities will be designed in the context of this reinforced ecosystem and will benefit from it.

1 Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013, Article 2.1 (8)

2 Social innovation will also be supported under the Employment and Social Innovation strand (EaSI) of the ESF+. This will include EU-wide social experimentation calls for proposals to support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, as well to respond to emerging needs on the ground.

3 Examples of successfully transferred or upscaled social innovation and social experimentation projects can be found in these 2 practical guides: 'Scaling up Social Innovations: Seven steps for using ESF+' and 'Social experimentations: A practical guide for project promoters'.

4 <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en/competence-centres-social-innovation>

Objectives

The overall objective of the Social Innovation CoP (SI CoP) for the period of 2023-2027 is to **facilitate and accelerate the transfer and upscaling of proven innovative solutions** (approaches, models, services, products, or practices) in public policies by using ESF+ funding. The aim is to achieve system changes by improving the results and impact of public policies, and by turning social innovation into a core element of their design and implementation. The current SI CoP will build on the work and results achieved by the previous SI CoP (2020-2022), taking into consideration the lessons learned from the 2014-2020 ESF programmes and EaSI calls. It will gradually integrate the needs and experience from ESF+ bodies and other relevant stakeholders, resulting from the current programming period, and will make use of all newly available resources. It will also benefit from the growing expertise and reinforced synergies of both the NCCs and the expanding network of EaSI National Contact Points (NCPs), which will be supported by the 2023 EU call from ESFA⁵ with the aim to help relevant organisations/networks cooperate at transnational level and thus further improve their capacity to support social innovation in their respective countries.

The SI CoP will **evolve to become 'practice-oriented'** and will assist ESF+ Managing Authorities in implementing social innovation and social experimentation within national and regional programmes, regardless of whether they include dedicated social innovation priorities or are of a more general nature.

The Social Innovation CoP will consider interrelated objectives aimed to:

- Improve a common practical understanding of social innovation and social experimentation among different stakeholders, from design to the validation and expansion of results, social impact assessment, and integration of project results into public policies.
- Facilitate active connections and collaboration between ESF bodies, NCCs or social innovation support structures, EaSI NCPs, social innovation and social experimentation projects, and other social innovation stakeholders through mutual learning, capacity building and networking. This will allow them to share experiences and learn about common challenges and tackling them jointly by implementing social innovation in public social policies.
- Consolidate the mapping of the European social innovation ecosystem based on the mapping of national ecosystems performed by TPs and NCCs, including an in-depth analysis of various governance models for NCCs. This will be done in close coordination with the work undertaken by NCCs within the framework of initiatives coordinated by the European Centre for Social Innovation.
- Identify policy needs and priorities of member states related to the ESF+ priority areas of employment, education, skills and social inclusion, with the aim to stimulate the demand for social innovation in public policies in close cooperation with the other two CoPs. This analysis will primarily focus on the priorities dedicated to social innovation in ESF+ programmes, with a particular attention for the topics and priorities from the other CoPs to enhance synergies and consistency between the activities of all CoPs.
- Help Managing Authorities increase the quality and number of social innovation and social experimentation projects, including by improving the access of socially innovative organisations to ESF+ opportunities.
- Share experiences, models and methodologies used to evaluate and validate new approaches, models, services, products, or practices and their readiness to scale up, in order to help social innovation projects reach their positive results and impact. This will help ESF MAs and policy makers to improve in selecting the best initiatives with high potential for transfer and upscaling.
- Increase the showcase of social innovations that address current and future societal challenges and positively influence policies, either locally or nationally. This will contribute to the ongoing expansion of the Social Innovation Match database with inspiring innovative products, services, successful practices and models, including innovative financing instruments and models, mainly funded by the ESF/ESF+ and EaSI but also within other EU programmes as well as other funding mechanisms.
- Assist in matching proven innovative solutions with the demand on the policy-making side. The latter includes ESF+ MAs in particular, but also other EU partners facing similar challenges in different contexts and territories.
- Tap into the potential of results of the EU-level calls for proposals under the ESF Social Innovation+ initiative.
- In collaboration with the EaSI NCP, raise awareness of social innovation direct management calls under the EaSI strand of the ESF+.

⁵ The Lithuanian European social fund agency, responsible for the ESF implementation in Lithuania, and recently entrusted body to implement the ESF SI+ initiative.

- Connect to and collaborate with other EU initiatives and programmes that support social innovation in a complementary manner to ESF+ and EaSI, such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, as well as mainstream innovation policies and programmes, so that ESF+ project promoters and MAs are kept informed about the wide range of support for social innovation at EU level.

