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Social and economic advantages of social economy enterprises

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Abstract

Motivation: The issue of social enterprises belongs to the common field of interest in economics and management sciences. The experience of the 2008+ crisis has shown that social enterprises, including cooperative ones, have experienced less of the crisis' negative effects compared to global corporations. It confirms their social and economic utility in times of constant threats and changes.

Aim: The aim of the article is to indicate sustainable advantages that social enterprises guarantee in a dynamically changing economic environment.

Results: The article sheds light on social enterprises by analyzing their impact on quality of life in unstable conditions of the world economy. As the article presents, social enterprises tend to have very specific economic and social goals and effectively realize them. Thus, they easily become independent and basically secure their place in the monopolized and globalized market.

Keywords: social economy; social enterprises; World Co-operative Monitor; European Union

JEL: A13; B55

1. Introduction

Social enterprises have clearly defined social objectives apart from economic goals. The negative effects of globalization processes in the contemporary world provide answers as to why social enterprises are created. These processes, especially in the 21st century, lead to a very high degree of concentration of production and consumption as well as their standardisation. As a result of this industrial progress, the processes of dehumanizing work and alienation are progressing as well. Any economic disturbance in a given place in the world triggers a chain reaction and spreads with international transactions. The experience of the 2008+ crisis has shown that social enterprises, including co-operative enterprises, have encountered less of a negative effect in comparison to global corporations. The variety of organizational forms of conducting business is therefore an indispensable condition for the stability of socio-economic processes worldwide.

In the literature, social enterprises are described as a peculiar phenomenon, a hobby activity. However, there is a lack of specific analysis of their impact on the level of production, consumption and quality of life. Meanwhile, they have very specific economic and social goals and effectively realize them while becoming independent and securing their place in the monopolized and globalized market.

The aim of the article is to indicate the characteristics of social enterprises, which, ensuring organizational diversity, contribute to the stability of socio-economic processes and allow for ensuring the well-being for people choosing this form of activity.

The article is of a theoretical and empirical nature. Apart from literature review, statistical data describing the functioning of social enterprises in the world in the second decade of the 21st century are used. It consists of the following parts: literature review on social enterprise and social economy, description of the applied research method, research analysis of the results of the largest social enterprises selected from the *Global 300* Report, presentation of results of selected enterprises along with further discussion. The article ends with an indication of possible directions for further research in relation to social enterprises operating in the EU countries as a whole and separately in Poland.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social enterprises in the light of social economy

Social enterprises are closely related to the concept of social economy, which means rational action aimed at satisfying the social needs of people. Many scientists regard social economy as a new scientific discipline, for which a new paradigm is defined, much different from the one applied in the classical econ-

omy. Social economy is characterized by active social problems solving, which is based on solidarity and cooperation, on placing the common good over individual good or over a narrowly understood group interest. The elements of social capital, such as trust and cooperation, have essential significance for its development. The co-operative and mutual enterprise business model has played an important role in economic development, job creation and addressing market failures for nearly two centuries (Mazzarol et al., 2018, pp. 551–581). Nevertheless, social entrepreneurship as a subject of research is still an emerging field (Dionisio, 2019, pp. 22–45).

An important feature of the social economy is its reference to such values as justice, solidarity, freedom or social responsibility. Because of social criteria, the following features in social economy have to be distinguished: the socially useful goal of the activity (providing services to members and the local community), the civic nature of undertaken initiatives (shaping civic attitudes through actions for people and activating local communities), democratic system of participative management (autonomous decisions regardless of the capital owned by the shareholder or owner), the community character of the ventures and the distribution of profits for socially useful purposes.

The sources of social economy should be sought in ancient times, when the role of social interpersonal relations and the importance of association were noticed. Then, in Egypt, Greece and Rome there were professional corporations, religious and secular brotherhoods providing necessary help to those in need. Significant development of associations, craft guilds, charity and care institutions took place in the Middle Ages. Significant importance was then attributed to the creation of communities, such as confraternities or local banks, developing ideas of reciprocity, brotherhood, intergenerational solidarity and concern for the common good.

Also very important for the development of the social economy was the 15th century civil humanism, which, appreciating the social character of a human being, encouraged the creation of civic communities to protect the rights of an individual. The policy of Italian cities of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance contributed to the development of civil society. The establishment of the first chair of economics at the University of Naples in 1755 was a special moment for the social dimension of economics. The support for the idea of social economy can also be found on the pages of Smith's *Theory of moral sentiments*, in which he claims that there are some social virtues on the market, such as prudence and justice, and unpaid human relationships or even friendships can be experienced. However, several years later, Smith's views changed significantly. In 1776 in the *Wealth of nations* he over-appreciates the market and individual profit.

