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Stakeholder Brief 11

Sustaining and growing one of the largest international communities of social enterprise scholars: **The Empower-SE COST Action**

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Executive summary

This policy brief summarizes the main outcomes of the four Working Groups (WGs) - Theoretical Foundations of SE (WG1), SE Industries and Impact (WG2), SE Ecosystems (WG3), Training and Dissemination (WG4) - from the perspective of the stakeholders involved. All WGs succeeded in stimulating a lively exchange of perspectives among researchers and practitioners and contributed to empowering the next generation of social enterprise scholars. The perspective of different categories of stakeholders was well included in all events organized so as to foster a fruitful dialogue and contribute to mutual understanding between geographical and disciplinary points of view.

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Introduction

The COST Action 16206, entitled "Empowering the Next Generations of SE Scholars" (EMPOWER-SE) attempted to address existing fragmentation of social enterprise (SE) research, from both a geographical and a disciplinary point of view, as well as from the perspective of the different categories of stakeholders. As the first COST Action ever devoted to the SE field, the aim was to build a worldwide community of researchers that is well connected with practitioners working in the field.

EMPOWER-SE consisted of four Working Groups (WGs). All WGs succeeded in stimulating a lively exchange of perspectives among researchers and practitioners and contributed to empowering the next generation of social enterprise scholars with particular attention to non-Western European social enterprise scholars. The perspective of different categories of stakeholders was well included in all events organized so as to foster a fruitful dialogue and contribute to mutual understanding between geographical and disciplinary points of view. This holistic approach had a role in partially filling the gap between the scientific community, policymakers and practitioners at the national as well as international levels. Each of the WGs activities and outcomes are briefly described below.

Working Group 1: Theoretical Foundations of SE

WG1 identified and bound the variety of SE conceptions and models existing throughout Europe, including countries which were not analyzed by previous recent research - particularly the "International Comparative SE Models" (ICSEM) Project. For each country, WG1 enabled to summarize the contextual and conceptual issues surrounding the social economy (academic spheres, policy makers and civil society) and enabled to identify the typologies of SEs existing in each country. Within this WG, several papers were presented at COST-specific research meetings:

Budapest (2019) and Lisbon (2018), at broader co-organized conferences like the EMES International Research Conferences held in UCLouvain in (2017); Sheffield Hallam University, (2019); University of Zaragoza (2021) and at the International Society for Third Sector Research conference (ISTR, Stockholm, 2018). Moreover, two books summarizing the main findings of this WG were edited by Jacques Defourny and Marthe Nyssens and published open access by Routledge (London and New York) in 2021 so as to ensure the widest possible dissemination.¹

With a view to empowering the next generation of social enterprise scholars, with particular attention to non-Western European social enterprise researchers, two meetings were organized by this Working Group in Lisbon and Budapest. The first WG1 meeting provided an opportunity to reveal the multidimensional reality of social enterprise in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and beyond. The second WG1 meeting provided space for discussion on emerging comparative trends as well as networking opportunities among Hungarian SE scholars, policy-makers, representatives of social enterprises and researchers of the COST Empower-SE network. Innovative conference networking formats - such as a stakeholder panel, a scientific pitching and poster session, as well as a World Café with six tables - provided a space for interactive exchanges between the various stakeholders.

Working Group 2: SE Industries and Impact

Working Group 2 (WG2) SE Industries & Impact gathered evidence and analysed the innovative contributions of social enterprises in five key industries for the development of sustainable societies: migration, social and health services, culture and the arts, sports and multi-level analysis. It organized five research workshops:

1. tackling the migration and refugee challenge (Trento, Italy; November 2018);

2. social Enterprise in Social and Health Services (Frankfurt, Germany; February 2019);
3. unlocking the transformative potential of culture and the arts through SE (Valletta, Malta; November 2019);
4. sport as community builder: Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises in sports (online event, December 2020); and
5. changing social enterprises in changing territories: A multi-level perspective (hybrid event, Zagreb/online, June 2021).

The five workshops fathered more than 200 researchers, policymakers, practitioners and national stakeholders from more than 30 countries of Europe and beyond. This WG involved a wide spectrum of researchers seeking to keep a variety of age, gender, regional affiliation towards a cross-disciplinary approach to both understanding better and to empowering SE scholars.

WG2 event ***Tackling the migration and refugee challenge*** focused on both the limitations and the challenges faced by current research in the migration area. This workshop - which attempted to bridge research on social enterprise and inclusion with research on the migration and asylum challenge - shed light on the still to be harnessed role of social enterprises in building a more cohesive society, where newcomers are well integrated in local communities and are enabled to contribute to the social and economic development of hosting communities.

Unlocking the transformative potential of culture and the arts through SE was an innovative workshop that gathered 37 researchers and 15 stakeholders, mainly practitioners. The potential of culture and the arts as a promising SE field was brought forward during this event, which resulted in a connected network of scholars interested in this incipient theme.

