ISCTE IUL
REPOSITÓRIO
INSTITUTO UNIVERSITÁRIO DE LISBOA

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:
2026-09-28

Deposited version:
Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:
Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:
Jesus, A. & Amaro, M. I. (2026). Evaluating social innovation for meaningful social change: A critical perspective from social work in Portugal. European Social Work Research, N/A. https://doi.org/10.1332/27551768Y2026D000000092

Further information on publisher's website:
10.1332/27551768Y2026D000000092

Publisher's copyright statement:
This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Jesus, A. & Amaro, M. I. (2026). Evaluating social innovation for meaningful social change: A critical perspective from social work in Portugal. European Social Work Research, N/A. https://doi.org/10.1332/27551768Y2026D000000092, which has been published in final form at https://dx.doi.org/10.1332/27551768Y2026D000000092. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Publisher's Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

Use policy

Creative Commons CC BY 4.0
The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in the Repository
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Serviços de Informação e Documentação, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)
Av. das Forças Armadas, Edifício II, 1649-026 Lisboa Portugal
Phone: +(351) 217 903 024 | e-mail: administrador.repositorio@iscte-iul.pt
https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt

Evaluating social innovation for meaningful social change: a critical perspective from social work in Portugal

Antonela Jesus[1], Universidade Católica Portuguesa,
Faculty of Human Sciences, CADOS
Maria Inês Amaro, ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIES

Abstract

Commitment to social change has long been central to social work. Yet, under neoliberal governance, social intervention has become increasingly organised through project-based funding that privileges measurable outcomes, accountability, and efficiency. In Portugal, the growing prominence of social innovation within public policy and European funding agendas has reinforced these dynamics, requiring non-profit organisations to redesign projects that align with funders' expectations while ensuring organisational sustainability.

This article critically examines the relationship between project-based funding, evaluation, and social work practice in Portugal. Drawing on an ongoing postdoctoral study, it analyses social intervention projects funded through public initiatives promoting social innovation and the social investment market. Adopting a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with social workers and evaluation specialists.

Findings show that dominant evaluation frameworks, informed by New Public Management and evidence-based managerial approaches, privilege short-term, measurable outputs over relational, participatory, and structural social change. Participants highlighted tensions between organisational missions, professional ethics, and funding requirements, particularly the pressure to translate complex social realities into quantifiable indicators.

The article advocates participatory, relational, and human development-oriented evaluation approaches that reconnect assessment with the ethical, political, and community-centred purposes of social work, contributing to debates on social innovation, professional autonomy, evidence-based practice, and transformative intervention.

[1] Corresponding author, email address antonelajesus@ucp.pt

Keywords
Social work; Social innovation; Evaluation; Human development; New Public Management.

1. Introduction

Contemporary societies are experiencing turbulent dynamics at the social, economic, and ecological levels. Within this context, the discourse around the valorisation of social innovation has gained increasing prominence, advocating the transformation of ideas into action in order to address pressing problems and to contribute to solutions, particularly when public policies fail to provide effective responses.

Across Europe, social intervention has increasingly become organised through short-term projects financed by competitive funding mechanisms. The Lisbon Strategy, implemented in the wake of 2000s, put the focus on entrepreneurship as one of the three pillars of the EU growth. In Portugal, this tendency intensified after the economic crisis of the late 2000s and the subsequent expansion of European-funded programmes focused on entrepreneurship, innovation, and measurable social impact. Within this framework, social organisations have been encouraged to present themselves as innovative actors capable of producing demonstrable outcomes, often through standardised evaluation tools and performance indicators (Campos & Soeiro, 2016; European Council, 2000; Jesus, 2019).

The growth model on which Western capitalist societies were built - progressively disseminated as a global paradigm - was oriented towards the logic of profit accumulation, combined with the formation of a consumer middle class, and underpinned by varying levels of social and labour protection, within a framework of representative democracy and participatory systems. This model has contributed to significant increases in living standards, material comfort, wealth production, and societal achievements (Amaro et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, within this framework, societies have continued to struggle with unresolved and emerging economic and social problems and, increasingly, environmental challenges, which not only persist but also assume novel and unforeseen forms. It is against this

backdrop that the notion of innovation gains strength, associated with the ways in which science and technology can be harnessed alongside the economy to develop new forms of value creation and profit accumulation, thereby pursuing gains in efficacy and efficiency are thereby coupled with the capacity to take risks, to experiment with novel solutions, and to advance perspectives grounded in "what works" and "evidence-based" approaches.

In social work, however, these tendencies must be understood as part of a broader dominant paradigm shaped by managerialist logics and neoliberal rationalities. Managerialism, understood as the growing hegemony of managerial principles in the organisation of professional intervention (Amaro, 2015; Dominelli, 2004), restructures public services around market principles, emphasising risk assessment, target-setting and performance indicators. Such mechanisms, while presented as tools of accountability, regulate the authority of professionals in relation to service users and risk displacing the ethical and value-driven foundations of social work, contributing to what Webb (2006) and Branco & Amaro (2011) terms as the "deprofessionalisation" of practice.

