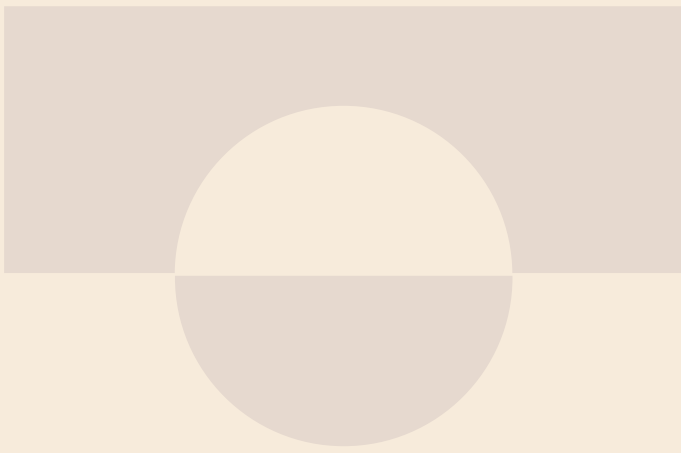


Cumulus Conference
Proceedings

Nantes, France
2025



ethical leadership
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Ethical Leadership: A New Frontier for Design

Hosted by L'École de design Nantes Atlantique

Nantes, France, on June 3-7, 2025

Conference website : <https://cumulusnantes2025.design>

Published by Cumulus

Cumulus the Global Association of Art and Design Education and Research.

C/o Aalto University, PO BOX 11000, FI-00076 Aalto, Finland

<https://cumulusassociation.org/>

ISBN 978-952-7549-07-0 (PDF)

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Series, No. 14

ISSN 2490-046X

Editor-in-Chief:

Cumulus President Lorenzo Imbesi

Editors :

Frédéric Degouzon (L'École de design Nantes Atlantique)

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JUNE 3-7, 2025

Nantes, France



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AMPLIFYING SOCIAL INITIATIVES OF THE THIRD SECTOR IN THE VENETIAN LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT | This paper explores how social innovation design practices can strengthen Third Sector initiatives, contributing to a more sustainable and equitable society. Through small-scale actions, Third Sector entities form a vast, often unmapped network that actively shapes a sector inclined toward social innovation. In the current context, many organizations leverage digital technology to advance social innovation. However, this process thrives as a participatory and context-sensitive approach rather than a universal model imposed from above. Two main perspectives typically drive this process: a critical stance on risks to individual freedoms and civic rights, and a 'techno-optimist' view that prioritizes technology despite potential impacts. Social enterprises face challenges due to limited resources, funding, or expertise. The iterative nature of design – marked by ongoing problem reassessment and solution synthesis – is particularly suited for experimentation in this field. The 'Amplify Social Initiatives' project, developed by an interdisciplinary research group, represents a social innovation initiative within the third sector. It aligns with a participatory approach by supporting internal solutions for partner organizations while documenting the methodology and results for broader dissemination. The project explores how the combination of social innovation and service design can foster relationships of care, initiate regenerative practices, and contribute to a fair and sustainable society. Tools such as brainstorming, prototyping, and storytelling play a crucial role in generating, testing, and communicating organizational values and visions. Aiming to develop a web ecosystem model, the project supports Third Sector organizations in enhancing their user-centered services by incorporating the latest UX/UI and human-centered design practices. It respects each social enterprise's identity while

ensuring consistent information organization and usability. The research framework integrates design methodologies with analytical models to reconstruct Third Sector processes, evaluating their impact in terms of reliability, efficiency, and alignment. This approach not only provides insights for strategic improvements but also guides communication strategies for initiatives that embody social innovation. This paper presents initial findings from action research conducted with partner organizations and discusses the development of the 'Amplify Social Initiatives' digital ecosystem extension. It also outlines the theoretical framework guiding the project. 'Amplify Social Initiatives' responds by providing a design-driven framework that fosters collaboration, adaptive digital culture, and social innovation. Communication is central to social innovation, not just as information exchange but as a generator of social bonds. By integrating design and technology, 'Amplify Social Initiatives' acts as a catalyst for collective intelligence, reinforcing community-driven initiatives and enhancing their scalability and impact.

KEYWORDS | THIRDSECTOR, SOCIAL-INNOVATION, DESIGN4TRANSITION, DIGITALPLATFORM

1. Introduction

As technology increasingly shapes our *social fabric*, Third Sector organizations face a pivotal challenge: how to harness digital innovation while preserving their fundamental mission of social impact. These organizations, which have traditionally excelled at addressing community needs through direct human interaction (Codice del Terzo Settore, 2017), now find themselves at a critical crossroads. While the digital revolution offers unprecedented opportunities for expanding their reach and effectiveness, many Third Sector entities struggle to bridge the gap between their social mission and technological advancement. Over sixty percent of Third Sector organizations in Italy acknowledge their incomplete digital transition (Italia Nonprofit, 2024). Balancing human connections with digital transition is not just a technical challenge but requires rethinking how social initiatives can thrive in a digital landscape (Cavotta, Grassi & Toschi, 2022).

The number of Third Sector and social private entities particularly in Italy remains substantial, representing socio-economic actors that, by mandate, pursue objectives beyond mere economic profit. These entities increasingly require new professional roles to support social innovation processes, as driven by their statutory mandate and societal function (Campagnaro & Bosso, 2023). Cooperatives, foundations, associations, and citizen groups increasingly acknowledge the critical role of design-thinking methodologies and competencies, particularly in facilitating technology and knowledge transfer and in the development of services within the domains of socio-cultural innovation in which they operate. What emerges is a compelling need for a new design framework as an integral part of social innovation – one that can enhance rather than diminish the human-centered nature of Third Sector work (Seravalli, Upadhyaya & Ernits, 2022).

This essay argues that successful digital transition in the Third Sector requires a co-designed approach that treats social initiatives as the primary drivers of both digital and social innovation. By reconceptualizing Third Sector organizations as *social antennas* capable of weaving social fabric (Bassi, 2013), 'Amplify Social Initiatives' is proposed as a theoretical and practical framework for the social-digital transition, as it integrates the design thinking method (IDEO, 2012) in the context of the Third Sector to amplify its social impact. This perspective not only preserves the sector's essential role in addressing societal needs but also leverages technology to amplify its impact in ways that

strengthen rather than substitute human connections (Binotto, 2010).

2.Objectives and methodology

The process of digital transition usually involves a complex social apparatus comprising three main actors, commonly referred to as the helixes of social innovation: companies, institutions, and research. These actors are typically engaged in social innovation processes. The so-called *fourth helix* model consists of an organized civil society, primarily composed of associations, committees, collectives, and groups of citizens with an interest in the initiatives presented.

The long tradition that sees codesign as a creator of contexts, tools, and procedures through which these different actors can better deliberate and learn from each other (Botero, 2013) makes it a privileged actor to proceed with a transition that brings together the methods, goals, and perspectives of the real *initiatives' makers*. Our approach combines *design thinking method* (IDEO, 2012) and *action research method* – the most appropriate methodology for any design project where the outcome is undefined, as noted by Swann (2002). As previously highlighted, the digitization processes of the Third Sector start with defining a problem whose solution is often far from being predetermined. Due to this characteristic, we have adopted an *anti-solutionist* approach that aims to iteratively frame and reframe the problem. The toolkit and the prototype of the digital ecosystem we propose are intended as *seeds of design* (Botero, 2013): their purpose extends beyond mere implementation and becomes a communicative act to reframe the challenge – understanding the real needs of the social sector for a technology that truly serves its social purpose.

The article describes the theoretical assumptions and the result of the design process that led us to break the linearity of the systematic process of *action-research* making visible the *iterative nature* of design processes (Swann, 2002) by placing *co-experience* at the center of action-research. The objectives of the research are thus to be understood in the dual nature typical of action research: practical problem-framing and co-learning of practices, addressing a specific problem through reflective processes. Findings suggest that design for social innovation in the third sector promotes redundancy and reflexivity (Light & Seravalli, 2019), using collaborative prototypes as useful supports for shared discussion and alignment rather than solving practical problems within organizations.

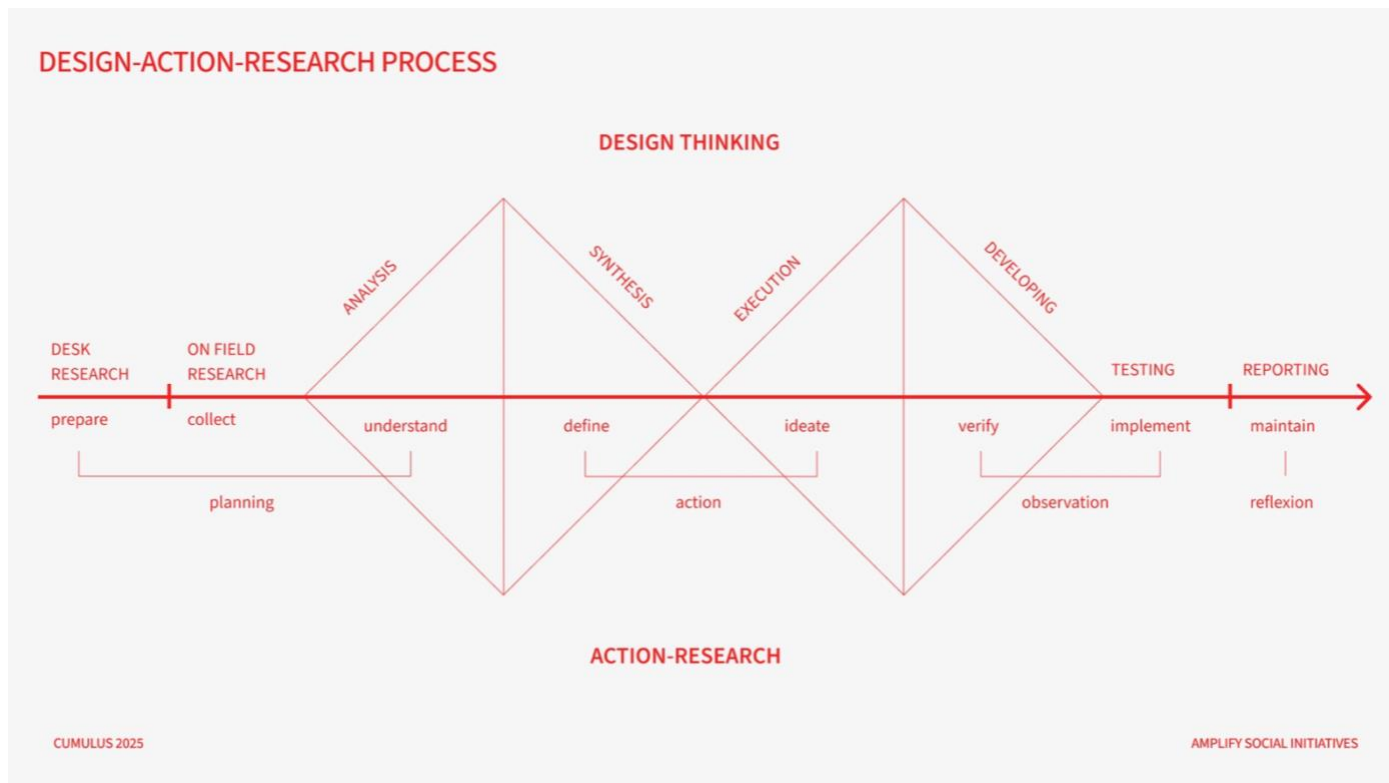


Figure 1. Methodological process diagram reviewed by Design Thinking Method (IDEO, 2012) and The Action Research Method (1993)

3.State of the art: desk research

3.1 Social innovation as the outcome of a design process

Design for social innovation manifests itself as an area of the design discipline concerned with the innovation of what affects *social structures* (Manzini 2014) and that necessarily – and increasingly in recent years – its research domain intertwined with social sciences. Moreover, design occurs when there is a joint invention of a solution to a collective and/or social problem (Zinna, 2020) and when the designer can contribute to rethinking the concrete critical spaces, services and their uses. However, when talking about change in the public sector we should consider it as the interplay between institutional aspects, societal challenges, and individuals' views and actions. So, designing with Third Sector organizations is not only useful in developing concrete outputs but is also and above all an opportunity for *reflexivity* and *rethinking* for the organization itself (Seravalli, Upadhyaya & Ernits, 2022).