The event ***Sport as community builder: Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises in sports*** gathered researchers in this industry in formation and discussed challenges and future directions of research.

The event ***Social Enterprise in Social and Health Services***, which took place in Germany gathered stakeholders from German welfare organizations and social innovation intermediaries who contributed with their input to the collective reflection on the German context of SE development.

It is worth mentioning that all these innovative research areas were included as thematic lines in the two co-organized international conferences held in the span of the Empower-SE Action.

Working Group 3: SE Ecosystems

WG3 encouraged a fruitful discussion among researchers and stakeholders from different countries that are interested in exploring and/or supporting social enterprise development and scaling. WG3 equipped major SE stakeholders with robust knowledge to identify the main elements of the SE ecosystem and to understand how these elements interact in each country. Thanks with the synergies with other research projects (European SE Mapping Project), the activities within WG3 focused on defining the components of the SE ecosystem; analysed how the ecosystem of SE is shaped in selected countries; verified whether all the above mentioned components are present in all countries and what role is played by specific components; developed some preliminary recommendations with a view to supporting SE further development and scaling.

WG3 organized the workshop ***Towards and enabling ecosystem for social enterprises***. It was held at the University of Bucharest Faculty of Sociology and Social Work in February 2020.

The second workshop in the pipeline was unfortunately cancelled due to Covid restrictions. The WG3 workshop offered a wide space for in-depth discussions from various points of view, gathering researchers and social enterprises stakeholders participating and modeling at the same time the complex social enterprises ecosystem, at the Romanian and EU level. The Stakeholders Forum, the panelist papers and the case studies presentations offered a complex image of country and regional variations in Europe, generated by the historical, cultural background, the degree of institutionalization of social enterprises, the specificity of the policy and political context.

Working Group 4: Training and Dissemination

WG4 organised a large variety of activities aimed at maximising the impact of the Action with regard to the initial objectives set.

Two international conferences and two PhD/ECR Training Schools were delivered aiming at training and supporting the next generation of SE researchers (i.e. research active scholars of social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, social economy and solidarity economy).

The first PhD/ECR training school funded by COST took place in 2018, in Marseille (France) and it was entitled ***Social enterprises and research methods: Qualitative methods, mixed methods and international comparisons***. This event enabled 20 experienced researchers and research professors (whom we call 'faculty') to provide intensive support to 40 PhD students and ECR, of which 26 received financial support from COST to attend. The intensive 3-day format gave each researcher one hour to talk through an aspect of their study, receive detailed feedback from two faculty members, and take questions from their fellow students. Faculty members also presented key issues from their research, and participated in evening debates about substantive research themes with the students.

The first international conference was the 7th EMES International Research Conference at Sheffield Hallam University (England) under the title ***Sustainable development through social enterprise, co-operative and voluntary Action***. The conference included a Transdisciplinary Forum (TDF) aimed at illustrating the SE context of the host country and bringing together academics, policy-makers and practice stakeholders through the joint presentation of ongoing research projects. Over 140 attended the TDF on 24th May and 382 people from 51 countries participated in the main conference (24th - 27th May). A total of 72 PhD/ECRs attended, of which 63 were COST funded. COST funds were also used to bring international speakers from the USA and Canada (Prof Angela Eikenberry and Prof Sonja Novkovic) to debate with EMES president with Prof Marthe Nyssens on the contribution of social enterprises, cooperatives and non-profit organisation to sustainable development. In addition to 302 papers and 11 panels, 50 attendees met representatives from a local social enterprise funding body (Key Fund), a local support network (Sheffield Social Enterprise Network) and social enterprise incubator (Social Enterprise Exchange) to learn about putting together an ecosystem for a city. The meeting took place at Blended, a social enterprise Cafè, hosted by one of the city's most experienced social entrepreneurs.²

The second PhD/ECR summer school funded by COST was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Hosted as a blended learning event by University College Cork - Ireland (UCC), it was delivered over two sets of dates (23th/24th October 2020 and 21st June 2021).

The topic of the training school was ***Researching the collaborative dimension of social enterprise***. A total of 22 faculty members supported 37 participants (28 PhD students and 9 ECR) through online meetings facilitated by EMES and face-to-face discussion at the University of Zaragoza's Teruel campus.

The second international conference took place October 4th - 7th 2021, as a hybrid event, using online technologies and Google alongside face-to-face meetings at the University of Zaragoza. The theme of the conference was ***Social enterprise, cooperative and voluntary action: Bringing principles and values to renew action.*** The TDF attracted 60 face-to-face participants, together with 310 delegates to the conference as a whole. A total of 75 PhD students were supported to attend the conference, and keynote addresses were provided using a combination of face-to-face and online participation. Despite the challenges of running a hybrid event (with both local and online chairs for each stream), delegates feedback reported a high satisfaction level with the conference.³

Lastly, WG4 organised a cycle of PhD Webinars aimed at paving the way to the Teruel conference. They were organized online by the PhDs and facilitated by EMES in February and June 2021 and they attracted over 40 PhD.

