

Social Enterprises – a Key Factor in Strengthening Cohesion and a Fair Transition

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Abstract. *The European Union is facing an increasing concern related to numerous social and environmental issues (climate change, precarious conditions of society supported by a regressive living condition, as well as the uneven effects expected in the context of the green and digital transition) that reinforce calls for solutions that could address all these shortcomings as comprehensively as possible. Social enterprises are seen as the tool that could face the challenges of our times on a three-dimensional level, addressing economic, social, and environmental problems at the same time. These are even more important for the European model as they prioritize social value and development as a driving force for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Social entrepreneurs are a part of civil society that have chosen to be actively involved in solving the issues that surround us by promoting innovative business models that support a sustainable and harmonious development. Policy makers must create a unified framework at European level regarding social enterprises and strengthen their role in the European economy by including in the main EU policies that would support their financing and development. Therefore, the objective of this article is to examine how social enterprises could act to ensure the premises of an inclusive ecological transition, as well as to stimulate discussion and research on the topic of social enterprises.*

Keywords: social economy, social enterprises, green transition, cohesion, sustainability

Introduction

Discussions about the social economy and the concept of the "third way" are increasingly debated nowadays. The concept of social economy has various definitions, but all of them it comes down to the following aspect: the social economy includes economic activities that prioritize, before obtaining profit, the satisfaction of social and environmental needs, by including in these activities vulnerable or disadvantaged groups (Amin, 2009). An important component of the social economy is represented by social enterprises.

Social enterprises and their evolution in the European Union came to the public's attention with the Social Business Initiative in 2011, which recognized the potential they can have in the economy and society. This initiative of the European Commission aimed to define social enterprises and to promote them at the European level through the following actions: increasing the financing of these types of enterprises, their greater visibility and the development of the legal field in which they operate. President of the European Commission at that time, José Manuel Barroso pointed out: "*Social business can indeed be a very powerful agenda for change. To deliver better outcomes for the common good. To show that it is possible to do things more responsibly*

*and more fairly, while still being a success on the market. And to become a real engine of growth in the EU. Europe must not only be part of these changes. Europe should be in the lead."*¹

The main purpose of social enterprises is bivalent, they create new value because they aim to generate profit but also have a significant impact on society, the local community, or the environment. Social enterprises are the faithful expression of the European economic model that promotes a balance between economic performance and social justice.

Achieving the objectives of the European Union requires a collective effort that involves the responsibility of public authorities, as well as of all social actors who, through social initiatives, respond to society's needs.

Through their activity, entrepreneurship with a social purpose, contribute to an inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Their economic and social impact is important for the evolution of the European Union because they promote social innovation that corresponds to society's needs in areas such as work, social inclusion, environment etc. Based on values of solidarity, social enterprises strengthen social cohesion and support the development even in times of transition when they can play an important role.

The motivation of our paper is based on the consideration that social enterprises, as an important component of the social economy, can be a key tool that tries to regulate the problems related to the mode of governance, as well as the fact that the prospects of the transition to the green and digital economy will not be without failures for a significant part of the population. That's why our objective is to bring the topic of social enterprises into current discussions and debates as a solution to the difficulties that may be encountered in this transition process.

The originality of the paper emerges from the fact that the analysis of social enterprises is carried out from the perspective of the potential they have within the European model. By promoting a fair transition, social enterprises are an important tool for the development of a cohesive society and a resilient economy. If in other economies, social enterprises as part of the social economy, are private "*as an alternative growth model aimed at finding a new balance between economic efficiency and social and environmental resilience*" (UN, 2021), within the European Union they are themselves the expression of the principles of the European economy that promote a balance between economic efficiency and social equity (Dinu et al, 2007). Considering this context, we analyzed the potential effects that social enterprises can have in accomplishment the objectives of the European Union regarding the achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion by promoting a sustainable development based on sustainable economic growth that ensures social justice and environmental protection.

The analysis started from the following hypothesis: Social enterprises, as part of the social economy, contribute to strengthening cohesion within the European Community by ensuring an inclusive green and digital transition. We set up some objectives related to the central hypothesis of the paper: to build a theoretical relationship between social enterprises, the social economy and the European Union, to show that the green and digital transition is a process that will affect the regions of the European Union unequally, to demonstrate that through the objectives and governance of social enterprises, they can contribute to a just transition promoting social cohesion.

This topic is important to be analyzed first because the member states are preparing actions and policies to promote a just transition at the European level. Social fairness is the heart of this transition, for this reason we want to show that social enterprises can actively contribute to the promotion of a just transition and a more cohesive Europe. Secondly, analyzing the subject is

¹ European Commission, (2015). The social business initiative of the European Commission

important because the experience in terms of involvement in environmental objectives gives social enterprises an advantage and capacity to address climate and environmental challenges in line with the European Green Deal Strategy.