Moreover, social innovation is a process in which there is no predetermined relationship between partnership patterns - roles, positions and functions of actors - and outcomes of the initiative in terms of *collaborative dynamics* (Granovetter, 1974). Therefore, in the present research, social innovation is the result of a highly contextual process - and never a *recipe dropped from above*, but rather an *autopoietic* process in which the outputs feed the inputs, in a circuit of social automation, as our framework proposes.

Technology, and particularly the use of digital tools as a vehicle for change, should be considered as a vector of desirable social innovation. It is a well-established belief that design and arts are a crucial way of applying technology and making it socially accepted for their humanistic and social approach to technology: giving meaning and making

things familiar. The social and *convivial approach* (Milani, 2022) to technology – and to transition – was one of the guiding principles we approached our project stakeholders.

3.2 Which digital technologies for which social innovation

Recently, Italy's Third Sector has increasingly engaged in projects that leverage technology to create social added value (Busacca, 2019).

According to a socio-technical paradigm, technologies are the combinations of information, computation, communication and connectivity technologies used to create, use, transmit or deliver electronic data. Technology management enables better decision-making through social collaboration, optimized resource allocation, and information sharing that attracts new potential stakeholders (Cavotta, Grassi & Toschi, 2022).

From a humanistic perspective, technologies evolve similarly to living organism: *adaptation* from function to organ and *exaptation* from organ to function (Milani, 2022). In this sense, digital technologies cannot be thought of as *pills to be assumed*. Equally indispensable is sociology and its qualitative method, because of its ability to grid different parameters, to give them weight and importance, and to draw from these comparisons assessments and predictions about certain social dimensions.

Specifically, this article refers to the branch of design that looks at digital technology to trigger, accelerate – and sometimes curb – certain ongoing social processes. The state of digital technology in Third Sector organizations is reported by Italia Nonprofit (2024), involving 665 organizations divided into the three most prevalent types (associations, social cooperatives and foundations). The report shows that a critical barrier to systematic innovation is the scarcity of resources and time which forces organizations to focus predominantly on present challenges, limiting their capacity for long-term planning and strategic innovation. It emerges that more than six out of ten organizations recognize that they are not yet fully digitalized (66.2%) but are aware that they are on a path of growth and improvement (52.7 percent). The report distinguishes between (1) digital management technologies – thus aimed at internal use – and (2) digital communication technologies – aimed at external audiences. Insights regarding the second category highlight the high use of the newsletter, through which the information conveyed mainly concerns updates on projects and initiatives (92.7%).

The proposed solutions therefore face up to these types of barriers to adoption in the current state of the art, with particular attention to the aspects of digital communication.

3.3 Co-designing for digital transition

Design, as mentioned earlier, can play an *intermediary role* in supporting and orienting these transition processes. The artifacts produced serve as *seeds of design* (Botero, 2013) in contexts characterized by high complexity and limited familiarity with creative processes. Codesign emerges as a crucial methodology for organizational development. *Prototype-based approaches* become extremely useful devices in verifying whether projects adequately address user needs and contextual requirements. This approach is particularly valuable in the digital transition process, where organizations must *navigate unfamiliar technological territories* while maintaining their social mission Campagnaro (2022). The successful implementation of co-design in the digital transition therefore requires an understanding of communication not only as a technical capability, but also as an *expression of phenomena* of diffused or organized relationality (Binotto, 2010). This perspective allows organizations to maintain their social base while embracing

technological innovation as a connector of intelligence and communities. Successful social innovation fundamentally relies on surfacing and transmitting knowledge embedded within individual experiences (Jedlowski & Leccardi, 2003). As Jedlowski (2003, p. 65) observes, the knowledge deposited in subjects' experiences is the source of innovation. While digital platforms facilitate community building and stakeholder engagement, this article reveals that successful digital transition demands more than fixed solutions: requiring an integrated, *evolving pathway* that emphasizes co-design processes.

4. Context analysis: on-field research

4.1 A technological matrix for social innovation needs

From the insights of early desk research, it emerged as the primary horizon of the project to identify a meeting point between the innovation needs of Third Sector entities and technological potential. The project partner enterprises were chosen for some common structural characteristics that allowed us to move in the Venetian ecosystem and for other differences that could give us a varied cross-section of the different possible responses to the same project intervention:

- Corte del Forner, small-sized volunteering association for food assistance;
- Sumo Cooperativa Sociale, medium-sized social enterprise for employment inclusion;
- Comunità di Venezia, big-sized cooperative for therapeutic care.

Not only does each social reality need to be analyzed individually to understand its characteristics and the nature of the service it offers, but technologies also need to be analyzed and synthesized to fully understand their benefits, limitations, risks, impacts, and prospects for the Third Sector (Cavotta, Grassi & Toschi, 2022). Technologies can be clustered according to their *vocation* between social impact-oriented technologies such as amplify project communication, communicate initiatives, do fundraising; and efficiency-oriented technologies - material storage, transparency of the institution, coordination of operators. The aim of clustering is to provide an analytical framework for understanding this relationship, with a *technological matrix for social innovation needs* (Figure 2) in the Third Sector, crossing on the x-axis the parameter *economic efficiency* and on the y-axis the parameter *social impact*. On this matrix we placed some of the technological tools surveyed and others usually used as levers of the digital transition. The construction of the matrix, together with the macro-structural analysis provided by Italia Non-Profit, was essential for us to be able to guide the interviews during the qualitative field survey phase.

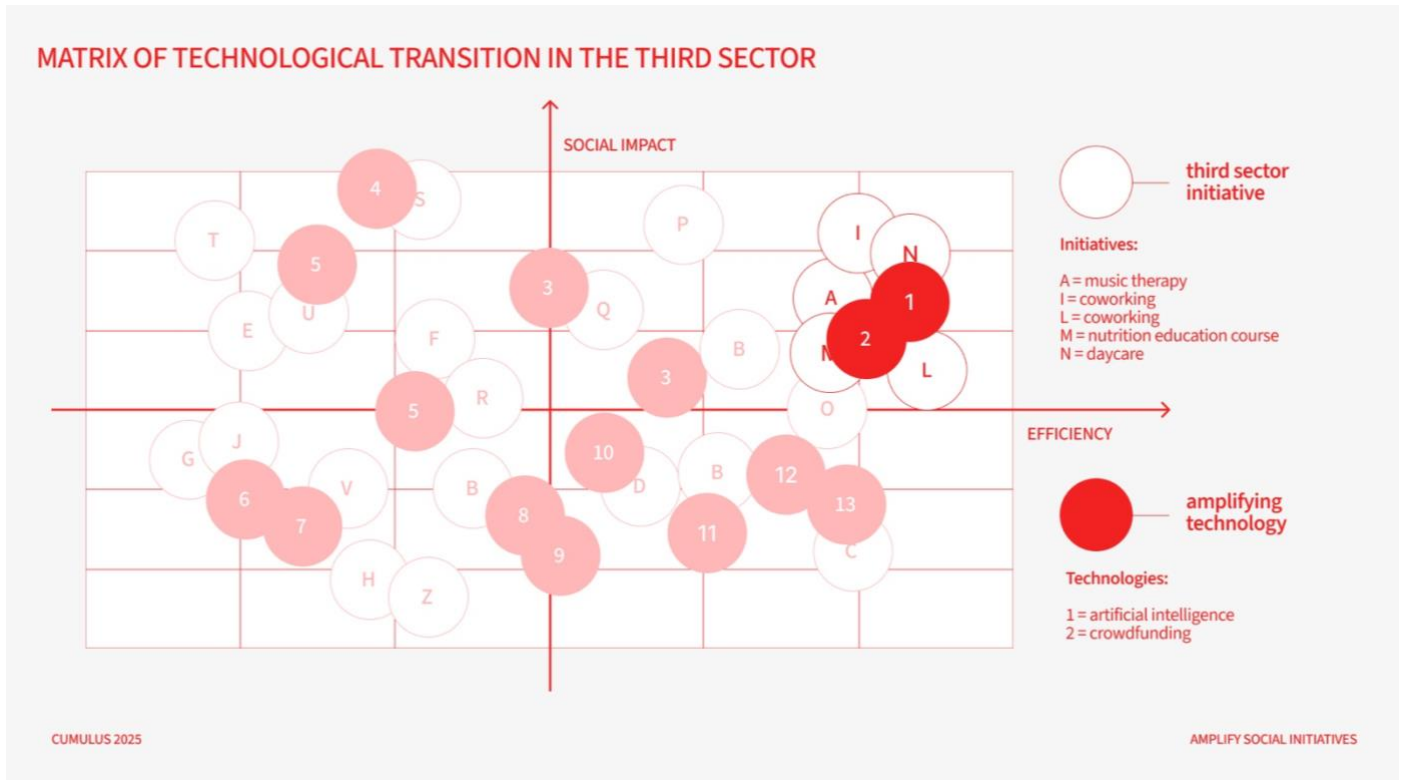


Figure 2. Cartesian matrix diagram (x-axis = social impact; y-axis = economic efficiency) of the relationship between technologies and Third Sector initiatives extracted from the fieldwork, highlighting a link between findings from the qualitative and desk analysis.

4.2 Between social *impact-oriented* and *efficiency-oriented* technologies: qualitative survey

The qualitative survey was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews aimed at a sample of 6 operators (2 for each entity) belonging to the project partner enterprises. The duration of the interviews, conducted in person at the headquarters of the partner entities, ranged from 1h to 1h30. After transcription of the interviews, we cross-checked the results produced based on a previously designed codebook.

As a result of the interviews, all the entities placed their vocation somewhere between the desire to trigger social change in their target territory and their need to survive in productive and economic terms. It is necessary to note how the questions logically implied the impossibility of untying the two directions. However, as the interviews progressed, it became clear that the frame of the problem was the structure of communication itself.

Dissatisfaction concerns particularly the incapacity of being able to talk about their initiatives and about the inadequacy toward standardized content typical of corporate and marketing communication. Unmaintained and poorly managed websites and social profiles - 47.8 percent are not optimized therefore invisible on the web (Italy Nonprofit, 2024) - are the clearest evidence of the gap between the Third Sector's digitalization needs and the response offered by standardized platforms designed to replicate the private sector's agility and proactivity in response to changes and emerging challenges (Parsons, 2006). The question is not whether to have a web or social presence in the form of a *showcase*, but to define what is important to communicate to the specific target audience and based on that to understand the opportunities offered by the digital ecosystem. These insights guide the new design focus of the project: from an ecosystem

for communicating Third Sector entities to an ecosystem for communicating Third Sector initiatives.