These approaches, while framed as guarantors of efficiency and effectiveness, often obscure the political, ethical, and relational dimensions of practice. In this regard, recent analyses of the politicisation and scientification of evidence-based practice (Jacobsson & Meeuwisse, 2020) highlight the ways in which the dominant paradigm not only narrows the space for professional discretion but also risks subordinating social work to technocratic and market-oriented rationalities.

This article critically examines these tensions through an analysis of Portuguese social innovation funding programmes and professionals' experiences. The paper focuses particularly on how evaluation practices shape intervention priorities, organisational sustainability, and understandings of social change.

The article addresses three research questions:

How do social workers and evaluation specialists understand the relationship between social innovation, evaluation, and social change?

How do project-based funding mechanisms influence professional practice and organisational priorities?

What alternative evaluation approaches may better align with the ethical and transformative commitments of social work?

To answer these questions, the article draws on qualitative interviews with social workers and evaluation specialists involved in Portuguese social innovation initiatives. The analysis draws on critical social work and human development perspectives.

The article is structured as follows. First, it contextualises the emergence of social innovation within neoliberal welfare restructuring and the Portuguese social policy landscape. It presents the theoretical and methodological framework guiding the study. Third, it analyses participants' perspectives on funding, evaluation, and professional practice, discusses alternative evaluation models and concludes with implications for social work theory, policy, and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1.Social Work: contributions from its historical foundations

Social work emerged as a profession in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, shaped by the contradictions of liberal capitalism. Rooted in traditions of charity, philanthropy, and community work, of which the Hull House settlementis an historical and significant example, the social work profession emerged at the intersection of care and control (Dominelli, 2004; Branco, 2019).

Historically, this has placed social work in an ambiguous position within the welfare state: while it supports people in need, it also functions as an instrument of social regulation. The rise of charity and welfare institutions in the 19th century reflected not simply benevolent impulses about social order, the management of poverty, and the reproduction of the workforce. Reform and social change, in this context, have not always been emancipatory, a tension that remains central to understanding the profession today (Dominelli, 2004).

The economic foundations of social welfare have always been contested. The post-war welfare state, underpinned by Keynesian economics and varying levels of social and labour protection, enabled significant improvements in living standards and material

well-being (Amaro et al., 2022). However, from the 1980s onwards, the gradual erosion of public investment in social welfare driven by neoliberal policy orientations repositioned the market as the primary organising force of society (Garcia, 2010). This shift was accompanied by the rise of New Public Management (NPM), which restructured public services around market principles, introducing risk assessment, target-setting, and performance indicators as tools of governance (Amaro, 2015; Branco & Amaro, 2011; Dominelli, 2004).

From this perspective, professional authority has increasingly been regulated through managerial mechanisms that risk displacing the ethical and value-driven foundations of social work. Evidence-based practice, aligned with positivist epistemologies, has reinforced a tendency to standardise interventions and reduce their contextual and relational dimensions. The work of Jacobsson & Meeuwisse (2020) highlights how the dominant paradigm subordinates professional discretion o technocratic and market-oriented rationalities.

2.1.1. The Portuguese Context

Any examination of social work and social innovation in Portugal must be situated within the country specific social and historical landscape. Portugal's welfare state developed later and less comprehensively than those of Northern and Central Europe. Following a long period of dictatorship, the Portuguese welfare state was established on a legacy of corporatist social organisation, with charitable and religious institutions playing a central role in social provision. The transition to democracy in 1974 and subsequent accession to the European Community in 1986 marked significant shifts, opening the country to new social policy frameworks and, eventually, to the logics of European structural funding (Lopes et al, 2014; Quintão, 2011).

The Portuguese social sector has thus been profoundly shaped by European funding cycles, particularly through programmes such as Anti-Poverty Programmes, EQUAL, and, more recently, the Portugal Social Innovation (PSI) initiative. PSI, launched in 2014, represented the first public initiative in Europe specifically designed to promote social innovation and foster a social investment market, using European Structural and Investment Funds.

The dominance of project-based funding in Portugal has generated specific tensions for non-profit organisations and professionals, where social workers are included. The imperative to continuously secure funding encourages organisations to frame their work in terms of innovation and social impact even when their primary function is the delivery of ongoing services. This dynamic, as this article explores, has significant implications for how social change is defined, measured, and pursued.

2.2.Social Innovation: Concept and Relevance for Social Work

The concept of social innovation has become, in the words of Klein et al. (2014) Rullac (2020), a "buzzword" widely invoked yet rarely defined with precision. Social innovation has been defined as a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, and sustainable, in which the value created primarily benefits society as a whole rather than private individuals (Azevedo et al., 2010). More recently, Wilken (2023) has identified three dimensions of social innovation: (i) technological and economic innovation directed at social needs; (ii) new governance structures strengthening links between social services and communities; and (iii) entrepreneurship through corporate social responsibility or renewed human resource practices.