The CoP Social Innovation will work in close cooperation with the other existing CoPs. The identification of policy needs and priorities, as well as innovative solutions and practices, will be aligned with the work programmes, policy priorities and thematic focuses of these other CoPs. The aim is to develop joint interconnected activities contributing to building a culture of innovation for social policies.

These objectives will guide and be reflected in all activities and outcomes of the CoP Social Innovation. Activities and outcomes will be planned on a yearly basis in work programmes, following a participatory and collaborative approach to ensure that the CoP members' needs are duly considered. This co-creation process, as well as the fast-evolving societal challenges encountered by all Member States, imply a strong element of flexibility to allow for adjustment when needed.

CoP participants

The SI CoP will drive forward transnational cooperation and active collaboration among the following types of stakeholders:

- ESF+ Managing Authorities and ESF+ implementing bodies in charge of the social innovation priorities at national and regional level.
- Key policy stakeholders (line ministries, national agencies, networks, international organisations, social partners, etc.)
- NCCs, EaSI NCPs and SIM National Validators.
- Experts with a relevant knowledge for the activities and development needs of the CoP members
- Commission representatives, including:
 - DG EMPL (ESF+ desk officers and EaSI officers)
 - DG RTD
 - DG EAC
 - DG GROW
 - DG REGIO
- Additional stakeholders invited according to the topic and activities:
- Social innovation and social experimentation initiatives as final beneficiaries (ESF+, EaSI and other EU or national programmes, as well as successful social innovations funded from other than EU sources)
- Members of the European Parliament working on social innovation
- Members of Committee of the Regions working on social innovation
- Members of Social and Economic Committee working on social innovation

We will aim to ensure regular rotation of the **CoP chairmanship** as appropriate to the work and activities undertaken (e.g., yearly or biannually), with a transition period to ensure a smooth take over.

For 2023, the Chair will be from an ESF+ MA, or from an NCC working closely with ESF+ bodies, from a MS where social innovation is a high priority, with a solid experience in using ESF for social innovation, including operational capacity and availability to lead the work. Proposals will be made on a voluntary basis.

The Co-chairs should be either from ESF+ MAs or NCCs, from MS with a nascent or growing level of knowledge and capacities related to social innovation.

Proposals will be made on a voluntary basis.

Engaging CoP members

Considering the high number of participants, their heterogeneity with regards to their functions, experience and knowledge of social innovation will be taken into consideration when designing the meetings and activities to ensure the active and collaborative participation of all.

The CoP model will combine the following community building methods:

- **Co-creation, one of the most powerful ways to engage with participants**, will be key to placing them at the centre of the value creation process as a practical and active source of knowledge, motivation and creation. This implies active participation at all stages. Participatory methodologies and tools will be used both online and offline to convene mutual learning, networking and to drive joint action at EU level. The work programme, the activities and the outputs will be discussed and collectively agreed before being submitted to DG EMPL for validation when requested.
- **Group facilitation techniques, including ice-breakers and gamification**, will be used to ease exchanges while making them efficient, fruitful and focused. The aim is to create an innovative working space defined by trust, confidence, creativity, and solidarity, where each participant has something to receive and to offer.
- **Short 'catching-up' sessions** will be proposed to smaller groups, if needed, using peer-to-peer support or external expertise.
- **Thematic working groups** (to be decided and named by participants) will be created on a temporary and voluntary basis to allow working in parallel on different thematic issues with the purpose to enhance the transfer and upscaling processes in practice, notably, in Action Learning Set format.
- **The needs-based approach** will be used to ensure that activities match the participants' needs and expectations, resulting in active engagement. The needs of participants will be assessed annually to help improve the year's work programme.

To overcome the challenges related with **online meetings and activities**, the CoP will use various **interactive tools and apps**, such as Miro Board, mentimeters, polls, surveys, etc., which will ensure interactivity of the sessions.

Proposed activities and outputs (results) for 2023

The SI CoP will put into practice various formats (plenary meetings, workshops, webinars, peer reviews, peer-to-peer trainings, action learning sets, study visits, conference, etc.) and tools according to the type of activity and the expected results. The current 2023 work programme will be adjusted in the mid-term on the basis of a participants' needs assessment (survey and discussion) and the progress achieved so far. The adjustment will also take into consideration cross-sectoral collaboration with the other CoPs.

The proposed framework aims to address 3 main activities, that will unfold into 7 events (6 online and 1 on-site).

1. Building a practical common understanding of social innovation and social experimentation across MS, from projects to public policies

Social innovation is intrinsically collaborative. Sharing pragmatic and usable understanding of social innovation, based on examples/experience of successful projects, is much needed to create the necessary common ownership and collaboration between different stakeholders, including policymakers and funders.