To investigate more deeply this new focus, we scheduled new qualitative meetings in the form of focus groups where we deepen this understanding.

What emerges is that individual initiatives are the core of the social activities of our partners in which they invest the most time and energy. Moreover, for these organizations, embarking on a design journey means deciding to devote even more time, energy and resources to their desire for change. The long time spent on problem-framing involves a deep discussion of the initial design question and brings out broader issues and needs that could steer the project towards more articulated and strategic interventions in terms of change and impact (Seravalli, Upadhyaya & Ernits, 2022). This shift becomes particularly clear in the initial stages of the project (Di Prima & Campagnaro, 2023) when members of the organization are asked to tell their stories to the design team, to share principles and values, and to describe the horizon of change towards which they are directed. As a result of the activities, we defined the problem framework and identified the trigger for the second diamond of the design process: using digital tools – described in the next chapters – to strengthen the communication of social innovation initiatives, as explained in the next section.

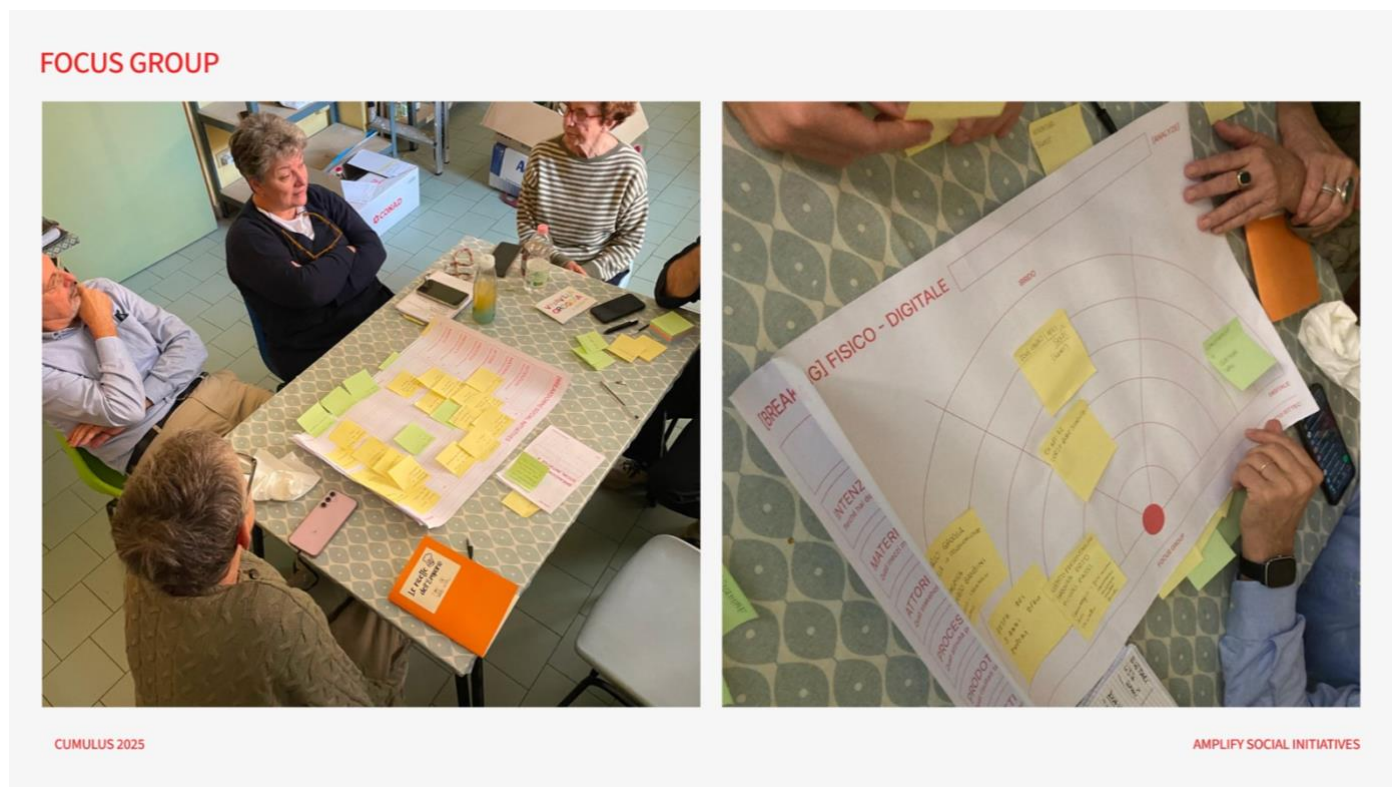


Figure 3. One of the focus group activities where the prototyped tools such as ‘brainwriting’, ‘decomposition of initiatives’ and ‘mapping of contact points’ were tested at the voluntary association ‘Corte del Forner’, Venice, 22 October 2024.



Figure 4. One of the focus group activities during which tested some of prototyped tools such as 'brainwriting', 'breakdown initiatives' and 'mapping touchpoints' at Social Cooperative 'Comunità di Venezia', Venezia, November 12nd 2024

5. A design logical framework to drive social impact

5.1 Social initiative as a driver for social and digital innovation

While the Third Sector possesses inherent innovative potential in social service delivery, its digital and social innovation capacity is significantly constrained by a disconnect between *unconscious design actions* (Manzini, 2014) and *intentional strategic planning* (Vink, et al, 2020), necessitating a fundamental shift from reactive service provision to proactive design-driven innovation supported by systematic frameworks and organizational learning. The resulting approach contradicts the sector's inherent ability to generate social innovation and positive community impact. What emerges is therefore to interpret this transition not as merely a technological hurdle but rather as an opportunity to transpose social impact into a digital context while designing solutions that catalyze transformative processes in welfare, social cohesion, and local impact.

Third Sector organizations demonstrate natural innovative capabilities in developing services for vulnerable populations. However, as Campagnaro (2022) observes, many organizations undertake *unconscious design actions*, responding to immediate needs without recognizing their design capacity or familiarity with design-thinking approaches. Third Sector organizations, in fact, are uniquely positioned to weave these networks of relationships, particularly in an era where globalization tends to fragment social connections (Bassi, 2013). This creates a paradoxical situation where organizations are innovating without acknowledging or strategically leveraging their innovative potential. Adopting the initiative as an object of the research means to revitalize the role of the Third Sector by operating at the level of *sense-making* (Rogers, 1995), identifying a solution which lies in adopting a co-design approach that facilitates both social initiatives and digital integration.

5.2 Initiative as design action

In contemporary literature, design is increasingly conceptualized as a *reflective* and *reformative tool* (Vink et al, 2020) capable of transforming ideas and initiatives into tangible actions with meaningful social impact (Busacca, 2019). The deliberate nature of design action provides a framework for organizations to progress beyond reactive responses toward strategic innovation. Organizations, therefore, should not be perceived as static entities but as emergent realities shaped by flows of action, negotiations, conflicts, and practical activities (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2004). This perspective aligns with the evolving nature of service design, which increasingly emphasizes "designing" rather than "design" to underscore its iterative and dynamic characteristics.

A central challenge in the digital transition of the Third Sector is bridging the gap between intuitive social action and strategic design thinking. Many organizations in the sector unknowingly engage in what Vink (2020) describes as *reflexive reformative actions*, often without recognizing their inherent design capabilities. Transitioning from *unconscious initiatives* to *deliberate design action* represents a critical step in enhancing organizational capabilities. The concept of ecosystem design broadens the notion of agency, recognizing the contributions of diverse actors, including those not directly involved in formal design processes. The following framework combines the *expert design capabilities* (Manzini, 2015) and the *distributed practices* of social innovation to bridge the unconscious potential of social initiatives into intentional co-created design actions.

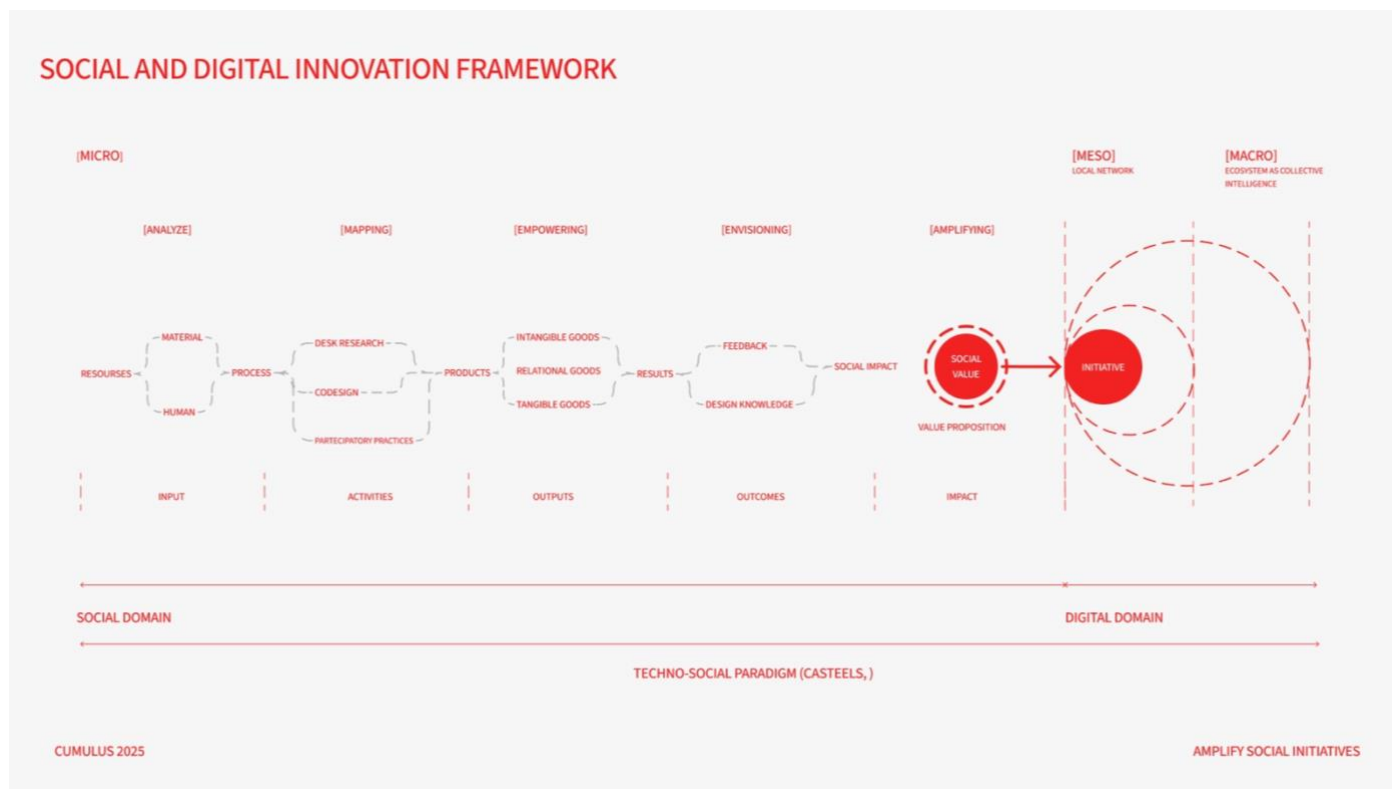


Figure 5. This framework proposes a theoretical and practical model for amplifying the impact of social initiatives in an ecosystemic way. Combining the value chain model with design thinking, it aims to scale up social value in the digital ecosystem through controlled phases.