Although historically rooted in traditions of solidarity and reciprocity, the contemporary construction of the concept gained momentum in the 1990s, in response to the crisis of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal policy orientations (Comeau, 2007; Pires, 2015). The decline of European welfare states, marked by the erosion of public investment and the repositioning of the market as the primary organising force, generated new needs and problems that gave rise to processes of social innovation (Garcia, 2010).

From the perspective of social work, the relationship with social innovation is both promising and contradictory. As Nandan, London, and Bent-Goodley (2015) observe, social workers can be a source of innovative practice by identifying and implementing new ways to address social problems. They can be intrapreneurial within organisations, designing more effective and efficient operations and partnerships or they can be social entrepreneurs, joining forces with community members, government, and business partners that creatively meet social needs.

Yet, as Wilken and Parpan-Blaser (2024) observe, the orientation of social work towards social problems repeatedly raises the question of how changing problems in the intermediate field between individual and society are to be addressed. When social innovation is appropriated by neoliberal agendas, it risks being reduced to an imperative for individuals and communities to develop entrepreneurial solutions to structural problems thereby reproducing, rather than challenging, existing inequalities.

Amaro et al. (2022) further note that there is no common understanding of what social innovation means, what criteria should be used for its evaluation, or how to measure it systematically. This ambiguity creates harmful effects: proposing entities present projects they consider innovative according to unconsolidated criteria, while evaluating teams lack reference frameworks to assess innovation potential. This critique is central to the core argument of the present article.

2.3.Evaluation Frameworks: From Compliance to Transformation

The evaluation of social projects has become a contested terrain, shaped by the competing demands of accountability, learning, and transformation. Within the dominant framework, driven by NPM logics, evaluation is primarily conceived as a tool for accountability for demonstrating that resources have been used as intended and that specified targets have been met. This approach tends to privilege quantitative metrics and short-term, easily measurable outcomes, at the expense of more complex and contextually sensitive dimensions of social change (Clifford & Barnes, 2022; Dahler-Larsen, 2012).

The Theory of Change model, widely adopted in the social sector, has been criticised for its application as a rigid and static template rather than as a dynamic, adaptive process (Nicholls et al., 2015). Similarly, the concept of impact has become diluted, frequently conflated with output measurement and thereby trivialised (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014).

In contrast, people-centred, relational and participatory models of evaluation offer an alternative grounded in the values of social work. Such approaches involve the co-construction of indicators with service users, ensuring that evaluation criteria reflect lived realities and collective aspirations, encompassing not only material outcomes but also political, social, psychological, and relational dimensions of life (Sen, 1999).

As Sen (1999) argues, development can only be evaluated when assessed not merely in terms of economic growth or institutional performance, but in relation to the tangible improvement of people's living conditions and the expansion of the substantive freedoms they are able to exercise. This human development perspective provides a critical foundation for the alternative models explored in this article.

3. Methodology

This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, wherein the social world is understood as constituted by the meanings that participants produce and reproduce about their everyday activities (Blaikie, 2010; Flick, 2009). Social realities are understood as already interpreted prior to the researcher entry into the field; the researcher task is to uncover and narrate this internal perspective, attending to the subjective states of mind of social actors, the meanings they attribute to their practices, and the intentions and rules that guide them.

As researchers, we approached this study from a critical social work perspective, committed to questioning dominant rationalities and attentive to the power dynamics embedded in institutional and funding structures (Fook, 2022; Webb, 2006). This positionality shaped both the design of the study and the interpretive framework through which findings were analysed.

3.1.Research Design and Participant Selection

A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. Two groups of participants were recruited.

The first group comprised twelve social workers engaged in professional practice within non-profit organisations whose financial sustainability depends on funding from European structural funds and/or the Portuguese state. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, with deliberate attention to ensuring representation from different regions of Portugal, including the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira. The sample included social workers aged between 25 and 45 years, working across diverse fields of intervention including social services, community development, and family support. All participants held professional qualifications in social work and had direct experience of working within EU-funded projects.

The second group comprised five specialists in social impact evaluation, including academics and consultants with experience in evaluation processes linked to European-funded social programmes in Portugal. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling: initial participants were identified based on their recognised expertise and subsequently invited to recommend other experts with relevant experience. This group was selected to provide complementary institutional and technical perspectives on evaluation frameworks and practices.

Participants provided informed consent and interviews were recorded anonymised.

3.2.Data Collection

Interview guides were developed for each participant group in line with the study objectives and informed by the conceptual framework.:

For social workers, the interviews explored three thematic dimensions: (1) the social worker as agent of social change; (2) definitions and practices of social change; and (3) perceptions of welfare, impact evaluation, and social sustainability.

For evaluation specialists, the interviews explored: (1) understanding of social impact assessment, evaluation criteria, and ethical commitment; (2) social impact and its measurement; (3) reflections on conventional evaluation approaches; and (4) future directions in social project evaluation.