Literature review

According to (Terziev, 2020), the development of the European social model is based on the concept of social economy, which has a remarkable potential, through its innovative solutions, to play an indispensable role in the social cohesion of the EU member states. Social enterprises operate in the context of the social economy, which has been recognized by the European Parliament as the cornerstone of the European social model (European Parliament, 2006). The social economy plays an essential role in the European economy by: 1) combining profitability with solidarity; 2) creating high-quality jobs; 3) strengthening social, economic and regional cohesion; 4) generating social capital; 5) promoting active citizenship, solidarity and a type of economy with democratic values, which puts people in the center of its objectives; 6) supporting sustainable development and social innovation, environmental and technological (Social Economy in the European Union: Summary Report, 2007).

Social enterprises are viewed by some authors (Dees, 1994) as organizations whose objective is to solve social problems or provide goods/services that public institutions or markets do not solve/provide. The people who lead these enterprises are seen as determined people, involved in the needs of society who want to bring solutions to major problems and who do not accept "no" for an answer (Bornstein, 2004). Social entrepreneurship contributes to social transformations through innovative ideas to social problems and through the mobilization of necessary resources (Alvord, et al, 2004). The same idea is supported by Hervieux and Voltan (2016), who describe social entrepreneurship as a legitimate social movement for several existing problems.

The social role that these enterprises have is very often mentioned as the main characteristic, and the financial part that emerges from trade is viewed only from the perspective of the sustainability of the enterprise. Thus, all resources are used for social objectives and if entrepreneurial activity produces financial profit, it is used for the needs of the community and does not belong to the people who own the enterprise (Haugh & Tracey 2004).

The Social Business Initiative emphasizes the three dimensions that social enterprises have: the economic dimension determined by commercial activities, the social dimension that is translated into achieving social or societal common good and the governance dimension that assumes its own structure, an inclusive one that contributes to achieving objectives. (European Commission - Social Business Initiative, 2011). The OECD (1999) also shares the same characteristics with the notion of social enterprises, but also adds the ability to find solutions to two major problems: social exclusion and unemployment. Social exclusion is not only viewed from the labor market point of view, but also includes social exclusion caused by poverty, mobility, demographics, opportunities, etc.

We can see that their impact on society is important and long-lasting, first social innovations solve some problems felt by a community or that concern a group of disadvantaged people, secondly they promote measures for achieving social inclusion, cohesion and make a more resilient society. Studies show that, while public authorities are interested in finance measures for social problems, they prefer not to deal with their implementation but to assign them to social enterprises that respond much better and punctually to social needs than public or private institutions do (Jenson, 2017).

With a growing consensus on the paradigm shift of economic growth, as well as on the shift in human behavior towards sustainable perspectives, social enterprises play an important role in the transition to a sustainable economy. Firstly, by contributing to social well-being and cohesion, and secondly by contributing to the promotion of sustainability and the quality of the environment.

There are studies that attest to this potential, for example: Vickers (2010) believes that social enterprises can contribute significantly to the environment sustainability and argue that there is a need to promote this idea so that international authorities support more their activity. Therefore, the social economy, through the lens of its values, is an important factor in terms of employment and social cohesion in Europe and is one of the key actors to achieve the ecological transition.

Methodology

The research issue consists in establishing a logical link between social enterprises, the European Integration Model, ecological and digital transition, and cohesion which represent a research challenge because studies that encompass these relationships are relatively limited. The challenge is all the greater because, being a relatively recent topic brought to the discussion of researchers, the database related to this subject is limited or even non-existent. We used the inductive research method by which we started from the specific elements/ examples in order to formulate a general conclusion. Through this method we observed/analyzed the specific elements of social enterprises. We also observed/analyzed the defining elements of the European model and the main challenges of the green and digital transition, built a relationship between these concepts and finally stated the conclusion. Therefore, the research methodology related to this article was initiated by establishing the hypothesis based on which we will work, namely: Social enterprises, as part of the social economy, contribute to strengthening cohesion within the European Community by ensuring an inclusive green and digital transition.

Due to the lack of data on the situation and impact of social enterprises at the EU level we carried out a mostly qualitative analysis. We observed and detailed the connection of enterprises with the European model and the social market economy and we emphasized their inclusive character in accordance with European principles and values. Also, in the end we treated this topic as a key factor in supporting a fair transition that takes into account the finality of the European social model, which is social cohesion. In order to elaborate the figures in the analysis we used data from the European Social Enterprise Monitor. This Monitor was launched in 2020 from the need to centralize data on businesses social at European level. There are currently 2 editions of this publication, the first edition included eight countries and the second edition included in the analysis 21 countries from the European Union and several other countries neighbors. The data are the result of questionnaires and most of the answers came from Germany, Austria, Turkey, Netherlands, Switzerland and Poland. With the help of these observations, we were able to state the conclusion of the research and detail it. We chose this type of research because it could motivate other studies and bring some new information and data for future research.