This framework allows us to examine initiatives through both their design intent and their capacity to generate social value and impact. We propose a *multi-level model* for designing social initiatives that illuminates the complex dynamics in digital transition by strengthening impact awareness through prototyping and communicating initiatives.

While design initially focuses on solving specific problems and creating tangible artifacts or interactions it can also drive deeper cultural, strategic, and systemic transformations. These transformations influence processes, mindsets, and organizational structures (Burns et al, 2006) and mark the transition from *expert design* to *diffuse design*. The primary goal of this framework is to create a common ground between social and digital environments to help organizations reconsider service transformation from a new perspective: fostering a shared multilevel ecosystem that consolidates best practices, resources, and tools.

5.3 From social initiatives framework to digital ecosystem model

At the local level, social innovation emerges through peer-to-peer initiatives and the active engagement of actors, involving territorial observation and community building efforts that foster belonging, solidarity and participation (Bassi, 2011). By integrating the structure of the Design Process Model (IDEO, 2012) with the basic principles of the value chain model, the framework made visible the *iterative nature* of design processes to identify a distinctive value that organizations seek to achieve by focusing on their activities. In doing so, the micro level highlights the main steps towards the co-creation of social value within a social initiative, contributing to be a fundamental analytical phase to understand the actors, resources, processes, and agents involved in the creation of relational products.

The meso-level bridges global and local knowledge through bidirectional innovation transfer. Initiatives generate relational products, fostering shared responsibility in local participation. This, in turn, strengthens community members' sense of belonging and forms the foundation for an infrastructural network that aggregates data on a global scale. At the intersection of the micro and meso-levels, two key mechanisms emerge. First, social learning and critical mass mechanisms (Rogers, 1995) drive the development of collective knowledge and enhance meaningful participation at the micro level (Mulgan, 2017). Second, *social capital* and *relational products* (Bassi, 2013) establish the foundation for trust and long-term relationships, enabling effective collaboration in public spaces—ranging from individual initiatives to broader initiative networks.

This level represents the institutional dimension. The role of the digital ecosystem is to enable processes that were previously inconceivable, activating community agency by empowering audiences to solve problems using their own skills and resources (Mulgan, 2006). It manages networks across multiple levels, fostering collaboration and innovation. Consequently, the role of design evolves from merely creating solutions to orchestrating processes, enabling systemic approaches that integrate infrastructures, resources, and users.

At the macro level, digital innovation focuses on social accountability, impact measurement, and the dissemination of best practices (Mulgan, 2017). When effectively managed, these global processes generate social capital, enhancing collective intelligence and knowledge-sharing across communities. The following digital ecosystem we conceptualize for social innovation further amplifies these effects.

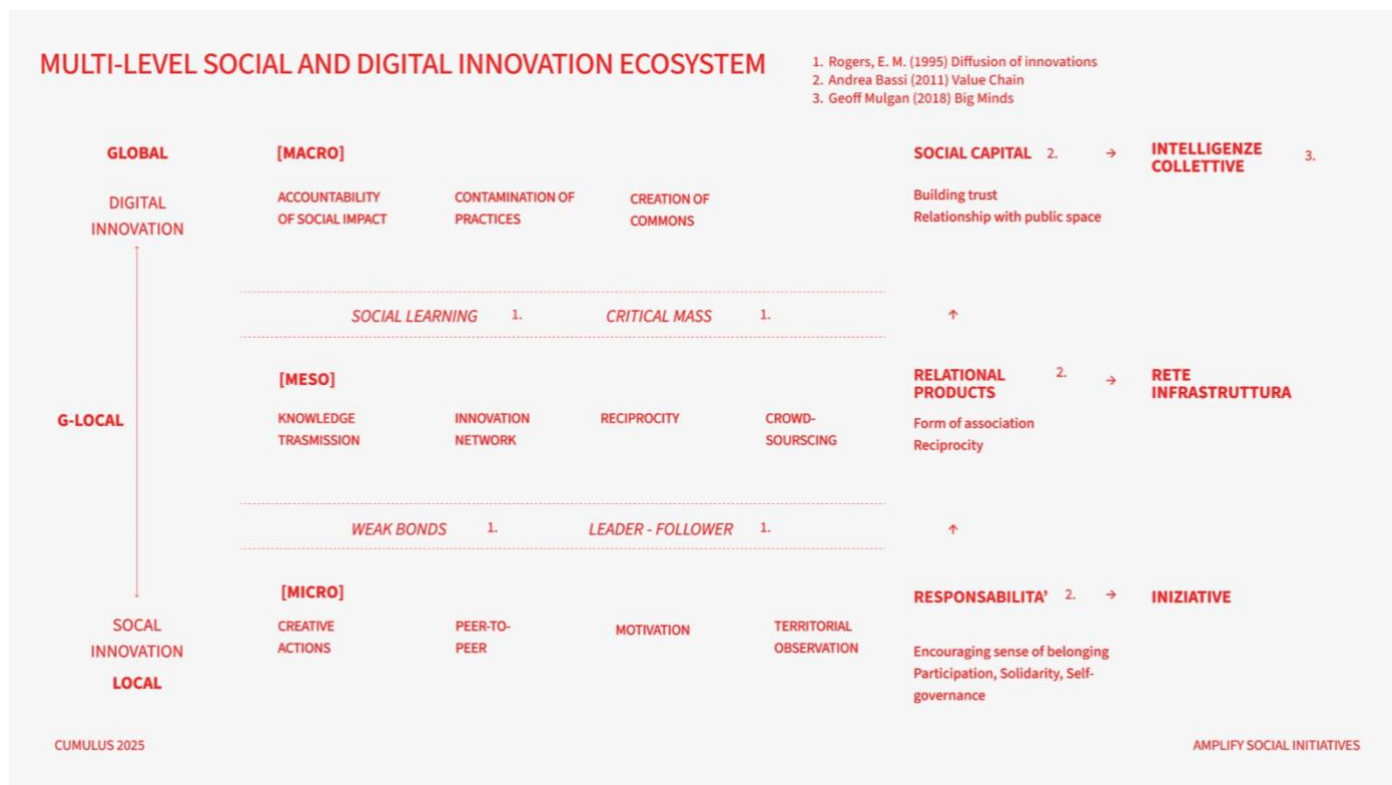


Figure 6. The multi-level social and digital ecosystem aims to scale up social innovation efforts into an integrated digital ecosystem, linking the micro-level (initiatives), the meso-level (network) and the macro-level (ecosystem), enacting virtual practices such as knowledge transmission and social learning.

6. New design focus: 'Amplify Social Initiatives' ecosystem

'Amplify Social Initiatives' aims to explore and give a digital place to the *constellation of design initiatives* (Manzini, 2014) as extensive as it is hidden (Author, 2022) carried out by Third Sector entities. An initiative is defined as any activity oriented toward the production of social innovation, where the latter is to be understood as the possible – and not necessary – outcome of complex social processes in which there is no predetermined relationship between patterns of partnership – roles, positions and functions of actors – and outcomes of the initiative in terms of collaborative dynamics (Granovetter 1974). The framework is designed to be an *operational tool* that guides an idea from the input to the outcome, and relative impacts, through a model of communication for social initiatives.

'Amplify Social Initiatives' is a toolkit platform – with possible analogic extensions – that supports Third Sector organizations involved in the digital transition process. It is a digital repository in the form of a guide, collecting ready-to-use tips, tools, and materials to implement and adapt the presence of digital communication within a social reality. It is suggested that the commitment should focus on creating a community, not only of advocates, but also of designers, to continuously influence this change. The common characteristic of transition design is the presence of *non-traditional design outcomes* (Burns, et al., 2006:21): although there are well-established tools to capture the experience of stakeholders in the service from multiple perspectives, each social innovation experience suggests reinventing the method, and with it the most suitable tools. To support engagement and build trust in the design process (Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009), our communication toolkit presented different uses of digital tools: (1) co-learning; (2) crowdsourcing; (3) codesigning. The model to which the platform would like to refer is that of *commons-based peer-production*, capable of harnessing decentralized *collective*

intelligence in open collaboration networks which occurs when experiences are created together or shared with others.

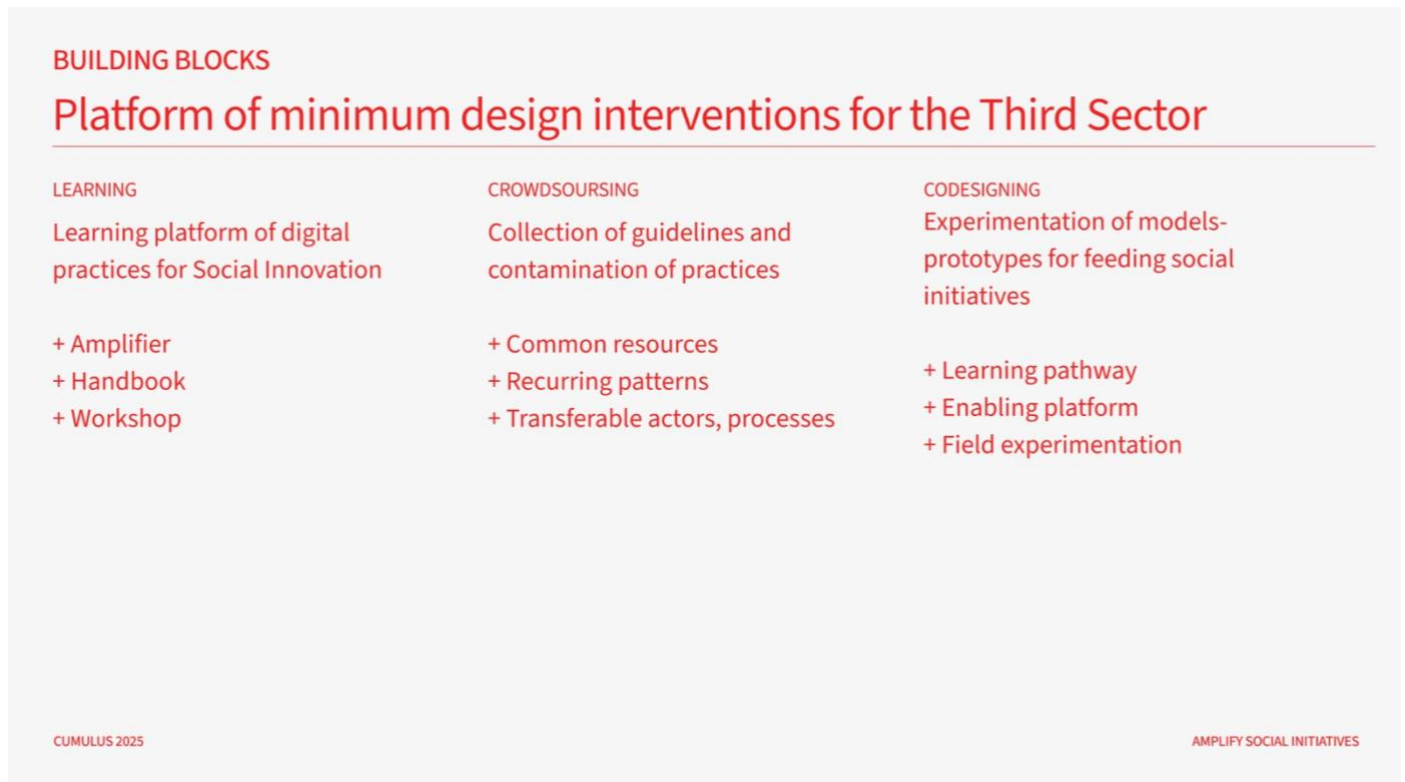


Figure 7. The program establishes a strategic social-digital capacity-building platform that integrates learning, crowdsourcing, and co-designing, utilizing digital infrastructure, educational resources, and interactive workshops to enhance organizational communication and knowledge transfer capabilities.