Interviews were conducted in Portuguese, audio-recorded with participants consent, and subsequently transcribed. The duration of individual interviews ranged from approximately 45 to 90 minutes.

3.3.Data Analysis

Data were analysed using categorical content analysis (Bardin, 2011), a method that enables the systematic classification of qualitative data into thematic categories through a process of coding and progressive abstraction. This approach is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm adopted, as it attends to the meanings attributed by participants to their experiences and practices rather than imposing predetermined analytical frameworks.

The analytical process involved three stages. First, a pre-analysis phase in which transcripts were read in full and initial impressions noted. Second, a systematic coding phase in which units of meaning were identified and assigned to thematic categories, informed by both the interview guide dimensions and themes emerging inductively from the data. Third, an interpretive phase in which categories were examined in relation to one another and interpreted in light of the study's conceptual framework on critical social work, social innovation, and social impact evaluation, enabling the identification of patterns, tensions, and analytical insights.

All data were coded and anonymised using the software MaxQDA. Participant quotations are identified by role (SW for social workers; ES for evaluation specialists) and participant number (e.g., SW5, ES1) throughout the findings section.

4. Findings

4.1. The perspective of social work: between political commitment and bureaucratic constraints

The findings are organised around the main themes generated through the analysis, which reflect both the study's conceptual framework and the issues raised by participants. In a first stage, attention is directed to the interviews conducted with social workers. Concerning perceptions of the social worker as an agent of change, we draw on the global definition of social work, specifically the formulation that describes it as a "profession that promotes social change". The interviews reveal a strong perception of the social worker as an agent of change operating simultaneously across multiple levels of social reality.

Rather than distinguishing sharply between micro, meso, and macro-level interventions, participants described social change as unfolding across interconnected levels of practice. They viewed individual support not as an end in itself but as part of a broader process through which personal change could contribute to wider community and structural transformation. As one participant explained: *"Our aim will always be to achieve some change, however small it may seem, but one that will make a difference in someone's life (...) people come to us in limit situations and when these people come to us the aim is always to change something in their lives so that they can get out of the situation they are in"* (SW5).

Likewise, participants emphasised that effective social work requires linking individual experiences with collective and structural conditions. Rather than treating personal difficulties as isolated problems, they described professional practice as involving the continuous negotiation between individual circumstances and broader institutional, economic, and political dynamics. *"We have the ability to make a connection between what is happening in people's lives and what is happening at the more structural level (...) the social worker has the ability to analyse all the dimensions of the person's life and often it is multidimensional"* (SW7).

These understandings resonates with critical social work perspectives that reject the separation between individual and structural practice (Fook, 2022).

Social change was consistently conceptualised as a long-term, continuous process that goes beyond short-lived interventions, not understood as a palliative or temporary solution, but as a transformative dynamic that enhances quality of life, broadens access to services and rights, and reshapes social perceptions:

"Social change is not a palliative; it is not for today or tomorrow. Social change must be continuous and lasting" (SW6). Importantly, this understanding situates change not only in material improvements but also in transformations of cultural representations and dominant interpretations of social reality. As another participant stressed: *"It is much more than changing the law or changing the thinking of one person. It is changing the thinking of many people so that things are different"* (SW10). This view highlights social work's role in fostering enduring transformation, challenging structural inequalities, and promoting new imaginaries for collective life.

Turning to the question of assessing or evaluating change within professional practice, the findings reveal frequent confusion between diagnostic assessment, ongoing monitoring, and evaluation of outcomes. In many organisational contexts, "evaluation" was reduced to periodic reviews of socio-economic conditions or family circumstances, as illustrated by: *"We analyse the socio-economic, family and housing situation and review it every 6 months"* (SW9). Such procedures privilege descriptive monitoring over critical evaluation, obscuring the deeper, transformative dimensions of intervention. This slippage highlights a gap between the profession's broader understanding of social change and the technocratic requirements imposed by funders and organisational

frameworks: *"We do activity reports and we also do impact evaluation, where we answer, for example, how many have been professionally integrated, how many have returned to their families, infection rate, levels of integration in society, whether they belong to any association, etc."* (SW2).

Although the interviews did not explicitly highlight political commitment as a key theme, the participants' statements suggest that it is rooted in their understanding of the profession itself - that is, social work geared towards social justice and structural change. This commitment, however, appears to be exercised within bureaucratic organisational contexts which the participants felt limited opportunities for critical and transformative practice.

4.2. The perspective of evaluation specialists: between ethical commitment and accountability imperatives

The perspectives of evaluation specialists, from an external vantage point, illuminated many of the same tensions identified by social workers, while adding important dimensions related to institutional dynamics and methodological practice.

A central theme was the widespread conceptual confusion surrounding "impact evaluation." Participants consistently recognised that "impact" has become a diluted and overused concept, frequently conflated with output measurement: *"It causes me particular frustration; I think there is a complete confusion about what impact is (...) everything is impact, everything is a reason to talk about it"* (ES1).

