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## HOW SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS LEARN NEW SKILLS? THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ECONOMY SUPPORT CENTRES IN SUPPORTING KNOW-HOW DEVELOPMENT

**Abstract.** The modern business model means that, regardless whether for-profit or non-profit, an organization should have both the willingness and the ability to learn and develop. Nowadays social enterprise has emerged as a key factor in efforts to address the many complex issues facing the world today. Its focus on providing a benefit to society as a whole rather than just the owners of the enterprise make it ideal for addressing the global concerns of the environment, healthcare, education, economic growth, and poverty alleviation. This article demonstrates specific examples on how Social Economy Support Centres create policy programmes for social enterprises and support their legal, financial and know-how development.

**Key words:** social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial support

### Introduction

The dynamics of public debt growth and analysis of macroeconomic indicators confirm the thesis that traditional welfare state models prove ineffective in the changing economic and demographic situation. The increasingly difficult to bear costs of social benefits borne by the state, in which recipients participate in a small way, leads decision makers to seek solutions aimed at labour market inclusion of people who are excluded or at risk of social exclusion (Frączak, Wygnański 2008, p. 16). Therefore, attention is increasingly being paid to the need to modernize the ways of achieving objectives set in the area of social policy, by strengthening its active instruments. One such instrument is financial support for the creation and

development of social enterprises. Social enterprises are a relatively new phenomenon in economic practice, so the amount of research on their functioning remains limited. The a priori focus of these organizations not on maximizing financial gain, but on achieving goals that foster social cohesion (mainly through social integration and supporting the activity of disadvantaged groups on the labour market), is in Poland received with some reserve by both citizens and researchers of economic processes. Due to the specific features of social enterprises, one of the interesting areas of research may be the search for ways of supporting their legal, financial and know-how development, for example through creating policy programmes.

The aim of this article is to synthesize previous scientific achievements concerning social enterprises. Using a critical review of the literature an attempt was made to present and systematize the concept of social enterprises paying special attention to their specific features and analyzing the ways of supporting them through the activities of Social Economy Support Centers. The structure of the paper is as follows. After an introduction, brief theoretical background is presented regarding social entrepreneurship and social enterprise. Second section raises questions about the specificity of managing these entities and the challenges involved. Research results are presented in the third section, while the last part of the paper summarises theoretical and practical contributions.

### **Social entrepreneurship and social enterprise concept revisited**

The term social entrepreneurship was not used before 1990 in Europe, and in the US not before the early 1990's (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010), which allows the impression of newness of the field. However, social entrepreneurship can be seen as a unique concept that has its own, distinctive characteristics, which include the mission, motives and challenges (Dacin et al., 2010). Social entrepreneurship appears as an answer to the increasing disproportions between the rich and the poor and a response to the exclusion of large social groups from mainstream social life. Therefore, governments are promoting social enterprises as a mean of encouraging local economic regeneration, community engagement and improved public service delivery (Kerlin, 2006). The growing significance of research on social enterprises, in particular the impact of their performance on building the foundations of socio-economic growth in the national states, is confirmed, among others, by the recommendation issued by the European Commission to undertake extensive studies in the EU member states [EC, 2014a]. The condition of social enterprises is of crucial importance for the achievement of social policy objectives and indirectly enables – through the inclusion of social groups that are excluded or are at the risk of exclusion – building cohesion in local communities and, more generally, in the whole country.