The toolkit platform emerges as a crucial enabler for bridging the gap between digital adoption and social innovation. By providing a comprehensive set of *tools*, *guidelines*, and *resources*, the platform enhances the communication capabilities of Third Sector entities, empowering them to navigate the complexities of the digital age. This long-term approach synthesizes user sessions, bridging the divide between grassroots initiatives and top-down digital transitions. By *steering* organizations towards digital adoption, the platform fosters interactions between designers and social innovation processes and facilitates iterative development through co-design thinking methodologies (Swann, 2002).

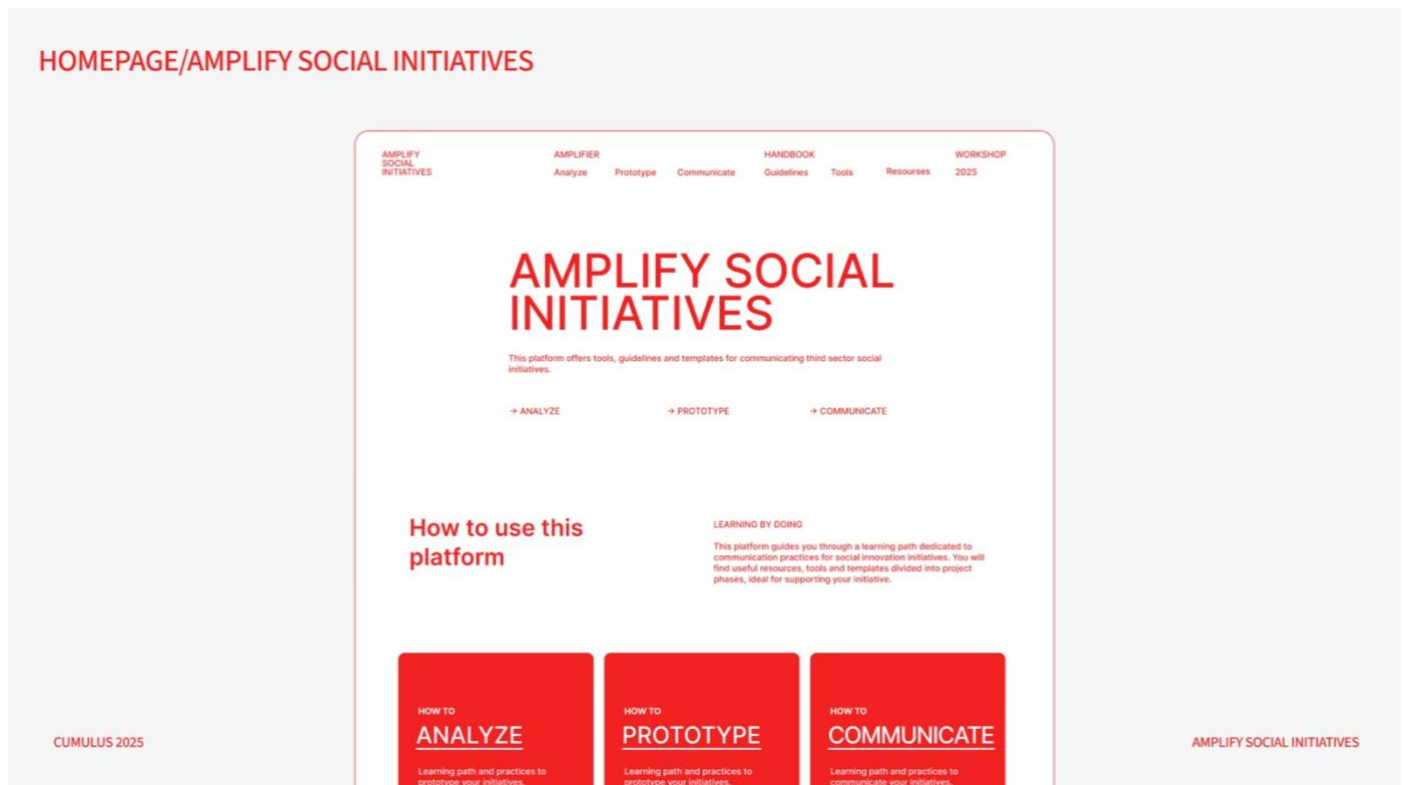


Figure 8. The Amplify Social Initiatives platform acts as an amplifier of social innovation by providing communication tools to increase their social impact.

The platform also integrates a variety of specialized tools to support communication, including editorial outputs such as social media campaigns, newsletters, and podcasts; organizational tools like email marketing and broadcast lists; and fundraising resources such as crowdfunding campaigns and donation drives. These tools are clustered into editorial, organizational, and strategic categories, providing a flexible and comprehensive framework for addressing the diverse needs of Third Sector organizations (Italia No Profit, 2024). By offering templates, guidelines, and resources tailored to each cluster, the platform enables organizations to craft effective communication strategies and amplify the reach of their initiatives. The platform functions as a dynamic *learning process*, reflecting the co-design thinking methodology employed during the research phase. It introduces organizations to a *three-step framework*—analyze, prototype, and amplify—that has been rigorously tested in on-field research.

The 'analyze' phase includes tools designed to deconstruct and map social initiatives, creating communication design frameworks that support the effective articulation of their goals and impacts. It provides an analytical framework without restricting the creative and proactive freedom of participants as a *true experimental tool* (Foster & Iaione, 2016). The result of the analyze phase is the unpackage of social initiative:

- *Brainwriting tool*: participants are invited to bring up as many past and current initiatives of their respective association as possible, proposing to write their title on a post it notes to be randomly stuck on the wall;
- *Breakdown tool*: participants are invited to answer the questions corresponding to the distinct phases of the initiatives and then to break them down into the various components that compose the value chain (human/material inputs, activities, outputs);
- *Mapping tool*: participants are invited to think about each phase of the initiatives and write down the corresponding digital touchpoints involved in the communication of the initiative development process.

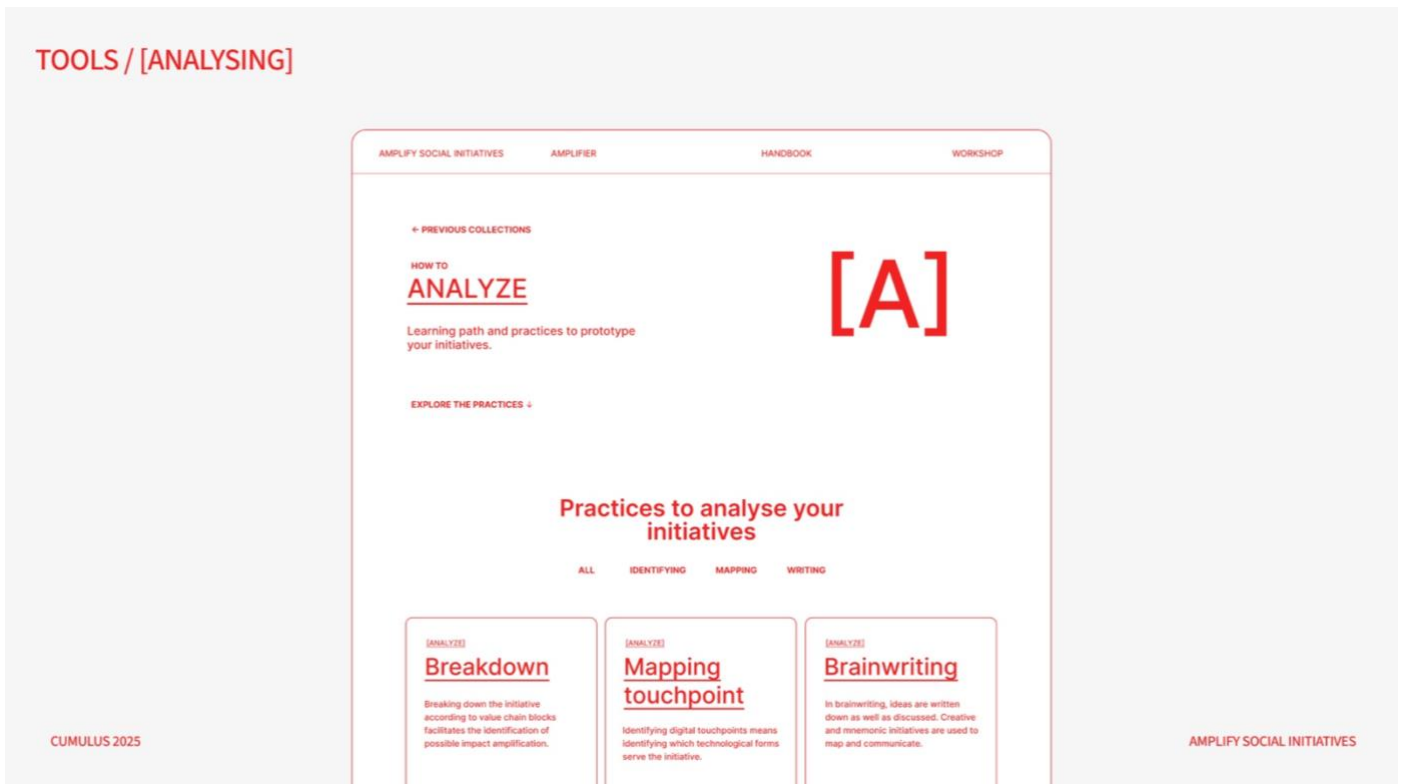


Figure 9. The platform is clustered by collecting all the tools and resources to enhance the methodological and learning approach and content findability.