Results and discussions

We answered our research issue by providing a comprehensive analyze on the link between social enterprises and the new more important objectives on the European agenda of policy makers. From the beginning it should be mentioned that the social market economy is part of the everyday life of over 447 million EU citizens and is the main means of action through which the EU responds to people's expectations. The objective of well-being and productive performance is complemented by those regarding the promotion of equal opportunities, an inclusive labor market, an active

participation of citizens in our society. Also, within the social market economy, the implementation of the European Pillar for Social Rights is ensured, an important tool for promoting a fair and cohesive society. Social economy is a major-social economic player of the European social market with 2.8 million of social enterprises and organizations that quantify 13.6 million employs and 8% of the EU's GDP.² Social enterprises operate on the European single market alongside with other forms of enterprises and manage to be a driver of economic and social progress providing solutions to societal, economic, and environmental challenges.

Also these are an integral aspect of the European model as can be seen in the diagram below (fig.1). Through its aspects due to the inter-conditioning of influences belonging to different fields, the European model defines its own route, which is an inclusive one, towards a social finality, namely social cohesion. The individual and his needs are at the center of actions, economic efficiency is seen as a tool for ensuring well-being and social progress. Prosperity, cohesion, democracy are common values to which European citizens adhere and which contribute to strengthening the sense of community and solidarity. Through the social market economy, which is the expression of the European model, the internal convergence and multidimensional cohesion of the community is aimed. Promoting the principle of competitiveness in a regulated market ensures profitable performances and through the structural funds' redistribution of wealth to the less developed territories is ensured. Thus, the main and distinctive element of the European model is the fact that it approaches development by reporting equally to the opposing parameters of efficiency and equity. The social economy as part of the social market economy aims to focus on social problems that are not sufficiently addressed through the free market. This type of economy puts social equity at the heart of the activity, aiming to improve living conditions and provide new opportunities for vulnerable people or community members who do not have sufficient access to development opportunities. Social enterprises are part of the social economy having distinctive elements compared to other types of organizations because they pursue social objectives but also carry out economic activities that help them finance the services and goods to achieve the objectives. For the European model, social enterprises are an opportunity to spread common values, a reconciliation between economic dynamism and attention to social needs such as social inclusion, non-discrimination, environmental protection, etc.

The reforms that a transition entail are major and most of the time they are difficult to be accepted by the population. Social enterprises are an important tool through which the new values promoted by the transition can be recognized and connected by citizens thanks to the involvement of social actors that acts based on solidarity and social responsibility.

² https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu_en

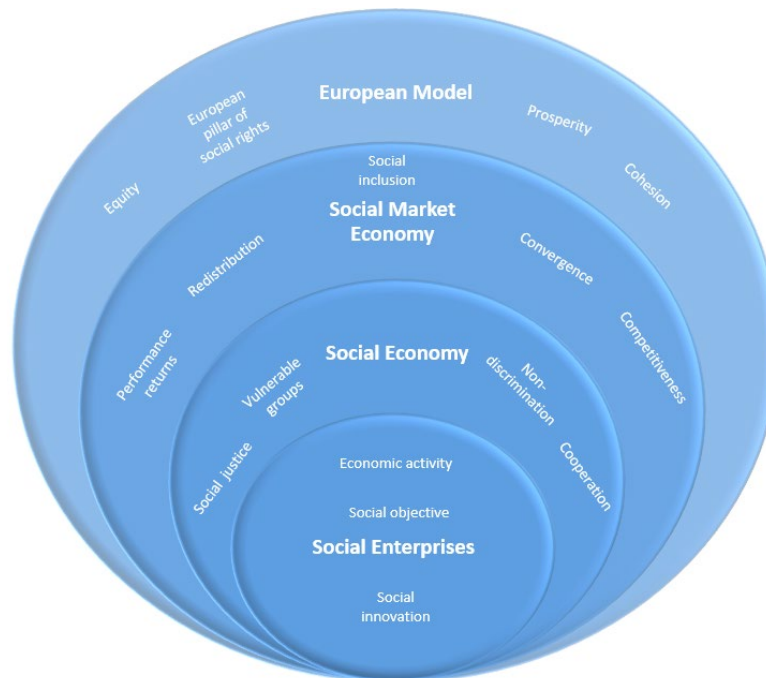


Figure 1. Social enterprises as part of European model

Source: Authors' own research.

