

Radar Social Programme: From Institutional Inconsistencies to the Potential of Developed Capacities

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Executive Summary

The *Radar Social* Programme was designed to strengthen the early identification of situations of social vulnerability through the creation of municipal technical teams funded under Portugal's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP). However, the analysis conducted on the basis of qualitative interviews and a survey administered to Portuguese municipalities reveals significant implementation shortcomings, associated with procedural ambiguity, weaknesses in institutional coordination, and the absence of a long-term sustainability strategy beyond the funding period.

The findings demonstrate that central government played a decisive role in financing and launching the programme, but without ensuring sufficiently robust mechanisms for technical support, operational coordination, and organisational continuity. The research further shows that, in many municipalities, the *Radar Social* Programme primarily performed functions related to identification, screening, and referral to pre-existing social services, raising questions regarding its added value in relation to already established local welfare structures and its effective capacity to generate innovation in local social intervention.

Despite these constraints, the programme enabled the creation of multidisciplinary technical teams, strengthened coordination between municipalities, local social networks, and community-based organisations, while also improving local knowledge and monitoring capacity regarding situations of social vulnerability across the territory.

Policy Recommendations

- Formally clarify the programme's operational procedures and implementation guidelines;
- Strengthen technical capacity-building mechanisms and continuous institutional support;
- Ensure the long-term organisational sustainability of local technical teams;
- Avoid institutional overlap by clarifying the objectives, roles, and functions of the different local structures and organisations involved.

Target audience of the policy brief

Municipalities; National Association of Portuguese Municipalities; National Confederation of Social Solidarity Institutions; Social Security Institute; Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security

Introduction and Policy Context

The *Radar Social* Programme emerged within the broader context of the increasing territorialisation of social policies in Portugal and the recent process of decentralising social policy responsibilities from central government to municipalities. Integrated within Portugal's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), the

programme sought to strengthen municipalities' place-based capacity to identify situations of social vulnerability, poverty, and social exclusion at an early stage through the creation of multidisciplinary municipal technical teams.

Inspired by a previous initiative developed by *Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa*, the



programme was built upon the assumption that social intervention delivered closer to local communities can improve the identification of vulnerable populations while strengthening coordination among the multiple institutional actors involved in local welfare provision.

However, the implementation of territorialised public policies of this nature raises significant challenges, particularly regarding the definition of the programme's own scope of intervention, which was framed in broad and weakly specified terms as applying to "any individual experiencing social vulnerability and/or at risk of poverty and social exclusion" (Ordinance No. 20/2024). This broad conceptual definition generated important operational challenges from the outset, particularly in relation to the

identification of target populations and the establishment of intervention priorities.

At the same time, the programme also raised questions regarding its articulation with pre-existing social structures already operating at municipal level, particularly concerning the potential overlap of functions and responsibilities within the local social intervention ecosystem.

Drawing on evidence collected from participating municipalities, this policy brief seeks to identify the main implementation challenges observed during the execution of the *Radar Social* Programme and to derive broader lessons for the future design of territorialised public policies aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Analysis and Main Findings

Data collected through a survey conducted with 160 municipalities revealed four major weaknesses affecting programme implementation:

- a) Lack of clarity regarding the programme's operational objectives;
- b) Absence of standardised guidelines concerning the target populations to be identified;
- c) Misalignment between centrally defined objectives and local territorial realities;
- d) Significant delays in access to the Social Security operational platform required for programme implementation

Procedural Ambiguity and Institutional Coordination Failures

The most significant limitations of the programme emerged during its operational implementation phase. The absence of clearly defined operational procedures, combined with the lack of structured initial training and insufficient continuous technical support from the Portuguese Social Security Institute, contributed to uneven and territorially differentiated implementation processes across municipalities.

A particularly revealing indicator of this procedural instability was the repeated modification of the programme's funding call,

which was republished eight separate times throughout the implementation process. These successive revisions affected technical staff profiles, team composition requirements, application deadlines, and operational criteria, generating considerable institutional uncertainty among local authorities.

The Bureaucratisation of Social Intervention

One of the most frequently reported inconsistencies concerned operational uncertainty surrounding informed consent procedures and the measurement of programme targets, particularly in situations involving family households.

"What exactly counts towards the target? All six household members or only the individual who signed the consent form? Nobody was able to provide a clear answer." (Municipality C)

The programme's institutional weaknesses became particularly evident in delays affecting access to the Social Security operational platform, a tool considered essential for achieving the programme's identification targets. Among the 127 municipalities responding to this question, the majority reported waiting more than six months before receiving access. This delay exposed significant weaknesses in the administrative preparation of the policy prior to territorial

implementation and directly compromised the timely execution of programme objectives.

Organisational Sustainability Challenges

As a pilot programme with a fixed implementation period, employment arrangements were in most cases based on temporary contracts exclusively linked to the programme. However, evidence also shows that 33 municipalities (out of 111 valid responses) included permanent municipal staff members within their *Radar Social* teams.

Among these municipalities, different organisational strategies emerged. Some local authorities used programme funding as a strategic opportunity to structurally strengthen their technical teams through new recruitment processes and the integration of additional staff with potential long-term continuity. Others chose instead to reassign already existing municipal staff to *Radar Social* teams, allowing short-term financial relief for municipal budgets without generating any effective reinforcement of local institutional capacity.

The analysis reveals local processes of institutional adaptation and appropriation that did not always coincide with the programme's original policy objectives. Although the programme succeeded in creating highly qualified and multidisciplinary technical teams, it simultaneously produced an institutionally fragile organisational structure, with the majority of professionals employed under fixed-term contracts and without realistic prospects of long-term integration into municipal administrations.