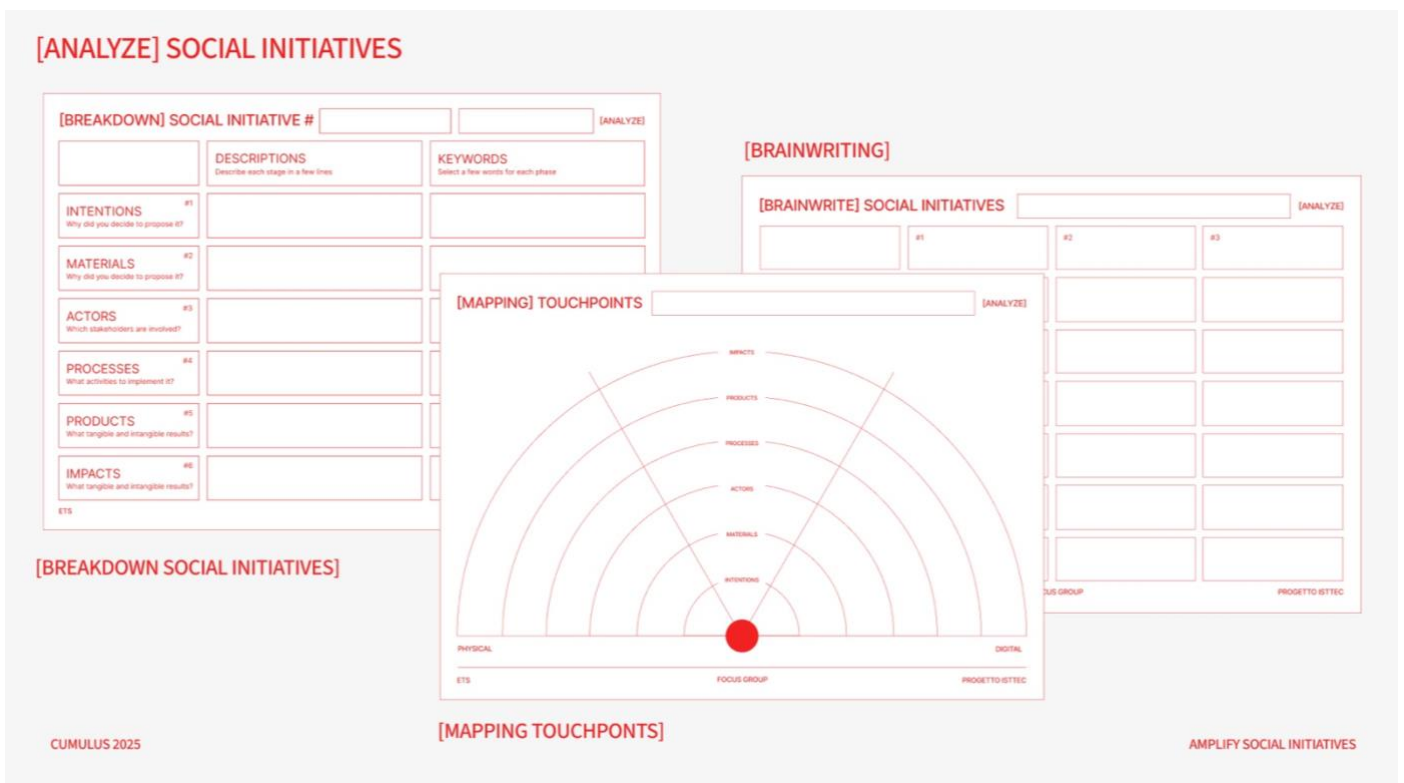


Figure 10. Collaborative design tools such as ‘breakdown social initiatives’, ‘mapping touchpoints’ and ‘brainwriting’ have been prototyped and tested to analyze social initiatives of the Third Sector.

The importance of prototyping underlined by Campagnaro (2022) in these contexts, highlights this iterative process that empowers Third Sector entities to adopt a strategic mindset that integrates digital tools into their operations effectively.

- *Identifying needs tool*: each card presents possible insights into the difficulties faced by third sector actors in unravelling the communication of an initiative, and participants are asked to select some or write down others;
- *Choose technology tool*: each card proposes a 'bio' of the technology (what it is) and a description of how it works (how to use it), so the participants are asked to choose the one they consider more relevant for their initiative.

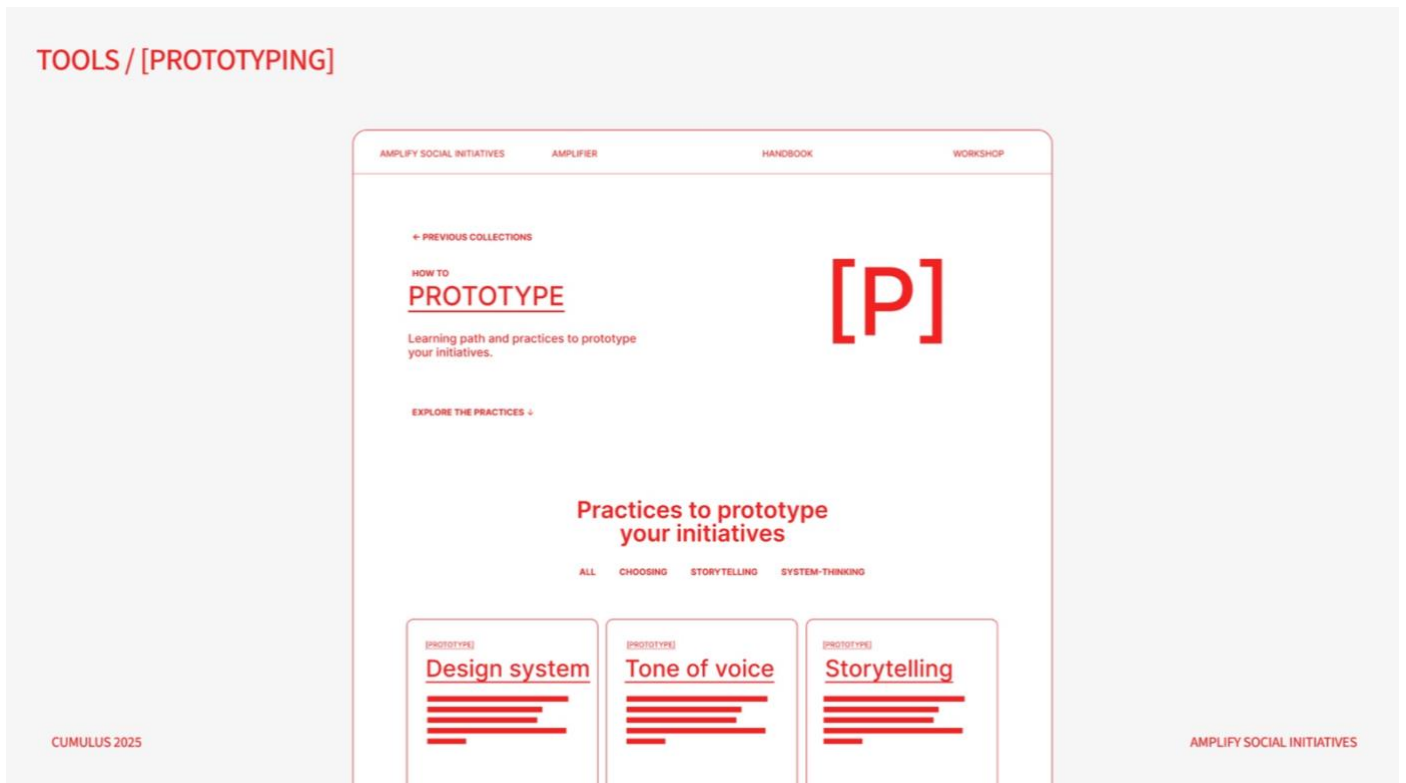


Figure 11. The platform provides intermediate tools for prototyping the initiatives, suggesting non-final outcomes but systemic and storytelling approaches to define their own tone of voice.

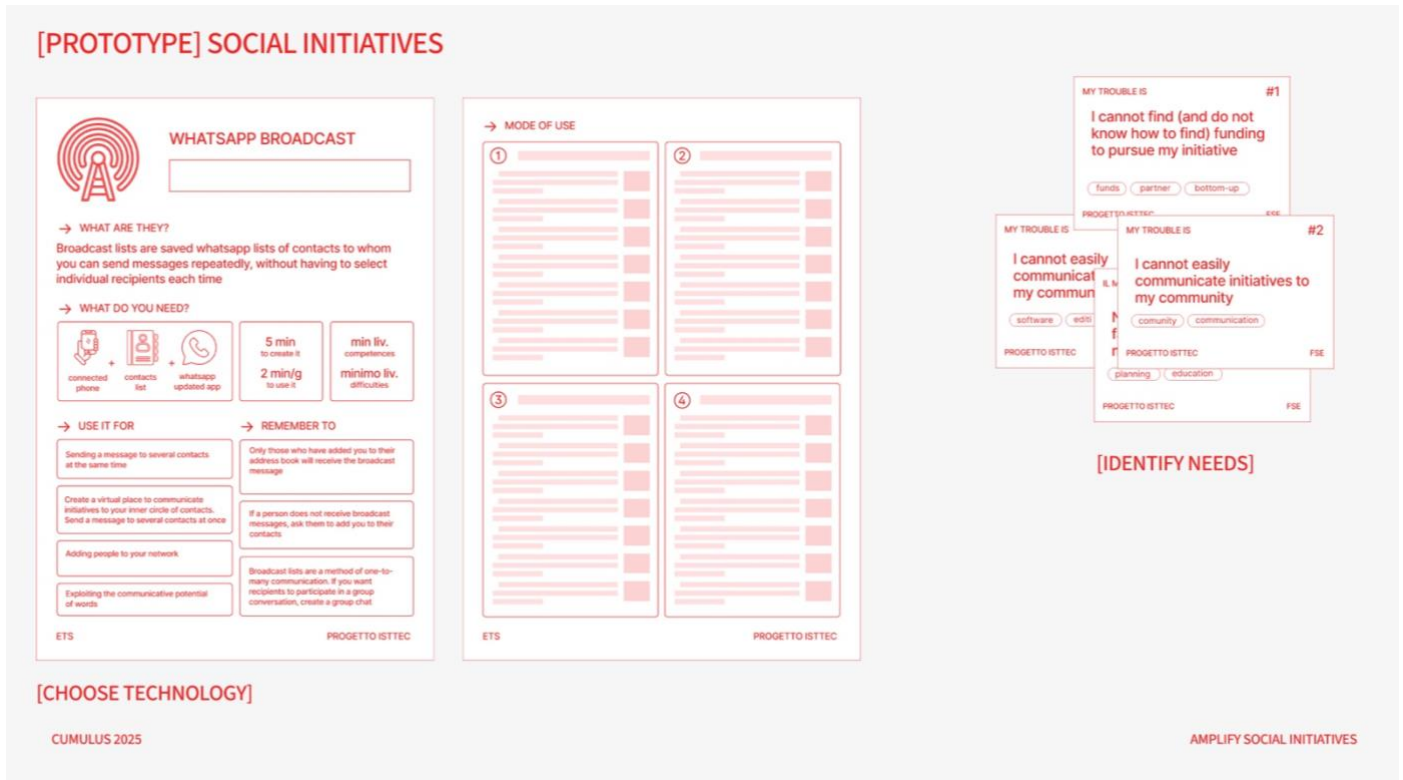


Figure 12. Collaborative design tools such as 'choose technology' and 'identify needs' have been prototyped and tested to guide the Third Sector in matching the best technological solution to the related problem associated with social initiatives previously analyzed.

The toolkit platform integrates a diverse range of communication outputs designed to bridge the digital divide and enhance the reach and impact of social initiatives within target communities. These outputs are organized into three main clusters:

- *Editorial oriented tools*: these tools refer to technologies and channels oriented to build a communication of initiatives that is continuous over time (e.g. newsletters, social media, podcasts);
- *Organizational oriented tools*: these tools act as facilitators of certain organizational and internal communication practices of the various service components (e.g. WhatsApp groups, broadcast lists);
- *Strategic oriented tools*: these tools assist in the use of purpose-driven technologies (e.g. crowdfunding campaigns, fundraising events, donation drives).

Such resources enable organizations to design and implement effective communication plans, ensuring that their initiatives resonate with their target audiences and achieve their intended impact. This structured approach not only amplifies individual initiatives but also contributes to overcoming persistent challenges in the sector, fostering greater social innovation and value creation.