At the level of EU member states, social enterprises do not have (benefit from an) uniform legislation. Each state has its own definition of this type of entrepreneurship and supports this sector differently, which leads to low visibility. The root of these enterprises is in the agricultural cooperatives, labor cooperatives, and voluntary associations existing on the territory of the EU in the 1900s.

The development of the number of social enterprises can be observed especially after the 2000s when at the level of the European Union there was a reform aimed at strengthening the social dimension of the European model. Starting with the Lisbon Strategy and then Europe 2020, the European model proposes to respond to the main challenges through a mix of economic and social policies that emphasize both economic performance and social equity. Thus, policies and enterprises that generate social innovation and respond to existing social needs in society are encouraged. However, the monitoring of their evolution as well as the impact they have in society, only started in 2020 through the European Social Enterprise Monitor. Collecting data at European level on social enterprises is vital to increase their visibility, to encourage studies in this subject as well as for government institutions and investors who can develop this sector.

In a global context, the UN initiatives for sustainable development (the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals) have the role of transforming the economy, society, and the environment into a beneficial tripartite, creating the conditions for sustainable development for all actors involved. The biggest challenges are given by simultaneously ensuring universal social protection, eradicating poverty in all its forms, reducing economic and social gaps, as well as ensuring a sustainable environment. All these objectives require structural reforms at the level of economies and societies and efforts to identify instruments that support these objectives at the domestic level. Given their aim to address social and environmental challenges, social enterprises have great potential to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs through their inclusive and innovative nature.

In addition to established areas of action, such as poverty, social inequalities, renewable energy, health, social enterprises place a significant emphasis on the SDGs aimed at creating jobs (through the action of employing disadvantaged and socially excluded individuals), but also gender equality (promoting the inclusion of women, who represent a vulnerable part of society as a whole and mainly in the field of remunerated activities).

In support of the SDGs developed by the UN at a global level, the European Union contributes through the European Green Deal Strategy which supports both the environmental objectives and the social economy by assuming ambitious objectives such as achieving climate neutrality without leaving no one behind. Through this Strategy, the European Union has committed itself that all member states will align themselves to the transformation of economies into sustainable ones, addressing various problematic aspects included in the 17 SDGs.

The post-pandemic recovery framework offers a unique opportunity to promote a green and inclusive transition, including through the both circular economy and social economy. While there is some consensus on the positive environmental impacts of the circular economy, its social benefits remain relatively unexplored. Through their circular activities, social economy organizations also produce social benefits as they reinforce social inclusion and cohesion, especially through work integration and provision of affordable goods and educational activities for vulnerable groups.

How can social enterprises effectively contribute to ensuring a just transition?

One of the most important objectives mentioned in connection with the transition, at least in the European Green Deal Strategy, is to reduce the greenhouse gas emission. Social enterprises have the potential to organize initiatives that establish and mobilize society towards initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by redirecting business activities to areas with low greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, renewable energy sources will be identified that will be used as widely as possible, to increase energy efficiency. As we can see in the image below (fig.), there are many regions in the European Union where the level of greenhouse gas emissions is high. These regions will be the most affected by the green transition and will require effective policies and measures to manage a fair transition. Economic transitions are complex processes that provide a broad framework of opportunities for society but at the same time can represent real challenges if they are not managed suitable. People tend to be reluctant to change, so the involvement of entrepreneurs in solving the main challenges positively contributes to strengthening confidence in the success of the process.