Relatedly, participants identified a pervasive misunderstanding of "sustainability" in the Portuguese context - frequently reduced to the ability to pay salaries after project funding ends, rather than referring to the endurance of the changes generated. This interpretation frequently clashes with the prevailing logics of project evaluation under European and Portuguese funding schemes: *"These evaluation logics are associated exclusively with accountability, merely as an obligation imposed by the funder"* (ES3).

Participants stressed that rigorous evaluation should draw upon internationally recognised standards, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development **(**OECD, 2010) criteria of relevance and coherence, to assess not merely whether activities were delivered, but whether they made sense within a logical and contextually grounded

framework. Instead, current practices often fall into what was described as a "subservient attitude towards the funder: what we said in the application we have to repeat in the report" (ES1). Such dynamics reduce evaluation to an exercise in compliance, undermining its potential as a tool for critical reflection and learning.

The discussion also touched on the widespread reliance on the Theory of Change model. While recognised as useful, participants criticised its application as a rigid and static template. They noted that many non-profit organizations are structurally designed to deliver services rather than to implement projects, creating significant limitations compared with international NGOs, which often display greater capacity in this domain. Participants insisted that evaluation should instead be understood as a fluid and adaptive process, capable of evolving alongside project implementation and of answering not only *what* has changed but *why* such changes have occurred.

Importantly, several emphasised that evaluation should be conceived as a process of learning rather than as a punitive mechanism. It should enable practitioners to identify what they know and do not know, encouraging critical reflection rather than fear of sanction. Yet, the reality of a "tiny market in Portugal", as described by one participant, creates dependency on funders and clients, discouraging evaluators from challenging dominant logics or "hostilising" those who provide contracts.

From this perspective, evaluation ought to be reimagined as a supporting function that contributes to social change, rather than being reduced to an instrumental requirement. Its role should be to ascertain whether interventions are genuinely producing positive effects, or merely consuming resources without meaningful outcomes. This necessitates balancing the ethical-political dimension of social work with contractual obligations to funders. As one evaluator put it: *"Change should come first, for the sake of those I am supporting. If I planned a set of activities and I see that they are not producing results, perhaps I should stop and reflect. But then there are so many interests that get mixed in"* (ES1).

Participants were acutely aware of the tensions surrounding neoliberal approaches to evaluation. On the one hand, they recognised the importance of accountability for public and European funds. On the other, they expressed concern about the dominance of quantitative metrics and the prioritisation of short-term, easily measurable outcomes.

Such frameworks often obscure more subtle yet transformative dimensions of social intervention - such as empowerment, relational trust, or community participation - that resist quantification. The drive for efficiency, standardisation, and scalability risks marginalising approaches rooted in solidarity and contextual responsiveness. Neoliberal evaluation logics, therefore, not only narrow the scope of what "counts" as impact but also threaten to erode the emancipatory potential of social work practice.

4.3.Alternative Models: Towards People-Centred Evaluation

In response to the limitations of dominant evaluation frameworks, participants called for alternative approaches that foreground people and communities. These proposals, synthesised from across both groups of participants, resonate with a growing body of literature advocating more participatory, people-centred, and learning-oriented approaches to evaluation.

A people-centred approach to evaluation would involve the co-construction of indicators with service users, ensuring that evaluation criteria reflect lived realities and collective aspirations rather than being imposed from above by funders or external evaluators. As one social worker argued: *"Very often, the data collected and the evaluations carried out do not involve the communities we work with. I may contribute to the evaluation of my service, but at no point are people who use drugs or people experiencing homelessness given the opportunity to evaluate the service, our intervention, or even the policies themselves."* (SW5). This concern echoes broader critiques of contemporary social impact measurement, which suggest that evaluation practices do not always place people and communities at the centre of assessment and frequently fail to adequately address the power relations embedded in decisions about what counts as evidence, whose perspectives are valued, and who defines the criteria for success (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015).

Similarly, an evaluation specialist stressed that participation cannot simply be introduced at the end of a project: *"There is an almost tendency to keep people satisfied by giving them something symbolic. But when evaluation processes are not genuinely participatory from the outset, it becomes very difficult for them to become participatory halfway*

through or at the end." (ES1). These accounts reinforce the need for sustained engagement with communities throughout the project cycle, from design through implementation and assessment, rather than introducing evaluation only at the final stages.

Narrative and ethnographic methodologies were identified as essential tools for capturing complexity, subjectivity, and multidimensional change. Quantitative indicators, while retaining a role, should be complemented by qualitative approaches capable of attending to the relational, political, psychological, and, where relevant, spiritual dimensions of people's lives. As one social work said: *"Management methodologies are often taken and applied to the social sector, but this doesn't work because they are frequently not adapted to it. We need to adapt them to the social sector and to the professionals who work in it, whose backgrounds are very different from those working in business organisations."* (SW1). Human rights-based indicators, disaggregated demographic data, and socio-demographic variables were proposed as important resources, enabling intersectional analysis and ensuring that questions of education, health, and participation are embedded in project design and assessment.