Employment instability had direct consequences for team continuity, with several municipalities reporting significant staff turnover during programme implementation.

Reconfiguring Local Social Policy Delivery

Despite the limitations identified, the *Radar Social* Programme generated important positive effects in two central dimensions: (a) strengthening territorial proximity and (b) improving local institutional coordination.

Local technical teams developed closer cooperative relationships with municipal social services, local welfare networks, charitable

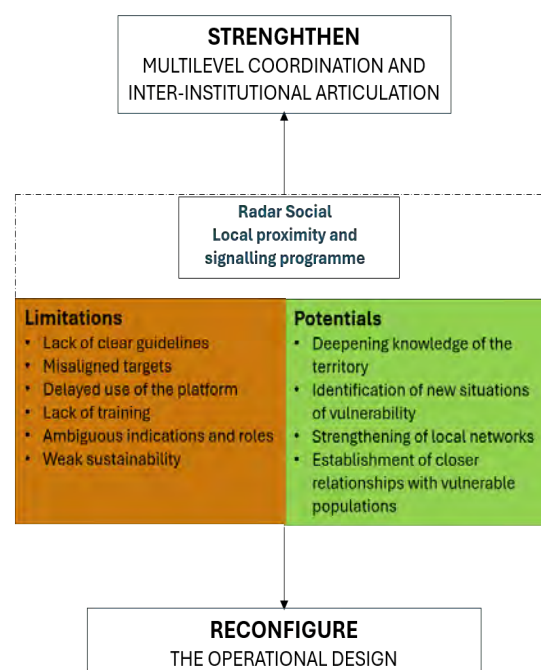
organisations, parish councils, healthcare services, and other third-sector organisations. This stronger territorial presence made it possible to identify previously unreported situations, deepen knowledge regarding local vulnerabilities, and establish closer engagement with populations experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

At the same time, the programme contributed to strengthening local cooperation networks and improving information exchange between institutions operating within the territory.

“...the Radar Social was the trigger that allowed us to go further.” (Municipality D)

However, in many municipalities, the *Radar Social* Programme ultimately came to perform predominantly administrative functions centred on identification, screening, and referral to already existing social services, rather than developing autonomous functions of sustained social intervention and long-term case monitoring. This raises important questions regarding institutional overlap, duplication of functions, and the programme's effective added value within local social policy governance structures.

Figure 1 – Institutional weaknesses and capacities developed within the Radar Social programme



Source: Radar.Loc survey (2026)

Policy options and Recommendations

Based on the analysis undertaken and the evidence collected, the following policy options and recommendations should be considered for the future design and implementation of territorialised social policy programmes:

1. Formally clarify operational procedures for public programmes targeting vulnerable populations. Public programmes addressing populations at risk of poverty and social exclusion require clearly defined operational frameworks from the outset. It is essential to establish prior and standardised guidelines regarding identification criteria; target population definitions; performance indicators; informed consent procedures; and the coordination between identification processes and subsequent social intervention.

2. Strengthen technical capacity-building and institutional support mechanisms.

The institute of social security should assume a more active role in the continuous support and monitoring of municipal technical teams. This should include the provision of mandatory initial training, continuous technical supervision, formal operational support channels, and the development of institutional collaborative platforms capable of ensuring consistent programme implementation across territories.

3. Ensure the long-term organisational sustainability of local technical teams.

The continuity of local technical teams should be integrated within a broader structural strategy aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion, avoiding implementation models exclusively dependent on temporary funding schemes. This requires the creation of

mechanisms allowing the integration of programme staff into permanent municipal structures, greater contractual stability and career progression opportunities, recognition of the strategic value of multidisciplinary local teams, and guarantees regarding the continuity of their activities beyond the programme's funding cycle.

4. Avoid institutional inconsistencies and clarify the objectives and functions of local intervention teams.

The *Radar Social* Programme should be more clearly and effectively articulated with pre-existing institutional structures operating at local level, including local welfare networks, municipal social support services, local social action councils, and already established municipal intervention structures. A clear definition of institutional complementarities is essential in order to avoid duplication of functions, reduce overlap between organisations, and prevent the fragmentation of local social intervention systems.

5. Prioritise phased pilot implementation before large-scale national expansion

Innovative public programmes should adopt phased implementation strategies before nationwide expansion. Pilot-testing allows policymakers to assess operational procedures, adjust administrative instruments, and correct institutional weaknesses before territorial scaling takes place. A gradual implementation approach reduces the risk of large-scale coordination failures and improves the overall institutional capacity required for successful policy delivery.

Conclusion

The *Radar Social* Programme represents an important policy experiment in the territorialisation of social policy delivery and in strengthening place-based approaches to social intervention within the broader context of the recent decentralisation of social policy responsibilities in Portugal.

However, despite strong political mobilisation, substantial funding made available through

Portugal's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), rapid territorial expansion, and the large-scale recruitment of local technical teams, programme implementation revealed significant structural limitations. Delays in access to the Social Security operational platform, the absence of standardised operational procedures, the functional ambiguity surrounding team responsibilities, and the fragility of long-term organisational

sustainability undermined an important part of the programme's initially expected transformative potential.

The *Radar Social* case highlights the limitations of accelerated implementation models for territorialised public policies, particularly when developed in institutional contexts still characterised by limited experience of decentralisation and insufficient multilevel coordination capacity.

The main lesson emerging from this study is clear: territorialised public policies do not depend solely on financial resources and political commitment. Their effectiveness requires the State to build, in advance, the institutional, administrative, and organisational capacities necessary to ensure coherent, coordinated, and sustainable implementation. When organisational expansion precedes institutional preparation, the risk of implementation failure increases significantly.

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