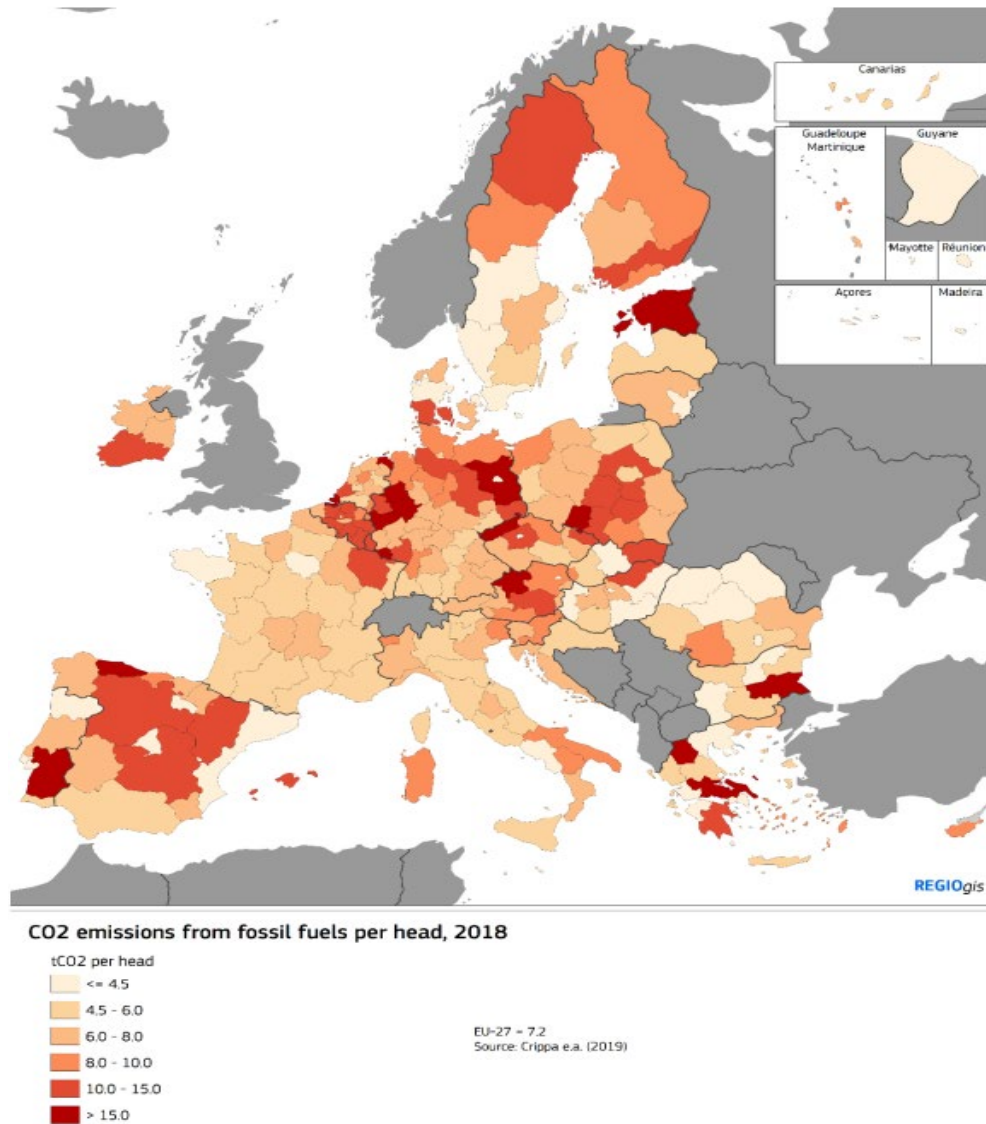


Figure 2. CO2 emissions from fossil fuels per head, 2018

Source: European Commission.

Social enterprises can give a major contribution to the objective of the green transition to support a fair one where no one is left behind through the following directions: firstly, by decreasing the negative effects caused by the removal of areas with high greenhouse gas emissions, by investing in renewable energy sources and by promoting a circular economy.

The actual challenges that societies are facing are several, as can be seen from the objectives that social enterprises have (fig. 3), social enterprises aim for social and environmental impact in different areas from reducing inequality and poverty to climate action or related to peace, justice and strengthening institutions. Due to the many objectives they follow, social enterprises contribute to economic resilience by acting according to the principle of social inclusion.