This shared practical understanding will improve the quality and relevance of ESF+ programmes and calls for proposals (demand) as well as of social innovation projects (offer) and transnational cooperation. This activity will help turning definitions into practice and provide tools, methodologies, and practices to be applied to foster both incremental and disruptive social innovations in policies.

Activities:

- **Online survey to assess participants' policy priorities (January 2023)**: the online survey will aim to clarify and specify demand from the policy side in the MS according to the ESF+ priority areas, essentially in the Social Innovation dedicated priorities of ESF+ programmes (national and if possible regional). It will complement a quick desk survey. The results will allow to identify common challenges and needs faced by several MS, as well as the upscaling elements and good practices in ESF+ programmes. Priority topics shared by several MS will be addressed within different working groups. Particular attention will be given to the priority topics identified in the other CoPs.
- **Interactive training workshop on social innovation characteristics (February 2023)**: training will focus on the criteria and characteristics of social innovation and experimentation, gathering perspectives from both project promoters, ESF+ bodies and social innovation support structures. This activity, from theory to practice, will be based on the analysis of the social innovation priorities in ESF+ programmes, as well as on hands-on assignments included

in the recent EU publications: **Social experimentation: A practical guide for project promoters**, aimed to support project promoters preparing social experimentation proposals, and **Scaling up Social Innovations: Seven steps for using ESF+ (steps 1 and 2)**, designed to help ESF+ MAs in the upscaling process.

- **Social Innovation Match Induction workshop (March 2023)**: an online plenary session to present and test the SIM database supported by interactive tools.
- **Mutual Learning Lab session on ESF+ Social innovation calls (June 2023)**: small learning lab sessions organised to foster the exchange of tools, approaches, methodologies, and practices among policy makers, in particular ESF+ bodies. The sessions will cover the following topics:
 - Social challenges and unmet social needs addressed in Social innovation calls for projects
 - Selection process and criteria specific to SI projects
 - Funding social innovation projects
 - Guidance and support to social innovation calls applicants

Outputs

- A collection of tools, practices and methodologies to (1) identify unmet social needs in policies and on the ground, and (2) to assess the innovative dimension of projects proposals, for a better matching between demand and offer.
- Guidance note (roles, profiles and responsibilities of national validator); SIM guidelines for validators (SIM User Tutorial Material); Validators Checklist (criteria of validation)

2. Social innovation ecosystems and NCC governance models

Six TPs have been tasked to map national social innovation ecosystems and set-up NCCs. The results of these initiatives will be analysed throughout mutual learning activities providing examples, practices and opportunities for collaboration. The aim is to reinforce each NCC and national ecosystem, as part of a much wider EU ecosystem supporting social innovation, both within ESF+ (like the EaSI NCPs) and other EU programmes (NCPs for Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, etc.) or EU networks (INTERREG, URBACT, Urban Innovative Actions).

Activities:

- **Joint Consortia Event between European and National Competence Centers (May 2023)**: to collect feedback from the six consortia selected to set-up national competence centres and to reflect about: opportunities and challenges occurred during the last 2 years; reflections to move forward; collaboration and workstreams between the European and National Competence Centres.
- **Competence Centres for Social Innovation Working Group Kick-off meeting (June 2023)**: it will serve to bring together the ESF+ committee members with the key contact persons of each EU Member State involved directly in one of the approved EU consortia for the national competence centres (NCC) in the respective countries. It will be a good opportunity to align future thinking and action(s) addressing the emerging needs on the ground identified by NCC's, to discuss the key elements of the approach, and working modalities of the Working group to ensure a sustainable and productive cooperation.

Outputs

- Approach for Collaboration Between Competence Centres for Social
- Validation of the approach for collaboration based on the outputs produced by the NCCSI since 202
- Joint ToC among MA's and NCCSI

3. Transferring, upscaling and mainstreaming social innovation

One of the main efforts/[aims] is to improve the transfer and upscaling of successful social innovations and social experimentations with a potential for solving similar issues. Transfer is understood as an application of successful solutions in different contexts, while upscaling means expanding these solutions to match broader social needs. This effort will be supported by ESF+ national and regional programmes (with dedicated priority on social innovation). Transfer and upscaling rarely cover the whole project, usually they involve just some of its elements, approaches, or methodologies (partial transfer / upscaling). Because social innovation is context-specific, a copy-paste approach does not work, and adaptation to the new context requires support from the initial project.