Participants further argued that alternative evaluation models should avoid universal prescriptions in favour of approaches that are sensitive to local contexts and diverse forms of knowledge. As one evaluation specialist explained, *"We need approaches developed locally, particularly from the Global South, and to decolonise evaluation by moving beyond a single recipe towards a plurality of approaches adapted to different contexts and realities"* (ES3). This perspective aligns with Chouinard and Cousins (2015), who argue that evaluation has traditionally privileged Western conceptions of objective evidence over local and indigenous knowledge.

Crucially, alternative models would reconceive evaluation not as a punitive or compliance mechanism, but as a process of critical learning, enabling practitioners to identify what is and is not working, to adapt their approaches, and to engage in genuine reflection on the transformative potential of their interventions. As Sen (1999) argues, development (and by extension its evaluation) must be assessed in relation to the tangible improvement of people's living conditions and the expansion of substantive freedoms.

Such alternative models are not merely theoretical possibilities. Participants noted that international frameworks, including those promoted by the OECD (2010), are gradually incorporating more holistic and people-centred evaluation criteria. The trajectory of evaluation reform in Portugal, largely driven by European structural funds, offers both a challenge and an opportunity: while the dominant logic remains one of accountability and compliance, growing international attention to sustainability, equity, and social impact creates openings for more transformative approaches.Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, were identified as a further horizon. While AI offers potential advantages (e.g. assisting in the construction of matrices, drafting reports, or identifying patterns in large datasets), participants warned against the risks of further mechanising evaluation processes and eroding the centrality of direct observation and engagement with communities. As one evaluation specialist noted: "*Artificial intelligence is now present in almost everything. It is used for drafting reports (...) This offers enormous advantages. However, it may also reinforce the mechanisation and quantification of evaluation, while diminishing the social dimension of fieldwork and direct engagement with communities*" (ES2).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate a set of profound tensions at the intersection of social work practice, social innovation, and evaluation in contemporary Portugal. These tensions are not merely technical or methodological but rather reflect deeper contradictions between the neoliberal rationalities that increasingly structure social policy and the emancipatory values that constitute the foundation of social work as a profession.

Rather than merely reinforcing existing critiques of managerialism, the findings show how neoliberal evaluation logics reshape professional practice by privileging accountability over learning and transformation. They also highlight a shared understanding of social change as a relational and multidimensional process that resists standardised measurement. Across both participant groups, this translated into support for participatory, people-centred evaluation approaches better aligned with the ethical commitments of social work.The emergence of a managerialist culture has progressively shaped professional practice towards a logic of outcomes and performance metrics,

privileging technical procedures and standardised protocols over more creative and context-sensitive approaches (Branco & Amaro, 2011). As the findings make clear, this shift risks obscuring the true impacts of intervention, namely, the processes of individual empowerment and social transformation that lie at the core of the profession's mission.

As Luís *et* al. (forthcoming) recently pointed out, there is a recognisable tension between the wishful idea of social change and the structural constraints to which achievement, causing professional suffering and burn-out. As argued, "evaluative mechanisms emphasising quantitative metrics further constrain the profession, obscuring the qualitative dimensions of human-centred work (…)". What is at stake is not only the form of professional practice but also the very identity of social work as a discipline oriented towards human rights, social justice, and transformative change.

Social innovation, in this context, occupies an ambiguous position. On the one hand, it carries genuine potential to foster new forms of solidarity, participatory governance, and inclusive responses to social problems. On the other hand, when appropriated by neoliberal agendas, it risks being reduced to an imperative for individuals and communities to develop entrepreneurial solutions to structural problems. The ambiguity noted by Amaro et al. (2022) - the absence of shared criteria for defining, evaluating, and measuring social innovation - is not simply an intellectual gap but a practical problem with real consequences for organisations and the communities they serve.

The evaluation domain exemplifies these contradictions sharply. Current results-driven frameworks tend to provide information about efficiency and compliance but fail to address more fundamental questions about whether individual and collective transformations have actually occurred. As the findings demonstrate, carrying out an activity with a given number of participants can be recorded as a successful outcome while the question of whether the intervention increased beneficiaries' autonomy, participation, or social inclusion remains unasked. Evaluation, in this mode, is reduced to an exercise in compliance that reproduces, rather than challenges, existing power asymmetries.

The ethical and political dimensions of this situation are significant. Will evaluation continue to function as a compliance mechanism, or can it evolve into a critical tool for promoting sustainability, social justice, and human development?Across both participant

groups, there was remarkable convergence around the view that evaluation should evolve from a compliance mechanism into a process that supports learning, participation, and social transformation.. The contribution of social work to this reimagining is central: by bringing a human rights-based lens to evaluation, the profession can shift the evaluative gaze away from the performance of projects and towards the lived experiences and outcomes of service users and communities.