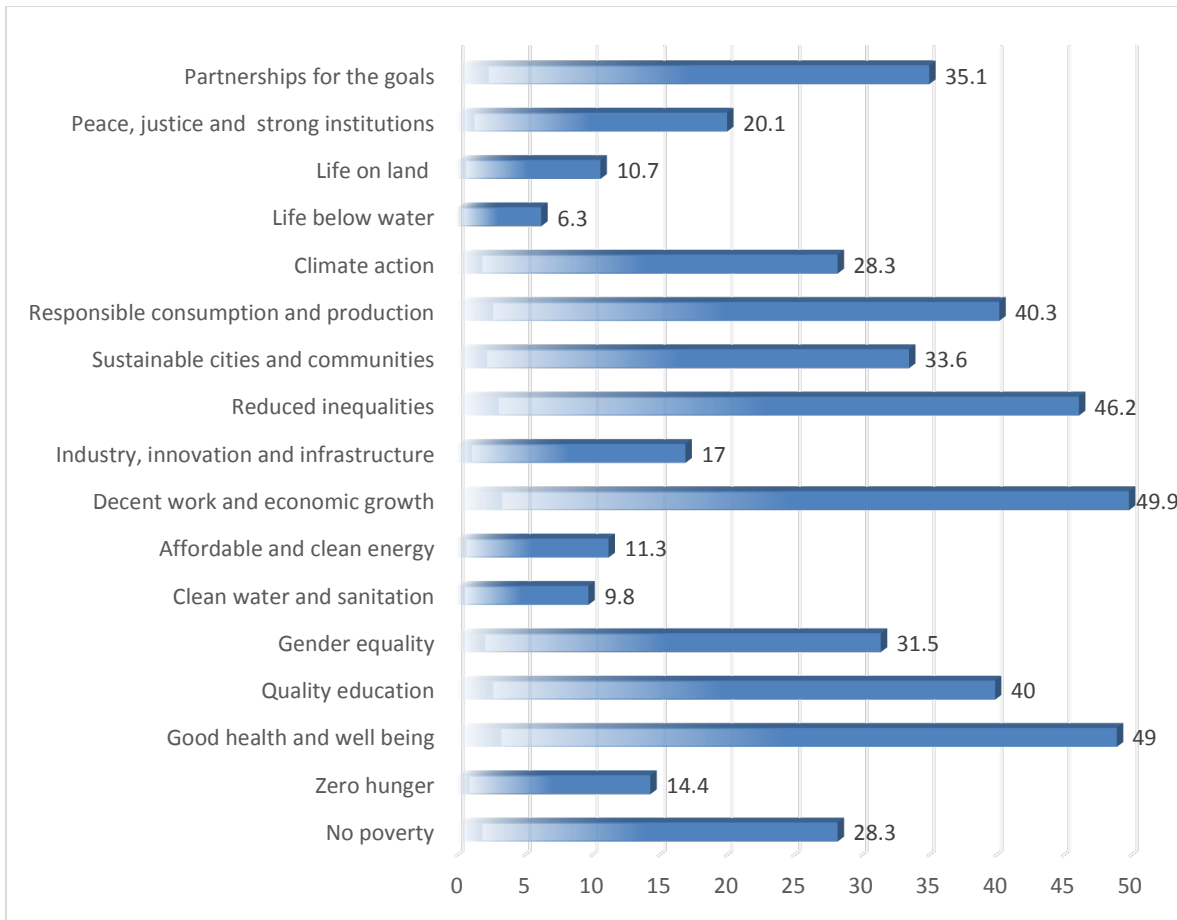


Figure 3: The target impact of social enterprises (%)

Source: European Social Enterprise Monitor 2021-2022.

Due to its local or regional specificity, social enterprises offer the advantage of knowing exactly the needs of that region and offering services and products in line with the community's expectations, in order to promote social and territorial cohesion.

In this context, since the green transition will affect European regions unevenly, social enterprises have the potential to reduce the negative effects by creating jobs for people affected by the closure of business segments with high greenhouse gas emissions and by reintegrating them into the labor market. At the same time, they can contribute to the retraining of people who were active in fields with high emissions of greenhouse gases, giving them the chance to be an active part of the new economic reality. Thanks to the social and inclusive objectives, social enterprises strengthen solidarity's feeling and social cohesion by creating opportunities for disadvantaged people.

Social innovation is a core feature of social enterprises. They have a unique role in the development of new services in accordance with the needs of society but at the same time they are promoting a sustainable growth. In the development of new renewable energy sources, social enterprises have the potential to contribute decisively to the increase of this segment due to their long-term vision in terms of smart and sustainable growth.

Ensuring a fair transition also involves moving from a linear economy to a circular one that promotes recycling and reuse actions. Social enterprises are an important part of this change, the

business models promoted by them are innovative both socially and in terms of environmental protection. Thus, they can develop green enterprises that aim at one or more green objectives or can, through the activity carried out, support complementary protection of the environment, for example by promoting a circular economy.

According to the Monitor of Social Enterprises, in the decisions adopted by social enterprises, they take into account, on average, 77.1% costs, 75.6% responsibility towards the environment and 74.9% social responsibility (fig.4). Supporting this type of entrepreneurship in which social and environmental responsibility are equally important with cost contributes to the strengthening of resilient societies in the face of challenges and transitions.



Figure 4: The criteria they take into account when making decisions

Source: European Social Enterprise Monitor 2021-2022

Regardless of the objective they aim for, social enterprises have traditionally played an important role in the labor market. They are supporting social inclusion by providing benefits or services to disadvantaged people, people with physical disabilities or people affected by long-term unemployment who fail to integrate on the free labor market. In the figure below (fig.5), we can see the top ten categories of people/groups that social enterprises consider in their activity. Regardless of whether it is about the services or goods they offer to certain categories, or about the fact that people from disadvantaged groups are integrated in their activity, social enterprises promote an innovative model of interaction with beneficiaries.