Challenges ahead

Thanks to the fruitful interactions with stakeholders and among researchers with diverse backgrounds, several lessons were brought forward.

The first lesson learned is that there are many areas of research that could be filled in by further research, given the aim of contributing to better understanding how to fully harness the potential of social enterprise to improve wellbeing, tackle social exclusion, fight against climate change and environmental degradation, and support the creation of a better world on a wide scale. The conditions under which social enterprises can contribute to both effective socioeconomic inclusion pathways and to meeting new needs arising in local communities still needs to be for instance researched in depth. Generally speaking, social science research has so far underestimated the contribution of - more in general - organized civil society in tackling a variety of social and societal challenges, except for the traditional

fields of engagement of social enterprises, namely welfare service provision and work integration. Hence, emerges the importance of focusing on new societal challenges - such as the migration and the asylum - as well as on emerging fields of engagement of social enterprises according to a holistic approach.

As remarked by several COST scholars - and here we come to the second lesson learned - there is a pressing need to change the European integration narrative. Indeed, CEE is often portrayed as "underdeveloped", "backward", "lagged behind" compared to Western Europe, which is seen as "progressive". The European integration narrative is rooted in legacies of cold War ideologies and it is built on the symbolic supremacy - or cultural hegemony - of countries on the centre of the global economy (Western European ones) and on the expectation that semi-peripheral countries (such as the ones in the CEE region) need and are able to catch up with these countries. Similarly to SE approaches from the Global South, there is a need to question this "developmentalism" attitude when researching SE in CEE. Theories on social enterprises developed from a North-South dialogue are hence inspirational to better understand social enterprise initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe.

As for the third lesson learned, it is connected to the building of a social enterprise ecosystem, which should not be conceived as a closed circle and all its components ought be regarded as equally important. It is thus of utmost importance to keep a broad approach - eager to capture new needs and gaps to be filled by social enterprises - and have a dynamic perspective. The main conclusion drawn from the various interactions with stakeholders is indeed that a conducive ecosystem for social enterprises has yet to be realized in most of the countries analysed, both in Europe and outside Europe. Hence, emerges the utmost importance of joining researchers' and practitioners' forces so as to understand how should an enabling environment - eager to valorise the energies coming from civil society - look like.

Regarding the fourth lesson, there was a general consensus that identifying new areas of research for a multidisciplinary area such as social enterprise does benefit from incorporating scholars who may not have a specific research expertise in the field but who are interested in exploring it from their area of specialisation. Doing so entails stronger identification and familiarisation efforts as well as additional resources to reach out to new scientific communities but the result is certainly worthwhile, as illustrated by the case of migration, sports, and culture in the Empower-SE Action.

Lastly, there is a need of supporting on-going efforts on the part of early-career researchers, particularly from countries with emerging or non-existing research ecosystems. These efforts can be of a short-term or of a rather more stable, longer-term nature. The urge to connect these generations of researchers with more senior generations emerged during the Action, which explored ways of implementing it. By doing so, an additional benefit could be tackled: stock could be taken and bridges built with previous scientific traditions and literature streams. Such connections could be formalised through schemes such as mentoring or focused study visits, collaborative work and publications among communities of junior/senior scholars or revision of former literature in the framework of anniversaries of seminal contributions to the field.

During this COST Action, new technologies for virtual conferencing helped to meet the challenge of the Covid pandemic. With travel restrictions likely in the future, the face-to-face format of scientific gathering looks set to give way to a new set of norms as countries manage the spread of the pandemic. Whilst we welcomed the return of face-to-face conferencing, virtual participation in hybrid format events is becoming normalised, and presents a unique challenge to sustainable network building. Research activities are supported by relationships that need to be strong and close over extended periods of time - face-to-face meetings will continue to be important in the early phase of building relationships. The way COST tools are applied and funded will need to adapt to support technologies that give the best online conferencing and networking experience.

As for the main contribution of this COST Action, it can be summarized in the valuable support - both scholarly and technical - provided to SE scholars. The support of COST has sustained and grown one of the largest communities of PhD/EC researchers in the field, who are represented in the governance of the global network that supports their activities. This size of this community is producing a more international, better supported and educated cohort of researchers who can evolve the SE field.

¹ You can access "Social Enterprise in Western Europe. Theory, Models and Practice" through this link: <https://www.routledge.com/Social-Enterprise-in-Western-Europe-Theory-Models-and-Practice/Defourny-Nyssens/p/book/9780367151188>; and "Social Enterprise in Central and Eastern Europe. Theory, Models and Practice" here: <https://www.routledge.com/Social-Enterprise-in-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-Theory-Models-and-Practice/Defourny-Nyssens/p/book/9780367342197>

² See the detailed 2019 conference report here: <https://emes.net/content/uploads/EMES-Conference-report-2019.pdf>

³ See the detailed 2021 conference report here: <https://emes.net/events/conferences/8th-emes-international-research-conference-on-social-enterprise>