Economic theory in the last decade of the 20th century saw social economy activities as marginal and perceived them as exceptions to the general principle of economics defined as ones for profit. Contrastingly, in 1999, Drucker claimed that in the 21st century, the sphere of business understood as an organized form

of economic activity would shrink, giving way to other sectors, the most significant of which will be the sector of non-profit social organizations.

In the last decades of the 20th century, social ideas have come back and a new view has emerged on the problem of injustice. Striving for development and elimination of poverty could be observed. Both in the Social Teachings of the Church and in the activities of religious congregations, communities, movements and associations, there is a striving to improve the living conditions of the poorest.

Indeed, there is abundant literature about social and sustainable entrepreneurship (Sarango-Lalangui et al., 2018). Innovators and entrepreneurs consider sustainable development as one of the greatest business opportunities in the history of trade. These authors stress the link between sustainable development and entrepreneurship, pointing out that companies' sustainability is attested by the main activities performed in their environments, impact evaluation, goal achievement, transparent communication of results, and that they must be oriented toward the satisfaction of the vital needs of the people.

The social enterprise is the element that identifies the features of the social economy. It is an enterprise because it produces stable goods and useful services with the help of people and material resources, and the owners bear significant economic risks and have decision-making autonomy in management. Its social dimension is expressed in the supremacy of providing services to members and to the community over making profits. It uses social resources (donations, subsidies, volunteering), it releases a community initiative, it does not make the decision making (exercising power) conditional on the amount of capital contributed. What is also worth noticing is the participation of employees in setting goals as an important element of the job satisfaction creation (Barnett & Bradley, 2007, pp. 317–363). Sassmannshausen & Volkmann (2016) provide a comprehensive overview of social entrepreneurship research and its place in the academic world.

The economic criteria of social enterprises are:

- business continuity in the production or sale of goods and services (as opposed to advising and granting grants);
- high level of autonomy (social enterprises are created voluntarily by groups of citizens; even if those enterprises utilize grants and donations, they are still managed by the citizens and not directly or indirectly by public administration bodies or private companies. Their shareholders have the right to participate ('vote') and leave the organization ('exit'));
- significant economic risk (financial profitability of the enterprise, including the activities of public institutions responsible for financial activities);
- employment of paid workers, despite the activity of volunteers (the activities of social enterprises require a minimum number of paid employees, although, just like traditional non-profit organizations, social enterprises can combine financial and non-financial means, paid work and volunteer activity).

On the other hand, the social criteria of these enterprises are:

- a clear goal for social benefits (one of the basic goals of a social enterprise is to act for a society or a specific group of people. At the same time, the goal is to develop a sense of social responsibility at the local level);
- the grass-roots, civic nature of the initiative (social enterprises are the result of group dynamics within a given community or a group whose members share specific needs or goals);
- the principle of ‘one member = one vote’ in the decision-making process (this generally means the principle of ‘one member, one vote’ or at least the fact that the rights to exercise the voting right do not result from having a share in the capital. Although the owners of capital in social enterprises play an important role, they share the decision-making rights with other stakeholders);
- involvement of entities for which the activity is conducted (persons using services provided by social enterprises are represented and participate in its structures. In many cases, one of the goals is to strengthen democracy at the local level through economic activity);
- limited distribution of profits (social enterprises are organizations that completely prohibit the distribution of profits or such as cooperatives in which the distribution of profit is allowed only to a limited extent, which eliminates behavior that maximizes profit) (Leś, 2008, pp. 42–43).

All the above criteria are met by cooperatives. Their role cannot be measured only by their turnover. What is also important in their case is: the social capital that grows out of social interactions and the economic ties between the members of the cooperative (Bidet et al., 2018, pp. 1261–1273).

The social economy is also described as a solidarity economy, an economy of solidarity, the economics of the local community or a civic economy. The social economy, sometimes identified with the third sector, embraces organizations other than public and market, because they combine economic and social goals. Traditional social economy originates from the cooperative and association sector (cooperatives, associations, foundations, mutual insurance companies). The new social economy derives its pedigree from the cooperative and association sector, as well as public and private (social cooperatives, companies with limited liability, units without legal personality).

Literature on social enterprises describes them with a special focus on the following areas: innovation and technology, rural and community development and urbanization, social, economic and environmental considerations, financing and crowdfunding, women entrepreneurs, corporate social responsibility (Bansal et al., 2019, pp. 7–8).