According to Perrini and Vurro (2006), the literature on social entrepreneurship might be divided into two main streams: one positions social entrepreneurship in the non-profit theory, while the other characterizes it as a new interdisciplinary phenomenon. What connects these two points of view is that they both stress the aspect of tackling important social problems (Austin, Stevenson & Wei-Skillern, 2006). And so, on the one edge, there are authors such as Boschee and McClurg (2003) or Dart (2004), who include social entrepreneurship within the scope of research on non-profit organisations, arguing that this concept might be explained as “the latest innovation” in the functioning of social enterprises, and then justified by the interest of non-profit entities in managerial competence and in the market-based approach, taken in order to improve their operational

efficiency and productivity. In this perspective, a social enterprise and social entrepreneurship are treated as “a set of strategic answers to turbulence of environment and to situational challenges that non-profit organisations face nowadays” (Dacin, Dacin & Tracey, 2011). Therefore, social entrepreneurship is seen as the third sector's response to an altered situation which might seem dangerous at the macro level: a predicted collapse of the welfare system, increasing financial pressures on organisations working for social goals, rising costs in many areas of the social sector, and the reduction of public and private grants and subsidies. At the other extreme, one might enumerate the advocates of extended theories of social entrepreneurship, such as Thompson, Alvy and Lees (2000) or Mair and Martí (2009), who believe that the phenomenon may be regarded as a new, independent and largely interdisciplinary field of research. They highlight the quality of social entrepreneurial initiatives, treating it as the basis for the field. In this spirit, they define a social entrepreneur as an innovator, capable of making an active contribution to social change, through creativity and attitude towards innovation – that is, typical features of the classical entrepreneurial process (Perrini & Vurro, 2006, p. 76). All researchers, however, seem to agree on the fact that the key to understanding this concept lies in the field of business entrepreneurship and in J. Schumpeter's theory, which forms the basis of social entrepreneurship. What social and business entrepreneurship have in common is a strong inclination for innovation and change, as well as the ability to perceive unmet needs and the resulting opportunities for entrepreneurial activities. In other words, projects in the field of social entrepreneurship are often innovative and – like purely business-like venture – they become agents of change, as well as the driving force of social and economic progress (Leadbeater, 1998, 58).

Considerable discrepancies exist as to the meaning of a social enterprise, which might be said to be the result of historical circumstances of the creation of this type of phenomena in different countries, as well as its economic nature. A social enterprise is a common example of a hybrid organisation (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Michelini & Fiorentino, 2012). Battilana and Lee (2014, p. 400) define ‘hybridity’ as “the state of being composed

through the mixture of disparate parts". The other terms used are social business (Molyneaux, 2004), social-purpose business (Cooney, 2011), community enterprise (Tracey et al., 2005), or social venture (Sharir, Lerner, 2006). Definitional problems are also complicated by the fact that social enterprises take different organizational forms depending on the existing legal system, the way the state provides its welfare function, as well as the cultural and historical conditions of the development of the non-profit sector in a given country (European Commission 2014). Social enterprise is a common part of all three sectors, as it works for the public good, often in the sphere of public services, with a strong sense of social mission, but applying the principles of business thinking. It combines the third sector with the private sector, thus becoming one of the important institutional forms of linking civil society with the market economy. At the same time, it is also an important segment of the social economy covering various organizational forms and institutions (Hausner, Laurisz, 2008, p. 10). According to Leś (2004, p. 7), it combines the characteristics of a non-governmental organisation and a market entity, creating new jobs and setting additional goals of sustaining these jobs and providing services to local communities. Haugh also sees a social enterprise as a collective term defining organisations acting for social objectives. They share the commitment to finding solutions, based on commercial experiences, which will allow them to pursue social goals and reinvest profits from the operations with the benefit for the community (Haugh, 2006, p. 5). Thompson and Doherty (2006, p. 403) define them as organisations that apply business solutions to address social problems. Despite the fact that social enterprises operate in different legal forms and in different socio-economic and cultural conditions, some common features can be identified: (1) production of products or services involving economic risk and economic verification of the effects of this activity; (2) orientation of activities towards social integration on the scale of a given local community; (3) subordination of ownership relations to the interests of stakeholders; (4) management culture based on partnership and participation; (5) democratic control by stakeholders; and (6) the surplus generated and accumulated capital are not appropriated

individually, but are used to fulfil a specific social mission (Hausner, Laurisz, 2008, pp. 13–14). However, regardless of the legal form, their principal purpose is not to generate commercial profit, but above all, to create workplaces for people at risk of social exclusion and professional marginalization and engage in delivery of social services and work integration services for disadvantaged groups (such as people with disabilities) and communities (Wronka-Pośpiech & Frączkiewicz-Wronka, 2014).