This aligns with people-centred models of evaluation that emphasise the co-creation of indicators, the use of narrative and ethnographic methodologies, and recognition of the multidimensional aspects of human life (Sen, 1999). It also resonates with the global definition of social work established by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (2014), which situates the profession at the intersection of individual and collective transformation, social justice, and human rights.

Reclaiming evaluation as a transformative practice requires resisting its reduction to a managerial exercise and reasserting its potential as a tool for empowerment, critical reflection, and social change. In doing so, social work can reaffirm its professional identity in the face of neoliberal pressures and contribute to the broader project of building more just and inclusive societies.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between social innovation, funding logics, and social work evaluation in Portugal. Drawing on qualitative interviews with social workers and evaluation specialists, it contributes empirical evidence to ongoing debates about the effects of managerial evaluation frameworks on social work practice. Rather than simply confirming theoretical critiques of neoliberal governance, the findings demonstrate how these tensions are experienced, negotiated, and challenged by professionals working within contemporary welfare and funding systems.

Three main findings emerge. First, participants did not reject evaluation but challenged its reduction to an accountability instrument, advocating approaches centred on learning, participation, and social transformation. Second, both social workers and evaluation specialists questioned outcome-oriented frameworks, arguing that social change is a

relational and multidimensional process that extends beyond measurable project results. Third, despite their different roles, both groups converged in advocating people-centred evaluation grounded in participation, contextual knowledge, and service users' lived experiences. Together, these findings position evaluation not simply as a technical exercise but as a contested space in which competing understandings of social work, social innovation, and social justice are negotiated..

These contributions have implications for policy, theory, and professional practice.For policy: Funding frameworks at both national and European levels should be revised to allow for more flexible, longitudinal, and qualitative approaches to evaluation. The current emphasis on short-term, quantifiable outcomes should be complemented by requirements for participatory evaluation processes and attention to structural and relational dimensions of social change.

For theory: Social work scholarship should continue to develop and refine people-centred and human rights-based models of evaluation, drawing on the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999), feminist and participatory action research traditions, and critical social work theory. Further empirical research on evaluation practices across different national contexts would strengthen the evidence base for such alternative frameworks.

For practice: Social work practitioners and organisations should invest in building "evaluation literacy". In other words, the capacity to engage critically with evaluation frameworks, to co-construct meaningful indicators with service users, and to document and communicate the multidimensional impacts of their interventions. This requires both training and institutional support, including the development of shared professional standards for social impact evaluation in Portugal.

Finally, the question of artificial intelligence and its integration into evaluation processes merits urgent attention. As AI tools become increasingly embedded in social sector evaluation, its application must be guided by social work values, such as prioritising the voices and experiences of communities, rather than further mechanising the assessment of human transformation.

In conclusion, reclaiming evaluation as a practice of social transformation, rather than compliance, is not merely a methodological question but a political and ethical

imperative. It is central to the future of social work as a profession committed to human rights, social justice, and the emancipatory potential of collective action.

Funding

This work was supported by the Porticus Foundation under Grant GR-074770.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all participants who voluntarily agreed to take part in this research.

Contributor statement

AJ wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript, all of which were reviewed by MIA. Both authors contributed to the Discussion section.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Research Ethic Statement

This study did not require approval from an institutional ethics committee, as it involved expert professionals participating in their professional capacity and did not include vulnerable populations or sensitive personal data. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the research.

References

Amaro, M. I. (2015). *Urgências e Emergências do Serviço Social: Fundamentos da profissão na contemporaneidade* (2ª Edição). Lisboa: Universidade Católica Editora.

Amaro, M. I., Caniço, M. J., Santos, S. e Santos, V. (2022). *Programa de Promoção da Inovação para o Desenvolvimento Social*. Trabalho de final de curso FORGEP. Universidade do Minho.

André, I., & Abreu, A. (2006). Dimensões e espaços da inovação social. *Finisterra*, *41*(81). https://doi.org/10.18055/Finis1465

Azevedo, C., Franco, R. F., & Meneses, J. W. (2010). Gestão de Organizações sem fins lucrativos. Porto: Vida Económica. In Bacq, S., & Janssen, F. (2011*). The multiple faces of Social Entrepreneurship: A review of definitional issues based on geographical and thematic criteria. Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 23: 5-6, (pp. 373-403).

Blaikie, N. (2010). *Designing Social Research* (2nd Edition). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bardin, L. (2011). *Content Analysis*. São Paulo: Edições 70.

Branco, F., & Amaro, I. (2011). *As práticas do "Serviço Social activo" no âmbito das novas tendências da política social: Uma perspectiva portuguesa*. *Serviço Social & Sociedade*, *(108)*, 656–679. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-66282011000400005

Branco, F. (2019). Social reform in the US: lessons from the Progressive Era. In U. Klammer, S. Leiber, & S. Leitner (Eds.), *Social Work and the Making of Social Policy* (pp. 71–88). Chapter, Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447349174.005

Campos, A. e Soeiro, J. (2016). A Falácia do Empreendedorismo. Lisboa: Bertrand Editora.