2.2. Social economy in the lenses of the European Union

The importance of the social economy is recognized by the European Union. The Permanent European Conference of Cooperatives, Mutual Associations, Asso-

ciations and Foundations of 2002 specified that social economy organizations are economic and social entities active in all sectors of economy.

They stand out with goals and a special form of entrepreneurship. The social economy includes organizations such as cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations. Their activity is clear, especially in the field of social security, food, banking, insurance, agricultural production, consumer affairs, the activity of associations and organizing trade facilities, crafts, housing, services in the place of residence, education, training in the field of culture, sport and activity in free time.

The development of the social economy is one of the priorities of EU policy. According to the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions (2016):

- social economy plays a key role in the economic and social development of the European Union, it covers 2 million enterprises, including associations, cooperatives and mutual units, provides 11 million jobs, or employment for 6% of the working population, and covers 10% of all enterprises in Europe;
- institutions and social economy entities have proved resilient during the crisis and, despite major difficulties, have contributed to improving the well-being of citizens and maintaining their jobs, while other organizations and enterprises have been unable to do so. This contribution was seen in the inclusion of people who had particular difficulties in entering and returning to the labour market;
- social economy initiatives, because they are based on cooperation and civic engagement of members of a given community, contribute to the increase of social, economic and territorial cohesion and the level of trust throughout the EU;
- the social economy is characterized by commitment and integration with the area in which social enterprises operate, which means that they are less susceptible to relocation and thus provide their employees with greater security, being an element of corporate social responsibility;
- social economy organizations stimulate the spirit of solidarity and entrepreneurship and the involvement of all citizens, including people marginalized by the economic system, which allows them to develop economic activity creating value and guaranteeing profitability in the case of social enterprises even in the economically weakest sectors;
- social economy fosters citizen involvement and co-creation processes through dynamic partnerships between the public sector, multiple social economy institutions and the private sector, especially social enterprises, and points to the need to adopt an approach oriented towards socially innovative measures and policies;
- the role of social economy institutions and entities in combating unemployment and promoting sustainable and socially inclusive growth is positive, especially in areas characterized by emigration, rapid aging of the population, lack of economic dynamism or poor entrepreneurial spirit, from rural areas;

- social economy organizations are a rare phenomenon of compliance of intentions that support the entrepreneurial spirit and maintain or attract economic entities able to use local resources;
- the social economy can be a very effective and appropriate instrument for combating the grey sphere in the economy and an instrument for creating economic and social value.

It is noticeable that there is an institutional conflict between the European law norms concerning competitiveness and the provision of state aid to cooperatives because of their social goals.

Tax regulations for cooperatives may constitute unequal treatment of market entities. Social goals for which cooperative support is implemented cause countries not to try to emphasize or even to externalize the assistance provided to cooperatives.

Such assistance is justified by the social interest pursued by a specific enterprise. However, it is obvious that not every ex-definitive cooperative acquires the status of a social enterprise. It is necessary to show each time that a cooperative performs social interest services, if it is to benefit from exceptional solutions provided for such enterprises. The implementation of social and cultural goals must be demonstrated, it is not enough for the cooperative legal form of the enterprise itself. The legal justification for state aid is provided for in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Article 107 of the *Treaty on the functioning of the European Union*.

The meaning of a cooperative should not be measured only by the amount of turnover. What is also important in their case is social capital that grows out of social interactions and economic ties between the members of the cooperative. Cooperatives as associations of people and as just and democratic economic organizations are irreplaceable in the process of creating social capital.

While confirming the importance of diversity of economic structures for economic development on the European market, and at the same time granting cooperatives an important element in such a mixed market economy, it should be noted that cooperative interests must be protected and promoted on a non-discriminatory basis. Therefore, cooperatives of all types must be able to develop their activities freely to meet market demands and the needs of their members. It is unacceptable to have unfair and unnecessary legal barriers regulating the activities of cooperatives, both at Community and Member State levels.

Cooperatives can take various legal forms, maintaining the basic features that make up the definition of cooperatives, which include:

- the possibility of free and voluntary association and representation from cooperatives;
- a democratic structure in which each member has one vote, decisions are taken by the majority, whereas elected leadership is responsible to members; equal, honest and fair distribution of economic results.

3. Methods

The aim of the research is to analyse the social and economic usefulness of social enterprises in turbulent economic environment and to discover whether social enterprises play the role which the EU assigns to them.

The research hypothesis assumed that social enterprises, ensuring organizational diversity, contribute to the stability of socio-economic processes and allow people choosing this form of activity to achieve the goal of increased well-being. The study focuses on the presentation of industries in which they operate and the financial results achieved.