In Poland, despite many years of legislative effort, social enterprise is still an umbrella concept and neither official definition of social enterprise exists, nor a legal construct has been introduced into the system (Ciepielewska-Kowalik, et al., 2014). A number of organisations with diverse institutional forms have many of the distinctive features of social enterprises and are often referred to as such in the public discourse (i.e. non-profit organisations, cooperatives, vocational enterprises for the handicapped, vocational therapy workshops, social integration centres, social integration clubs and non-profit companies). These legal and organisational forms can be grouped in the three models of social enterprise (Ciepielewska-Kowalik, et al., 2014, p. 8–9). Each of them derives from a different pillar of organisations that stay close to a set of EMES criteria. These models of social enterprise are model 1 (traditional cooperatives and social cooperatives), model 2 (entrepreneurial non-profit organisations such as foundations, associations and other voluntary organisations), and model 3 (work and social integration social enterprises such as social enterprises for the disabled or social enterprises for wider group of persons threatened by social and economic exclusion). It should however be born in mind that, in spite of corresponding to the notion of social enterprise, out of many legal and organisational forms existing in Poland only social co-operatives fulfil the criteria of a social enterprise (see: Ciepielewska-Kowalik, et al., 2014, p. 8–9; EC, 2014b for details). Polish social cooperatives are based on the models of social cooperatives in Italy (type B), referred to as work integration social cooperatives and aiming at social and economic integration of individuals who are exposed to social and economic exclusion (EC, 2014b). They can be set up by natural persons but also by legal persons,

among which can be NGOs, public authorities, and church units. However, majority of them (95 %) are natural persons' social co-operatives, when only 5 % are legal persons' co-operatives (Starnawska, 2015). They aim at social and economic integration of individuals who are exposed to social and economic exclusion (EC, 2014). Many existing social cooperatives dedicate themselves to inner-city community renewal by providing sustainable employment – including living wages, job training, and benefits – to hard-to-employ individuals. According to the most recent data, there are about 1482 social cooperatives in Poland. What can be observed is a significant growth in their number resulting from the support granted to setting up social enterprises with the investment of public money, mainly European funds. It is however estimated that around 40 % of existing social cooperatives in Poland no longer conduct business activity. They are still on the register because they don't want or cannot - due to lack of knowledge or resources– carry out the winding-up process. No matter the reason for that decision, they have failed. The increasing importance of social economy in Poland results in the need to undertake research regarding principles and practises in the area of management. It is particularly important to understand how and what kind of support social enterprise receive for their legal, financial and know-how development.

#### **Specificity of social enterprise and the challenges involved**

Professionalization and increasing competition in the non-profit sector necessitate changes in the management methods of social enterprise. The shift from administration to management means that managers, in order to meet the intensifying competition in the 21st century, had to change from passive administrators to active leaders. Therefore, they had to acquire new skills and use new cognitive tools to make rational managerial decisions, because leaders - by virtue of their knowledge and position - are expected to make decisions with significant impact on the achievements and results of the entire organization. Effective management skills are therefore manifested mainly in the way decisions are made. When choosing the direction of action, the

manager must look for rational or optimal solutions to emerging problems, ensuring the implementation of the intended objectives, developing their skills, gaining new information. The specificity of social enterprises assumes that their activities should in particular appreciate the need for development, self-fulfillment and the achievement of economic effects by the participants of these enterprises. This poses tasks for managers in these entities, including modification of the already existing and development of the future management model, which would take into account the dual aspect of operation so important in these entities. Reconciling contradictions on the continuum: market actions versus creation of public/social value is an extremely difficult task for managers, hence the need for strategic planning and building the right strategy for the organization. Social enterprises should also strive to grow in order to be more effective in achieving their goals, thus achieving success (di Domenico et al., 2010). Developing and strengthening their position allows them to increase the potential that can be – in future actions – used to solve social problems and thus contribute to the growth of the economic potential of a country.