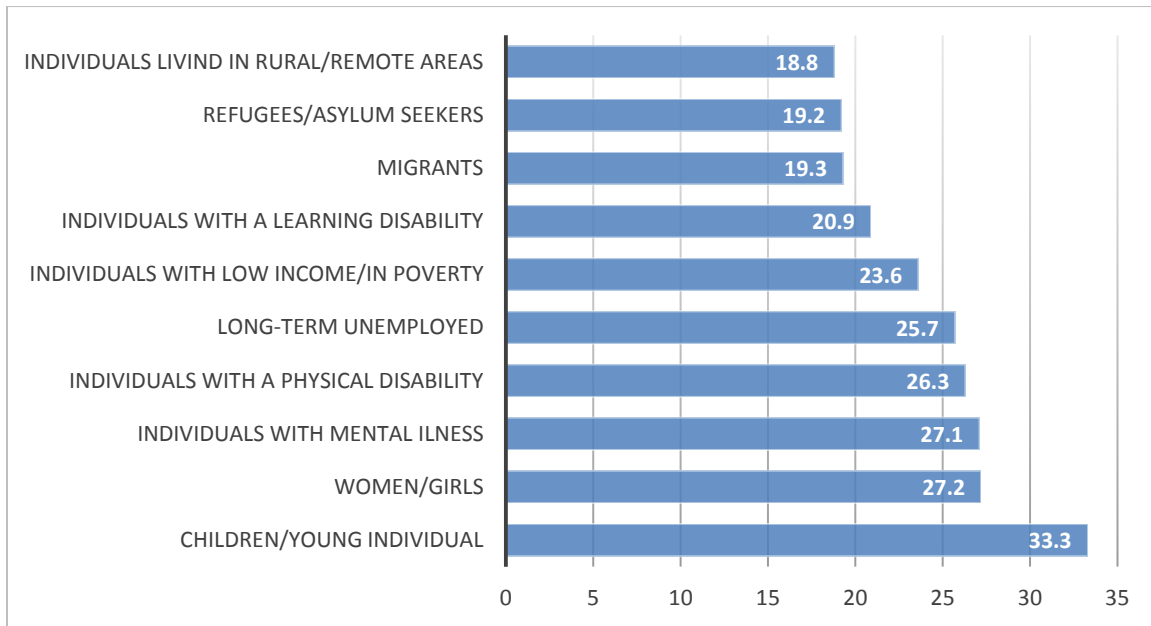


Figure 5. Specific target group of social enterprises (%)

Source: European Social Enterprise Monitor 2021-2022.

In the same time digitalization is another objective addressed by social enterprises. Supporting social inclusion and education, it aims to reduce the digital gap which is significant, mostly between rural and urban areas. This objective can be achieved in different ways, for example by providing digital devices through which people without material possibilities can access certain education or training programs, inclusively by extending access to digital networks. In this way social enterprises could have a significant contribution to the social capital formation. The need to close the digital gap is highlighted firstly in the case of rural areas, compared to the urban ones, and secondly in CEE countries, compared to the rest of the European Union.

It can be seen from the fig.6 that, although the pandemic period has advanced the digitization process, through the telework option and the acceleration of online trade, there are still considerable gaps between European countries.

The DESI score also reflects the great challenge of the digital transition. The fact that there is a relatively low level of connectivity makes other more complex technology use activities difficult. Therefore, one of the directions of action of social enterprises to support the digital transition is to support and expand connectivity, especially in rural areas, where it is limited. The actions towards the digital transition are also supported through the National Recovery and Resilience Plans of the member states. Their regulation provides that, in the structure of the NRRP, at least 20% of the total financial support is allocated to the measures that support the increase in the digitization level, as well as to the objectives that address certain barriers in advancing the digitization process. Although the minimum limit for the digital transition was 20%, member states showed a major interest in benefiting from the opportunities of the digital transition, allocating an average of 26% for digital objectives.

Even if the level of digital connectivity is quite important, to benefit from the opportunities offered by them, the human capital formation in the use of digital tools cannot be neglected (Paraschiv et al, 2022). The role of social enterprises can be highlighted in this context by supporting educational programs that contribute to the formation and improvement of the digital

skills of human capital, so that it will be able to effectively use technological tools. For social entrepreneurs, preparing communities for the digital era is a goal set in line with the principle of leaving no one behind, as technologies, the way of working and the specifics of jobs advance, the vulnerable population must not be left behind.