The subject of the study are social enterprises selected from the *Global 300* Report. Published since 2006 by disseminating the idea of cooperative and social entrepreneurship, the International Cooperative Association (ICA) together with the European Research Institute of Cooperatives and Social Enterprises (EURICSE) present the largest cooperatives and social enterprises in the world. The report is published in a special edition of the *World Co-operative Monitor* (WCM). The *Global 300* includes social enterprises from dozens of countries with an annual turnover of over 100 million dollars. This is the only report of its kind, collecting annual economic and financial data on the global cooperative movement and social entrepreneurship (Bretos et al., 2018, pp. 5–37).

In the latest, sixth issue of the *World Co-operative Monitor* (2017, p. 86), a report was presented showing the world's largest social enterprises based on the 2015 financial data. The data on 2 379 enterprises (1 449 from Europe, 702 from both Americas, 216 from Asia, 12 from Africa) from eight sectors was collected. As many as 1436 organizations had a turnover of over US \$ 100 million forming the TOP 300 list. Companies from the following industries have the largest share among the submitted organizations: agriculture and food — 23%, insurance — 18%, banking — 12%, wholesale trade and retail — 8%. On the other hand, the share of enterprises from the industrial sector amounts to 5%, similar to the cooperatives operating in the health, education and social care sector. 1% of cooperative enterprises presented in the report operate in other sectors.

4. Results

The latest Top 300 list includes cooperatives from 27 countries, their total turnover in 2015 amounted to 2164.23 trillion US \$. The insurance sector has the largest share in this value — 41%, agriculture and food industry — 30%, wholesale and retail trade — 19%, and banking — 6%.

In the top ten of the largest cooperatives in the world there are four cooperatives operating in France: three from the banking industry, and one from the commercial sector. Second and third place were taken by American co-operatives in the insurance industry. The largest cooperative enterprises coming from Germany represent the banking and financial services sectors as well as

wholesale and retail trade. Among the largest cooperatives there were also two cooperatives from Japan, both representing the insurance sector (World Co-operative Monitor, 2017, pp. 20–21, 80). A list of the ten largest social enterprises along with their country of origin and sector of industry is presented in table 1.

The development of cooperative enterprises in the 21st century is clearly characterized not only by an upward trend, but also by internal dynamics. The Spanish Co-operative Corporation *Mondragon*, which might compete with large industrial international corporations is often described in literature as the largest cooperative in the world. Although in 2011–2015 its turnover decreased by 18.4%, it figures at the top position of 10 largest cooperatives in the industrial and tooling industry in the world and at the 35th position in *Global 300* (World Co-operative Monitor, 2017).

What is more, in Spain, the economic performance of the cooperative in comparison with conventional companies belonging to investors in Spain in the last years of the economic crisis is not worse (Montero & Pacheco, 2018, pp. 115–154).

The analysis of trends in the activities of the 100 largest social enterprises included in the last report clearly shows growth in 2011–2015. Chart 1 presents the turnover dynamics of enterprises from particular industries.

In addition to the well-established social enterprises in the banking, insurance, financial, agricultural and commercial sectors on national and international markets, companies from the health, education, social services and other services sectors have shown impressive dynamics. The largest growth of approx. 40% was demonstrated by enterprises from other services sector. OBOS BBL, with turnover dynamics of over 176% in 2011–2015 is an outstanding example. OBOS BBL provides real estate services. The company offers new and used apartments for housing purposes, as well as provides housing financing. It serves customers in Norway.

A significant increase in turnover (55%) in 2011–2015 was noted by Capricorn Society Limited, a membership organization, operating in the trade of automotive parts and accessories in Australia and New Zealand. The company also provides equipment financing, travel, business risk, technology and financial services. It was founded in 1974 and is based in West Perth, Australia.

The CNS International also had more than a 22% turnover. The company was founded in 1989 by a group of senior experienced divers, dive supervisors and diving superintendents. The most important CNS resources are based on personal experience and knowledge. Through the implementation of difficult projects at various water depths in many countries around the world, CNS strengthened its position among major domestic and international diving companies.

In 2011–2015, the dynamics of turnover of over 22% was also observed in Centrale der Werkgeversaan de Haven van Antwerpen (Cepa), founded in Antwerp in 1929 for the organization of work in the port. Currently, Cepa

is responsible for the personnel and payroll administration of approximately 9 300 manual workers.

The German DATEV cooperative developed dynamically in the discussed period (increase by 20%). Its members are: tax advisors, lawyers, auditors, small and medium enterprises, municipalities and founders using the DATEV software. The cooperative was founded in 1966.