In order to manage a social enterprise in a modern and comprehensive way, a manager should get to know many different factors which influence his work, and he should perceive all management issues and emerging dysfunctions and needs. It is people who create and implement strategies, who control their course, and who make appropriate corrections when necessary. The process of implementing the strategy must be based on an appropriate (flexible, adapted to the assumptions) organizational structure, i.e., a skillful arrangement of positions, hierarchy, leadership, teams, as well as an appropriate number of implementers within the framework of individual tasks. Action plans implemented as part of the strategy should be internal systems – not a collection of chaotic, ad hoc activities, but a system of interrelated activities with built-in control mechanisms. In imposing and enforcing the style of action an important role is played by leaders – leaders who take care of compliance with specific, desired procedures and minimize the risk of occurrence of behaviors

inconsistent with the accepted rules (timeliness, effectiveness of action, the dominant set of values). In order for the initiative to have a chance of success it is necessary to have human potential - people who will work for the implementation of the strategy. This concerns both managers and employees with a smaller scope of competence. In Polish context entrepreneurial actions of social cooperatives also goes beyond the need to maximize profit for shareholders and owners, as they, above all, solve social problems, create workplaces for people at risk of social exclusion and professional marginalisation and engages in delivery of social services and work integration services for disadvantaged groups (such as people with disabilities) and communities. Considering an extremely important function of social enterprises, the next section of this paper focuses on specific examples on how Social Economy Support Centres create policy programmes for social enterprises and support their legal, financial and know-how development.

#### **The role of Social Economy Support Centres in supporting social entrepreneurs**

Social Economy Support Centre (OWES) is an entity or partnership supporting the development of social entrepreneurship co-financed by the European Union under the European Social Fund. It supports individuals interested in launching ventures in the field of social entrepreneurship, social economy entities and local government units. Recipients of OWES activities are: individuals, especially those threatened by social and/or professional exclusion, initiative groups who want to establish a social economy entity or social enterprise, social economy entities (foundations and associations dealing with widely understood social and professional activation of persons threatened by marginalization and social exclusion), social enterprises, local government units and companies and institutions from social economy environment. OWES offer counselling, trainings, realize services that support development of local partnership, provide legal, accounting and marketing services for social economy entities, promote social economy and employment in social economy sector. There are currently 56 accredited OWES operating in Poland, few of them in each of

the 16 voivodships. The main task of OWES is to provide comprehensive support for the creation of social enterprises and their subsequent development. Their specific tasks include:

- providing information, training and advisory support for social economy entities from a given subregion,
- support for created social cooperatives (training, advisory and financial),
- Building partnerships for social economy,
- Promotion of social economy,
- Searching and testing long-term financing sources for OWES and social cooperatives.

In other words, the centers are to be the first-contact institutions for individuals involved in the social economy. In order to obtain data for analysis, the author asked the persons managing individual centers for consent to provide information on training organized by OWES. Such consent was expressed by the managers of two centers, while the request sent to the manager implementing the project in the northern subregion remained unanswered.

In order to demonstrate specific examples on how Social Economy Support Centres create policy programmes for social enterprises and support their legal, financial and know-how development, this part of paper presents the training and advisory offer of Social Economy Support Centers (OWES) in the Silesia Province. Primary data gathering process started in July 2021. The data for the study was collected with the use of two telephone interviews with experts working in two Social Economy Support Centers (OWES) and data analysis.

The first OWES which agreed to participate in the research covers the area of Bielsko, Cieszyn, Żywiec poviats and the City of Bielsko-Biała and is aimed at multi-level and multi-stage assistance for entities from the social economy sector, as well as for people at risk of social exclusion in the creation of social cooperatives. Detailed data on training provided by OWES of the southern subregion during its operation is presented in the table below (table 1).