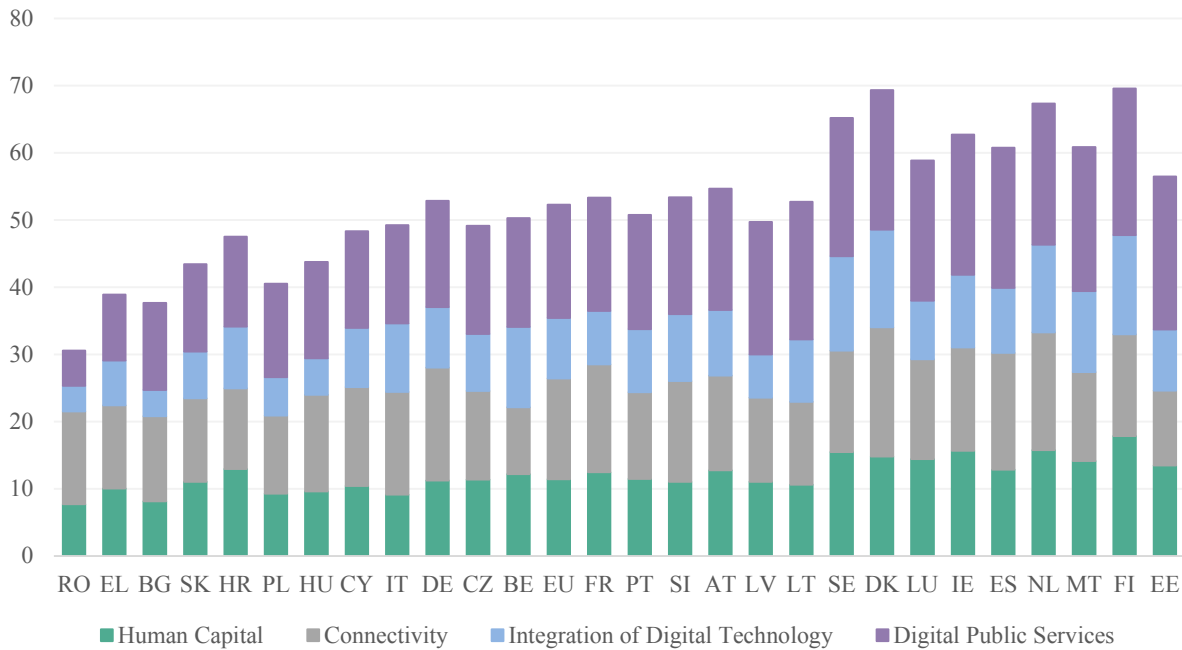


Figure 6. DESI Index 2022

Source: European Commission.

The value of social enterprises in terms of social innovation is recorded in the strategic documents of the European Parliament. At the same time, it is mentioned that, despite the potential that social enterprises have for ensuring equal, full, and unrestricted access to new digital technologies, they were not considered in the Commission Digital Single Market strategy for Europe. This underlines once again the need to explore and drive discussions on social enterprises and their potential in ensuring a fair transition and cohesion. Our research contributes to the body of knowledge in the field by highlighting the links between social enterprises and the most pressing topics at the moment, namely ecological and digital transition supported by social cohesion.

Conclusion

In order to open the reflections on what can be done, we conclude that the green and digital transition represents a challenge for European economy and society because it is a complex process that will affect European regions unevenly. To manage a fair transition for everyone, appropriate, innovative social measures must be implemented.

Social inclusion, environmental protection, reducing inequalities are just a few examples of objectives that social enterprises pursue by carrying out an economic activity. We showed that through these defining elements, social enterprises could respond to society's needs, turning challenges into real opportunities. For the European model, social enterprises have a special value because they transpose the very principles and values promoted by community, solidarity, cohesion, social inclusion.

We must mention, the research has its limits. We have not been able to develop adequate quantitative research to estimate the real impact of social enterprises in the economy and society. There is a lack of data's centralization at the European level since there is no European-wide regulatory framework for social enterprises. The principle of subsidiarity applies in this case, each state chooses how it defines and how much it supports their development. We wanted to stimulate research on this topic by demonstrating, even theoretically, the potential that social enterprises have in the transition process. In the future, if a proper database is made, we aim to analyze the impact of enterprises in different sectors.

However, we made a theoretical breakthrough between the notions of social enterprises, social economy and the European model through which we demonstrated the potential they have in supporting a just transition. The ability of social enterprises to create both social progress and economic performance is considered a "win-win". However, there is clear potential for the field of social enterprise to be expanded so that it can address contemporary environmental challenges, moving towards beneficial social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Despite its importance, the social economy, but especially social enterprises, are poorly highlighted and very little supported for their potential in correcting market failures and government decisions and supporting well-being and quality of life, not only by advancing inclusion and social cohesion, but also by avoiding the extension of social erosion following the transition.

Taking into account all these aspects, to benefit more from the potential of the social economy, through the lens of social enterprises, following our findings, we propose a series of measures that could contribute to greater visibility of the potential of social enterprises, supporting a fair transition and advancing social cohesion:

- Development of a common institutional framework to facilitate the access and activity of social enterprises and to promote data's centralization;
- Increasing the visibility and inclusion of social enterprises within the objectives and EU strategic community documents;
- Inclusion of social enterprises in the actions and measures regarding the just transition;
- Facilitating access to non-reimbursable funding sources;
- Promoting the spirit and culture of social entrepreneurship within the education and training system;
- Elaboration of training programs to benefit "small entrepreneurs" in order to expand the idea of a social objective at the expense of the profit objective.

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