Chouinard, J. A., & Cousins, J. B. (2015). The journey from rhetoric to reality: Participatory evaluation in a development context. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 27*(1), 5–39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-013-9184-8

Clifford, J., Barnes, K. (2022). Why and What to Measure? The Justification for Social Impact Measurement. In: Hazenberg, R., Paterson-Young, C. (eds) Social Impact Measurement for a Sustainable Future. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83152-3_4

Comeau, Y. (2007); *Les contributions des sociologies de l'innovation à l'étude du changement social. Innovations Sociales et Transformations des Conditions de Vie.* Actes du Colloque – 16 Avril, Cahiers du CRISES, Collection Études Théoriques.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2012). *The Evaluation Society* (1st ed.). Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqsdq12

Dominelli, L. (2004). *Social work: theory and practice for a changing profession. Cambridge:* Polity Press.

Ebrahim, A., & Rangan, V. K. (2014). What impact? A framework for measuring the scale and scope of social performance. *California Management Review, 56*(3), 118–141. https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2014.56.3.118

European Council. (2000). *Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000: Presidency conclusions*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

Flick, U. (2009). *Desenho da Pesquisa qualitativa*. Porto Alegre: Artmed.

Fook, J. (2022). *Social work : a critical approach to practice* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Garcia, J. L. (2010). Tecnologia, mercado e bem-estar humano: Para um questionamento do discurso da inovação. *Alicerces: Revista de Investigação, Ciência, Tecnologia e Artes, 3*(3), 19–31. http://hdl.handle.net/10451/11336.

Hubert, A., Thébault, J.-C. (sup.) & Schinas, M. (2010). *Empowering people, driving change: Social innovation in the European Union*. European Comission.

International Federation of Social Workers. (2014, August 6). *Global definition of social work*. https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

Jacobsson, K., & Meeuwisse, A. (2020). 'State governing of knowledge' – constraining social work research and practice. European Journal of Social Work, 23(2), 277–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1530642.

Klein, J.-L., Laville, J.-L. & Moulaert, F. (2014). L'innovation sociale. France: Eres.

Luís, R.; Jesus, A., & Amaro, M. I. (forthcoming). Understanding social change: From Jane Addams's legacy to today's challenges in Social Work. In In The Spirit of Jane Addams: Global Dialogue, Social Change and Community Engagement in the 21st century. An Interdisciplinary Inquiry. University of Warsaw Press.

Lopes, A., Martinho, A. L., Pais, C., Parente, C., Costa, D., Guerra, I., & Diogo, V. (2014). Empreendedorismo Social em Portugal. (C. Parente, Ed.). Porto: Universidade do Porto - Faculdade do Porto. Retrieved from http://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/

Nandan, M., London, M., & Bent-Goodley, T. (2015). Social Workers as Social Change Agents: Social Innovation, Social Intrapreneurship, and Social Entrepreneurship. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, *39*(1), 38–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2014.955236

Nicholls, A., Simon, J., & Gabriel, M. (2015). Introduction: Dimensions of Social Innovation. In: Nicholls, A., Simon, J., & Gabriel, M. (eds) *New Frontiers in Social Innovation Research.* Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137506801_1

OECD (2010), *Quality Standards for Development Evaluation*, DAC Guidelines and Reference Series, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264083905-en.

Jesus, A. (2019). *Inovação em serviço social: Potencialidades e limites do empreendedorismo (social) como estratégia de integração social* [Doctoral dissertation, Iscte-IUL]. Repository. https://hdl.handle.net/10071/19754

Pires, R. (2015). *O que é a inovação social? Aproximação ao conceito na sua relevância para o Direito Social, Financeiro e Fiscal*. Paper nº 1/BD/iLab/Cedis/2015. Retrieved from: https://ilab.cedis.fd.unl.pt/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/paper_bd1_ilab_2015.pdf.

Quintão, C. (2011). *O Terceiro Setor e a sua renovação em Portugal – Uma abordagem preliminar*. IS Working Papers, 2 (2). Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. Retrieved from: https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/bitstream/10216/54358/2/ISWP22011000122410.pdf

Rullac, S. (2020). *L'innovation en travail social: Un objet à définir et des processus à caractériser*. *Revue suisse de travail social / Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziale Arbeit, 25*, 139–156. https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855362

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Webb, S. (2006). *Social Work in a Risk Society – Social and political perspectives*. Nova Iorque: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wilken, J. P., Parpan-Blaser, A., Prosser, S., van der Pas, S., & Jansen, E. (Eds.). (2024). Social Work and Social Innovation: Emerging Trends and Challenges for Practice, Policy and Education in Europe (1st ed.). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.9692626

Wilken, J. P. (2023). It is all about social quality: how social work researchers can contribute to social innovation. *European Social Work Research*, *1*(3), 261-274. Retrieved Sep 5, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1332/HAHK3548.