The second OWES which agreed to participate in the research covers the area of 14 cities with poviat status: Bytom, Chorzów, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Gliwice, Jaworzno, Katowice, Mysłowice, Piekary Śląskie, Ruda Śląska, Siemianowice Śląskie,

Sosnowiec, Świętochłowice, Tychy, Zabrze and 8 poviats. Similarly, the project is aimed at multi-level and multi-stage assistance for entities from the social economy sector, as well as for people at risk

of social exclusion in the creation of social enterprises. Detailed data on training provided by OWES of the central subregion during its operation is presented in the table below (table 2).

Table 1.

**A collective list of OWES trainings in the southern Silesian subregion in the period January 2018 – July 2021**

| №   | Workshop title   | Conducted trainings/workshops |
|-----|--|-------------------------------|
| 1.  | HR and payroll in social enterprises   | 4                             |
| 2.  | Accounting in non-governmental organization  | 8                             |
| 3.  | Sponsoring in social enterprises   | 4                             |
| 4.  | Coordinator's work and project management in social enterprises                      | 4                             |
| 5.  | Marketing in a non-governmental organization   | 4                             |
| 6.  | Responsibility of the management board and the audit committee in social enterprises | 6                             |
| 7.  | Improving personal skills of employees of social enterprises                         | 4                             |
| 8.  | External sources of financing of social enterprises                                  | 4                             |
| 9.  | Project management in social enterprises   | 2                             |
| 10. | Economic activity, paid and unpaid public benefit                                    | 2                             |
| 11. | Volunteering - unlocking the potential   | 2                             |
| 12. | Business plan and organization development strategy                                  | 2                             |
| 13. | Organization of mass events by social enterprises                                    | 2                             |

Source: own study based on data obtained from OWES

Table 2.

**A collective list of OWES trainings in the central Silesian subregion in the period January 2018 – July 2021**

| №   | Workshop title  | Conducted trainings/workshops |
|-----|---|-------------------------------|
| 1.  | Fundraising for social enterprises  | 2                             |
| 2.  | Financing sources for social enterprises  | 24                            |
| 3.  | Fundamentals of accounting in social enterprises                                  | 28                            |
| 4.  | Sponsoring for social enterprises   | 2                             |
| 5.  | What a member of the board and supervisory body of an NGO should know             | 2                             |
| 6.  | Grants as sources of financing for social enterprises                             | 8                             |
| 7.  | Taxes for social enterprises  | 2                             |
| 8.  | Contact with the media  | 6                             |
| 9.  | Working with the client   | 2                             |
| 10. | Financial statement of the for social enterprise at the end of the financial year | 30                            |
| 11. | Project management  | 4                             |
| 12. | Fundraising for social enterprises from scratch                                   | 8                             |
| 13. | Creation of social cooperatives by legal entities                                 | 10                            |
| 14. | Personal data protection in non-governmental organizations                        | 2                             |
| 15. | Marketing strategies and building the image of social enterprises                 | 2                             |
| 16. | Using the Internet to promote the activities of social enterprises                | 2                             |
| 17. | Grant application for social enterprises  | 10                            |
| 18. | Deal with stress – for social enterprises boards, employees and volunteers        | 2                             |
| 19. | Improving personal skills   | 2                             |