In the health sector, social enterprises are also developing dynamically. Founded in 1967, Unimed is a thriving system of medical co-operatives in Brazil. It provides services to 18 million patients in the whole country and employs 110 000 doctors. Unimed runs hospitals, ambulances, laboratories, diagnostic centres and pharmacies, making it the second largest network of hospitals in Brazil. From 2011 to 2015, it recorded an increase in turnover by over 50%. The Centre Hospitalier Universitaire et Psychiatrique de Mons-Borinage in Belgium was equally dynamic at a rate of 50%.

In Japan, in the Saitama Prefecture — the fastest-growing area in the country — the Saitama cooperative is located. Saitama members are particularly active in promoting health in society through volunteering. They organize free activities such as walks, exercises, dancing and yoga in public places and parks — over 500 events each month. Most participants of these events are from 50 to 70 years old.

In the banking sector, a high growth rate (60%) is shown by the Federal Credit Union (US). Since 1933, the number of its members has increased from 7 to over 8 million. It is a financial institution serving the army and soldiers' families.

According to the estimates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) — Global GDP in twenty countries with the largest share in the global gross domestic product increased in 2010–2015 by 21.4%. Therefore, the social enterprises described above kept up with the largest economies in the world. And the diversity of activities undertaken by these organizations confirms their social and economic usefulness.

5. Conclusion

The development of cooperative enterprises in the 21st century is clearly characterized by an upward trend. Cooperatives and the cooperative movement have become the precursor of today's social economy sector. 19th century members of cooperatives defended their dignity and economic security against the negative effects of the developing industrial capitalism. Similarly, in the 21st century, the dynamically developing sector of the social economy in the world is to a certain extent a response to the processes of globalization and the activity of international corporations striving for a global monopoly. The end of the twentieth century and the 21st century brought global changes in the economy. In the current situation, the tasks of the social economy are perhaps even more significant than ever (International Labour Organization, 2016).

The research hypothesis assumed that social enterprises, ensuring organizational diversity, contribute to the stability of socio-economic processes. As presented in the results, this hypothesis was confirmed.

Research confirms that norms, values and beliefs in the field of social entrepreneurship are reflected in the values referred to in the EU Treaty and they are embedded in the principles, rights and freedoms set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Karat Coalition, 2013). Also the results of the survey of social enterprises located in the United States and Canada, as presented in the article, indicate the tendency to create social enterprises in increasingly new industries like healthcare and new technology (Lubberink et al., 2019, pp. 187–193).

In order to stimulate the amount and growth of social enterprises the cooperation between entrepreneurs and local government, the developing of social business models and measuring of impact needs more attention (Nijskens, 2017).

The survey covered the largest global social enterprises. It seems necessary to undertake research in all countries of the European Union as since the beginning of the 21st century, the social economy has become increasingly important in EU policies. The importance of this kind of socio-economic activity is demonstrated by the fact that it was recognized as important at the global level by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Labor Organization (ILO).

It seems reasonable also to conduct an analogous study in Polish conditions in respect to social enterprises. In accordance with the assumptions of the National Program for the Development of Social Economy (Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2014), the social economy in 2020 will be an important element of public policies, contributing to employment rate growth, social cohesion and development of social capital. As mentioned by KPRES, cooperatives and people conducting activities in the sphere of public benefit seem to be the most important groups of social economy entities.

The aim of the article was to indicate sustainable advantages that social enterprises guarantee in a dynamically changing economic environment. According to the adopted by the EU definition, it is the sphere of civic activity which, through economic activity and public benefit activities, serves: professional and social integration of people at risk of social marginalization, creation of jobs, provision of social services of general interest and local development. The results of the study prove that the development of cooperative enterprises in the 21st century is characterized by a distinctly increasing tendency, but also by internal dynamics. They are also comparable with the discoveries of other researchers.

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Appendix

Table 1.

The largest social enterprises according to *Global 300 Report 2017*

Position	Company	Country	Sector
1	Groupe Crédit Agricole	France	banking and financial services
2	Kaiser Permanente	USA	insurance
3	State Farm	USA	insurance
4	BVR	Germany	banking and financial services
5	Zenkyoren	Japan	insurance
6	Groupe BPCE	France	banking and financial services
7	REWE Group	Germany	wholesale and retail trade
8	Groupe Crédit Mutuel	France	banking and financial services
9	Nippon Life	Japan	insurance
10	ACDLEC — E.Leclerc	France	wholesale and retail trade

Source: Own preparation based on the World Co-operative Monitor (2017, p. 8).

Chart 1.

Turnover dynamics of the largest social enterprises by industry in 2011–2015 (in %)



Source: Own preparation based on the World Co-operative Monitor (2017).