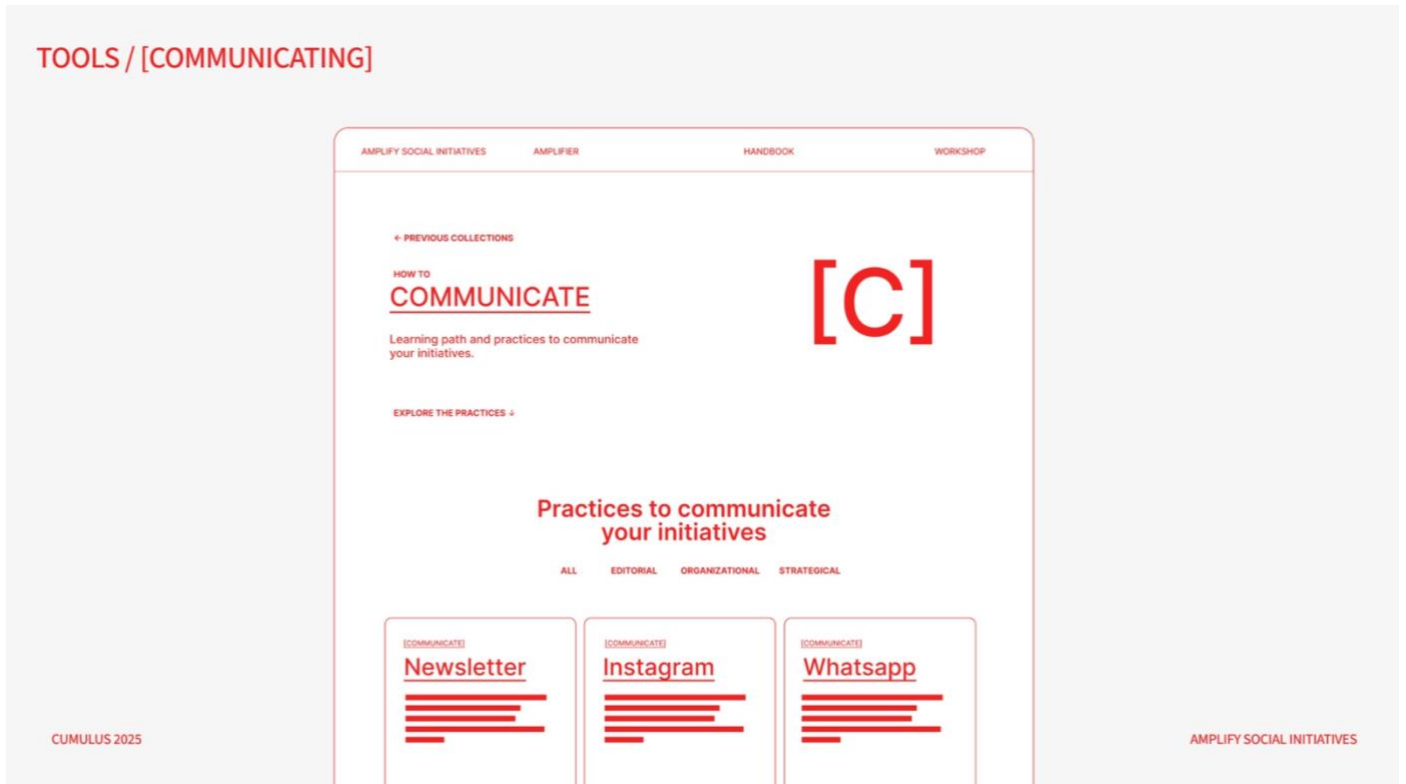


Figure 13. The platform proposes a series of communication outputs and provides specific guidelines for structuring newsletters, social media and organizational communications.

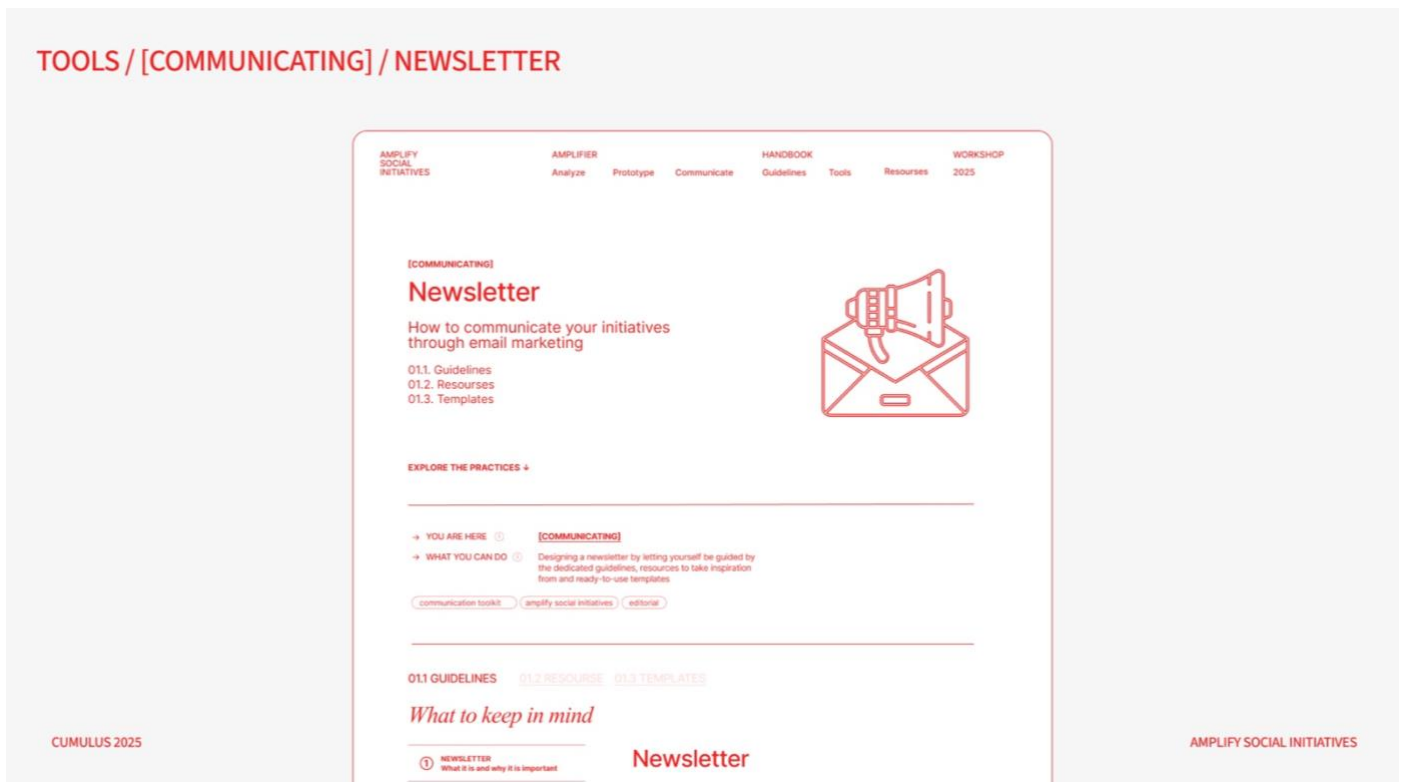


Figure 14. Communication tools provide different ways (guidelines, resources and templates) to guide social initiatives, previously analyzed and prototyped, to create different communication outputs, such as newsletters (for example).

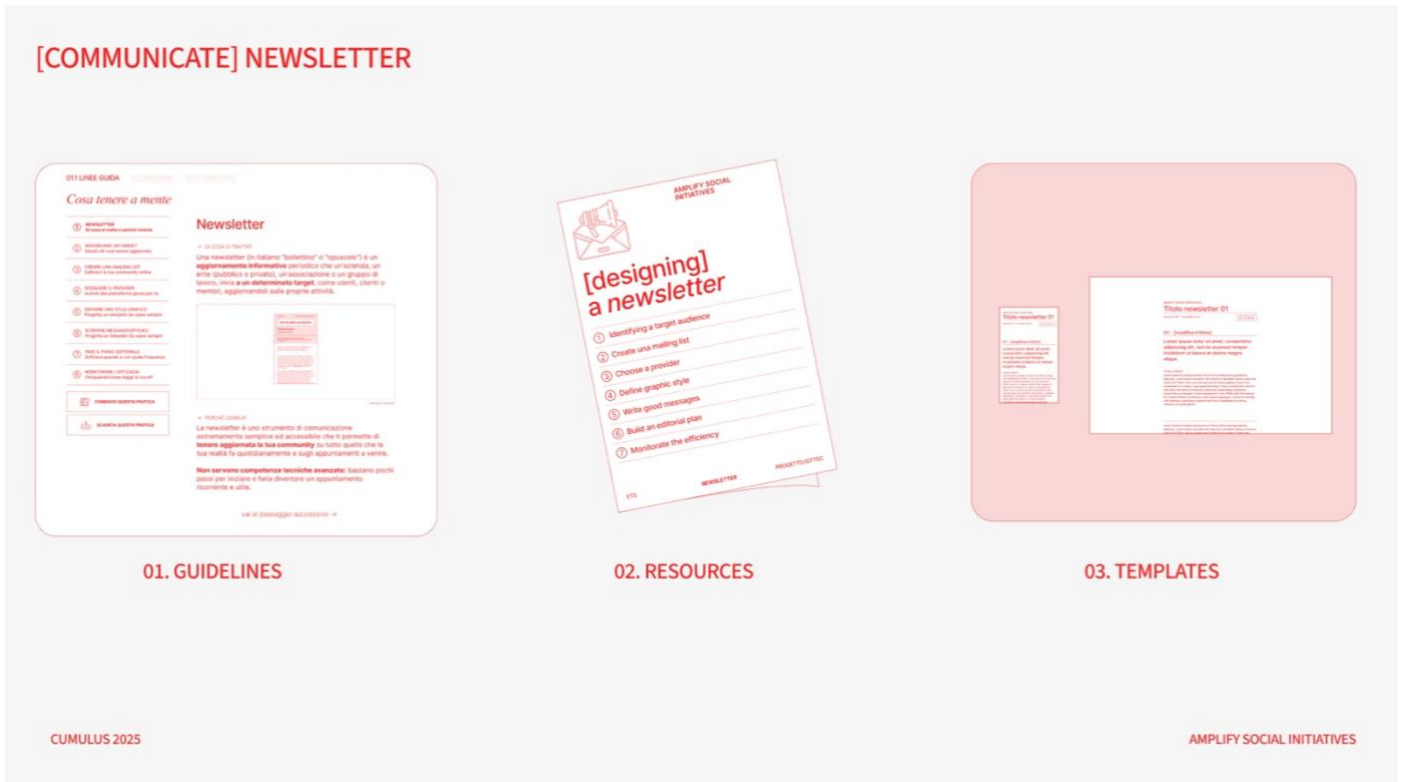


Figure 15. One of the possible communication outputs is the newsletter, for which the platform proposes different tools (guidelines, resources, and templates) to guide its creation, depending on the level of competence and energy available.