Activities:

- **Connect SIM case studies (successful SI) with potential needs and opportunities in ESF+ programmes (September 2023):** a virtual meeting will bring together SIM national validators and ESF MAs, with the aim to improve SIM cases descriptions and potential for transfer and scaling-up through discussions and exchanges with ESF+ MAs as SIM database users.
- **Scaling-up Lab (October 2023):** a virtual Lab session will focus on the ESF MAs needs, with the view to help them identify successful SI pilots and projects matching their needs and the elements with a potential for transfer or scaling-up, with testimonials of successful scaled-up SI projects

Next steps ahead (2024)

Virtual matching sessions. Specific challenges identified by MS ESF+ programmes and successful social innovations that have the potential to tackle these social challenges would be selected and proposed as “matching”. During the selection, priority shall be given to social innovation projects funded by ESF+, including EaSI strand, and other EU programmes (Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, etc.).

Outputs

- Recommendations for SI projects and validators about SI cases description
- Thematic paper on “scaling-up and transfer in practice” with practical recommendations and cases for ESF MAs.

The outcome shall be improved matching between the demand for innovative solutions from the policy side and the offer from social innovation projects with the potential to efficiently tackle policy challenges by transfer or upscaling.

Dissemination of results

The dissemination of various outputs and outcomes to a wider audience, will be based on ESFA communication strategy planned to be published in the first quarter of 2023. The use of various tools, communication channels, and social media will be discussed with participants. Given the relevance of social innovation for social economy stakeholders, the outputs can also be promoted via the EU Social Economy Gateway which is planned to be launched in the second half of 2023.

All SI CoP participants and ESF+ bodies should use their own communication channels (websites, newsletters, etc.) to present the results and outputs in local languages in their corresponding MS, once they have been validated by the EC and according to their purpose.

Teamwork organisation and logistics

ESFA and the SI CoP coordinator will function as a secretariat and act as a convenor responsible for the organisation of work and administrative collaboration, including the assistance with logistics and technical support for CoP activities (online apps and tools, technical experts, etc.).

SI CoP thematic experts will be responsible for preparing and revising work programmes, and organising SI CoP activities (content, priorities, agendas, etc.) of short, medium and long term perspective. The experts will also help prepare certain events and act as facilitators in close collaboration with the CoP Chair and co-Chair. They will also contribute to the development of all outputs, preparation of documents and implementation of a wider dissemination strategy.

Work schedule

	Time	Activities / meetings	Target group (events)	Output
1.	November 2022 (online)	All CoPs kick off meeting – plenary session and SI CoP breakout session		Presentation of the draft SI CoP work programme for 2023, 1st round of comments and suggestions
2.	January 2023	Participants online survey: policy priorities (focus on ESF+ SI dedicated priorities)		Survey's results and analysis to be used for setting up thematic working groups interested in/ challenged by similar policy priorities for Interactive training workshop on SI characteristics
3.	January-June 2023	Desk review of the priorities dedicated to Social Innovation in ESF+ national and regional programmes (including other CoPs' priorities)		Short analysis document (main common policy challenges faced by MS, SI priorities, and the upscaling component)
4.	February 23, 2023 (online)	Interactive training workshop on SI characteristics	ESF+ MAs	Event report with training modules and tools
5.	March 29, 2023 (online)	Social Innovation Match Induction workshop	SIM National Validators	Guidance note (roles, profiles and responsibilities of national validator). SIM guidelines for validators (SIM User Tutorial Material). Validators Checklist (criteria of validation)
6.	May 15, 2023 (online)	Joint Consortia Event between European and National Competence Centers	EUCCIS, NCCS, thematic experts	Approach for Collaboration Between Competence Centres for Social Innovation
7.	June 1, 2023 (online)	Mutual Learning Lab session on ESF+ Social innovation calls	ESF+ MAs	Event report with Calls examples and real practices (1) identify unsatisfied social needs to be addressed by SI Calls (2) to assess the innovative dimension of projects proposals, 3) to adapt funding to SI projects and 4) to guide and support SI project applicants. Video recording of the event

8.	June 21, 2023 (on-site)	Competence Centres for Social Innovation Working Group Kick-off meeting	EUCCIS, NCCS, ESF+ Committee members, thematic experts	Validation of the approach for collaboration based on the outputs produced by the NCCSI since 2021. Joint ToC among MA's and NCCSI. Short event video
9.	November 2023 (online)	Mid-term event, crosscutting topics (annual meeting)	COP members	Event report
10.	October 2023 (on-site)	Connect SIM case studies (successful SI) with potential needs and opportunities in ESF+ programmes.	SIM National Validators and ESF MAs	Recommendations for SI projects and validators about SI cases description
11.	Postponed to 2024 (online)	Upscaling Lab: identify SI elements with a potential for transfer or scaling-up	ESF+ MAs, SIM projects (CoP members)	Thematic paper on "scaling-up and transfer in practice" with practical recommendations and cases for ESF MAs
12.	November/ December (online)	A joint plenary session on the work programme for 2024. Discussion of future activities	COP members	Presentation of the draft SI CoP work programme for 2024, 1st round of comments and suggestions