Source: own study based on data obtained from OWES

Analysis of the offer of Social Economy Support Centers (OWES) allows for the observation that training offer is dominated by trainings in finance and accounting. There also appear topics related to contacts with the media, fundraising or legal issues, such as creating a social cooperative. Relatively few topics concern improving personal skills such as conflict resolution or management of employees and volunteers. The phenomenon of social entrepreneurship is an important part of deliberations around the social economy sector. It seems, however, that the most important thing at the current stage of social entrepreneurship formation in Poland is to get as many groups and communities as possible interested in the idea, while the development of institutional social economy is likely to take many years or even decades. Properly educating social entrepreneurs and equipping them with leadership skills is becoming an important part of their professional development. The practice of managing social enterprises is a difficult challenge primarily for the people involved. Therefore, a forum for exchange of knowledge should be set up in the near future in which, in addition to entrepreneurs, representatives of the world of science and public administration could participate. Professional and technical support, which the leader is able to reach and use, should help him e.g. in proper realization of issues connected with incomprehensible and complicated formal procedures. In addition, many action ideas developed elsewhere can be creatively adapted. However, in order for subsequent ideas to be replicated, external assistance is often needed. Although a system of mutual support and cooperation is not necessary when starting a particular initiative, it is often indispensable for the development of other initiatives. The future of social enterprises also depends on cooperation, including economic cooperation, between different sectors. It is becoming necessary to create different types of partnerships, specific clusters to meet particular needs, joint management and pooling of resources. It is worth noting that social enterprises are particularly strongly “rooted” in their local environment, where their stakeholders come from. This means that creating contacts outside the organization should not be a self-contained but a consciously managed process. The management

process itself should be oriented towards creating shared values, norms and trust. This is due to the fact that social enterprises are often a grouping of voluntarily associated people with different backgrounds, resulting from their previous professional and social situation. It seems crucial to prepare a potential leader in terms of key competencies, including human resource management with a focus on motivation. He or she should also have sufficient expertise in the market in which the entity operates and a basic knowledge of the laws of economics. It is also important to provide mentoring, coaching and supervision to existing leaders, as well as opportunities for continuous improvement in their skills and social competencies. To implement the system of care for social economy leaders it is necessary to develop new support mechanisms based on existing institutional tools, such as District Labour Office, Social Cooperative Support Centre or Social Economy Support Centre, which should also offer a system of professional support and development for social economy leaders. Here, using the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, it is worth to take advantage of the potential of experienced entrepreneurs who have free time (e.g., are retired) to engage in assistance to their younger colleagues from the social economy sector.

### **Summary**

In today's world, regardless of the sector in which organizations operate, the ability to learn translates into building competitive advantage. Social enterprises and other actors in the public, private and civil society sectors work in various ways to alleviate poverty, promote economic and social cohesion, reduce social exclusion and combat other problems caused by global imbalances. Given the magnitude of the problems they face, it is crucial to equip social entrepreneurs with the right competencies or skills to use tools and techniques to help them effectively achieve their goals and reach more beneficiaries with their initiatives. In the right hands, such knowledge can be an effective tool to better utilize limited resources, properly communicate with stakeholders and promote transparency in organizations' operations, thereby empowering citizens and bringing about sustainable social change.

The development of social entrepreneurship is exceptionally important from the point of view of every national economy because social economy subjects, including social enterprises, constitute a reservoir of resources inaccessible to other forms of activity. These resources can be used to the advantage of local communities, as they play an important role in the implementation and provision of public and social services, and, on a greater scale, they can also be used in the process of building a democratic and civil society. It is worthwhile to invoke here Ducker's words and vision formulated far back in the 1980's, when he pointed out that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the condition of the organisations operating in the public and social sector would determine the condition of the economy as a whole. Therefore, nowadays it is crucial to search for the rules and routines of management which, transplanted from the private sector to the public and social sectors (especially to social enterprises), will stimulate the increase in the efficiency of the latter organisation.

Social enterprises are a unique form of entrepreneurship and business, because they meet both social and economic objectives, and in such a way that the economic results are largely channelled to help the organisation's employees and/or achieve a social mission. In the case of self-financing of these organisations, the fulfilment of these goals is possible due to their competitiveness. In some countries, for example in Poland, only scarce external funds are available to support social entrepreneurship development (apart from public funds and some additional support given to social enterprises). This leads to the situation in which social enterprises are not only grant-dependent, but also self-insufficient. To support their social value, social enterprises should pursue their activities in a thoroughly entrepreneurial way. It can be achieved through the development and application of appropriate support mechanism, which is especially important if an organisation operates in an open market.

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