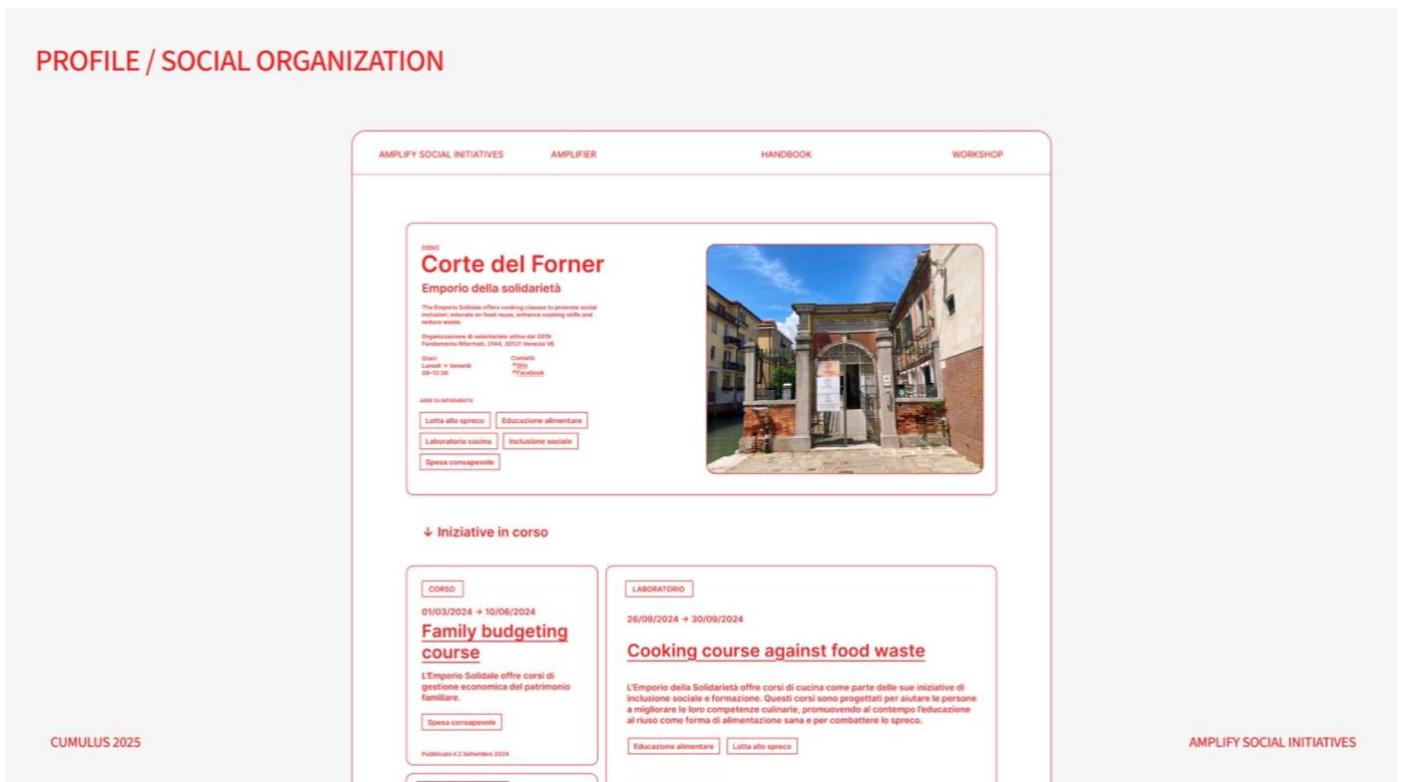


Figure 16. The interface design prioritizes the action-oriented presentation of content, moving from identity-centric models to an activity-based demonstration of organizational values through documented social impact initiatives.

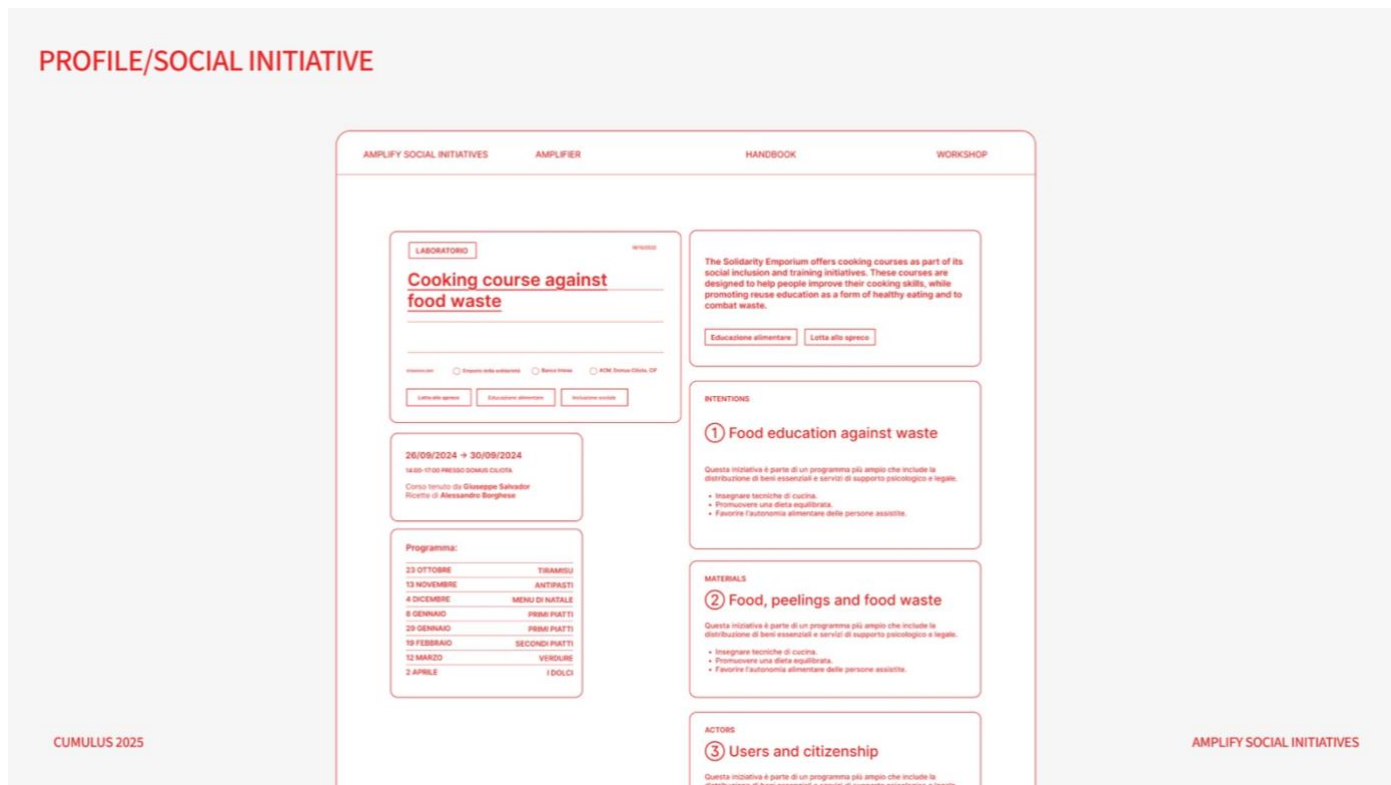


Figure 17. The initiative interface uses the value chain framework to structure and present operational information, enabling an architectural organization of initiative components, serving as modular building blocks for project replication and facilitating a crowdsourcing methodology.

COMMUNICATION THINKING / TOOLKIT

APPROACHES

editorial

organisational

strategical

OUTPUTS

Social network

Podcast

Newsletter

Email marketing

Whatsapp group

Broadcast list

Crowdfunding

Fund raising

Social events

TOOLS

guidelines

resources

templates

Figure 18. The Communications Toolkit addresses critical operational gaps in the third sector through an integrated digital communications framework. Encompassing strategic planning, organizational development and capacity building, it ideally addresses all these challenges while providing targeted implementation resources designed to increase the impact of existing social innovation initiatives.

7. Initiative as design action

On-field research, in line with the state of the art in the Third Sector, identifies a key barrier to digital transition: intrinsic resistance to adopting digital communication tools, primarily due to constraints in time and digital competence. This challenge is exacerbated by the sector's limited funding and pressing operational priorities (Italia No Profit, 2024). Manzini (2024) observes that successful social innovation demands significant stakeholder engagement, time, and commitment – resources that are often unavailable without robust policy support as our on-field research showed as well.

The limitations of a *technology-first approach* become evident when examining the findings of this article. The assumption that technological solutions automatically improve the communication capacities of the Third Sector overlooks crucial structural and social complexities. This technological determinism, as discussed by Harari and recently expanded upon by Author (2024), fails to account for the sector's unique challenges and limitations. While digital platforms can be a cost-effective infrastructure and enact behavioral change, they cannot independently address the structural and political challenges of supporting long-lasting impact in the Third Sector. As Vink argues (2020), meaningful systemic change requires comprehensive policy frameworks and socio-economic arrangements that extend beyond technological and design solutions. To drive meaningful change, public policies must embody innovative governance. As Manzini and Selloni (2016) propose, policies should form *policy constellations*, or clusters of initiatives, capable of positively interacting with the socio-technical systems they aim to influence. This ecosystemic approach to policy design highlights the need for long-term, socio-political commitment. The introduction of the 'National Single Registry for the Third Sector' (RUNTS) – introduced in the Italian 'Third Sector Reform' (2017) – has increased bureaucratic requirements without providing adequate support for the digital transition, failing to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of the sector and enabling a comprehensive analysis and observation of the sector. This exemplifies the *digital-imperative* main problem: the lack of digital standards and resources to support their implementation. Furthermore, both the literature and field research show that initiatives are at the core of social innovation and reveal a mismatch between the Third Sector entities mapped in RUNTS registry and the actual social innovation initiatives being developed. 'Amplify Social Initiatives' aims to intercept them with a tested theoretical-practical framework driven by design.

As mentioned above, the *quadruple helix model* emphasizes the importance of public governance and its crucial role of synergy between the State and the Third Sector, as well as citizens and local authorities, in promoting a sustainable ecosystem that supports social objectives. Public policies that raise awareness about social problems and support social innovation initiatives (Nesta, 2016) should help address these challenges. This process involves the creation of *collaborative public services* (Manzini & D', 2024) that integrate design-driven stakeholder engagement and local capacity to produce *collective goods* (Crouch et al, 2004). However, without a solid regulatory framework, initiatives are at risk of failure and attempts to be more probable, effective, durable and scalable and to become true *collective benefits*.

The implementation of collaborative tools, therefore, becomes crucial not just for operational efficiency, but as a catalyst for organizational learning and capacity building in which designers are mediators and facilitators, supporting ongoing initiatives and socially meaningful design projects (Manzini, 2014). This approach can help bridge the existing digital competency gap while fostering a more technologically adaptive culture

only in the conception of *digital common* empowering the empowerment of self-governance through a non-exclusive use of resources. Therefore, 'Amplify Social Initiatives' can be considered as a *trigger space* (Ostanel, 2017) not necessarily a physical space but as collector places of social energy. In this way they become at the same time laboratories of co-design and spaces to produce collective services which tend to scale up social innovation and amplify the impact of the often *unmapped* (author, 2022) network of small-scale design actions.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, communication for social innovation can be conceptualized as a fundamental element in the architecture of social relations, establishing itself as an essential instrument to *produce sociality* (Ascoli, 1999). This theoretical perspective is grounded in the premise that communication is not merely a process of information transmission, but rather a catalyst that generates *social bonds*, thus contributing to the weaving of contemporary *social fabric* (Bassi, 2013). Within the context of social innovation, this conception takes particular significance as it highlights the transformative potential intrinsic to communication itself. Defining communication for the Third Sector as an expression of diffused or organized *relational phenomena* (Binotto, 2010) requires the recognition of its preliminary nature of social roots and the understanding of its capacity to amplify social impact and to evolve in new communicative domains.

This theoretical perspective enables the examination of Communication for Social Innovation in the Third Sector in its authentic dimension, by generating interpersonal connections and social dynamics. Design for social innovation as a *transformative force* emphasizes the role of communication in fostering and sustaining social relationships.

'Amplify Social Initiatives' shows that the design intervention in digital transition necessitates a synthesis between the original datum of community union and the contemporary aspect of technology as a connector of *collective intelligence*. This evolution requires a redefinition of its vocational purpose and consequent methodologies, essentially returning to its fundamental social roots of communication (Binotto, 2010): being social energy collectors on a territorial scale.

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Acknowledgements: