

If not for profit,  
for what and how?

S O C I A L  
E N T E R P R I S E

# Toward a social mission-based typology of social enterprises

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## INTRODUCTION

In the literature, social enterprises are viewed in a very general way, that is, as hybrid entities blending economic (business) activities with a social mission, or the subject is confined to only one type of social enterprise - usually the work integration social enterprise (WISE). As a result, the role and impact of the mission a social enterprise serves, how it performs and its sustainability – seem to be underestimated.

In this study, arguments will be presented in support of a hypothesis that it is the social mission which determines, perhaps even decisively, a social enterprise's chances of surviving and thriving in the market. In other words, the hypothesis states that due to these chances, social enterprises differ because their social aims, which form the basis for their existence and activities, also differ. The chances a social enterprise has of success are greater or smaller depending on the type of social mission it fulfills.

The wording of the above hypothesis is the primary cognitive outcome of qualitative empirical research conducted in late 2010 and 2011 on a group of about 40 Polish social enterprises. This is also why the arguments presented below will have a purely empirical character.

This paper consists of three parts. First, a brief summary is presented on the definition of a social enterprise adopted for this study and on the research itself. This information is needed to assess both the value of the empirical data collected as well as its interpretation. Then, a synthesis of the research results will be presented justifying the hypothesis outlined above. The paper concludes with the theoretical implications of the study.

## THE DEFINITION OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ADOPTED IN THE STUDY

The general idea defining the identity of social enterprises appears to be relatively clear. Attempts to more closely examine the meaning assigned to the concept of social enterprises result in quite significant inconsistencies. These arise from the differences in the social, cultural, economic and political environment in which social entrepreneurship is conceptualized and practiced (Defourny, J. Nyssens, M., 2012).

In Poland, the understanding of the concept *social enterprise* is evolving and continues to do so. Originally, a social enterprise was identified as only one of its types, i.e. as a WISE. Later, its scope of meaning came to include a second type of social enterprise - companies focused on local development. Finally – with the significant influence in this case of both European regulations and recommendations on the directions of development of the social economy in Poland<sup>1</sup> - social enterprises began to be linked to the broad category of *services of general interest*,<sup>2</sup> in particular *social and cultural services of general interest*. This change in approach was reflected in draft legal regulations on social enterprises. Although work on the draft law is still in progress – so Poland still has no official definition of a social enterprise – it seemed reasonable for research purposes to adopt the proposed definition of a social enterprise contained in the draft act. Thus, for purposes of this study, it is understood that:

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<sup>1</sup> See the report: *Improving social inclusion at the local level through the social economy. Report for Poland*, prepared in 2009 by LEED OECD, in cooperation with the Ministry of Regional Development.

<sup>2</sup> The scope of public benefit services is not officially defined. However, we can assume that it includes, among others: education, child development and schooling; health; culture, aid, social care and inclusion; housing; physical exercise; recreation and sport; public safety.

*Social enterprises are groups of people engaged in non-commercial economic activity with the aim of (1) re-integrating disadvantaged persons into the labor market, or (2) benefiting communities by improving the quality of life of their members, including the stimulation of local socio-economic development through the provision of goods and/or services of public benefit.*

This definition does not imply which legal form a social enterprise should adopt and does not set out the conditions for its formalization. This is important, as using a different approach would exclude from the scope of the research initiatives that are pure examples of social entrepreneurship – even those presented in the catalog of good practices - though based on informal ties.

## THE RESEARCH ON POLISH SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: SOME BASIC INFORMATION

The primary objectives of the study were to identify the factors enabling the sustainability of Polish social enterprises. The resulting research task was to obtain the fullest possible insight into what is happening both inside social enterprises, as well as outside – how they are functioning in the market. Therefore, the research was clearly exploratory in nature. It was assumed that obtaining as complete a picture as possible of their functioning within a given social, legal and institutional environment will provide information on the following specific issues:

- characteristics of the enterprise, that is, the origin and history of the social enterprise, aims, business aspects (the type of business, customers, market position, business concept and its rationality), social aspects, employees (number and structure, recruitment, turnover, position in the enterprise), organizational structure, management;
- embeddedness of the enterprises in the community;
- the social capital of the enterprises (integration within social networks and access to institutional resources supporting social enterprises).

In any empirical study, selecting the sample is critically important. Given the research objectives and the available resources and opportunities, purposive sampling was determined to be the optimal solution. The reason was to include a group of social enterprises in the study that would reflect the diverse range of types. It was presumed that this group would include social enterprises selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- Type of social mission. Three types of mission, and therefore three types of social enterprises can be distinguished. These are: (1) work integration social enterprises (WISE), those whose mission is to integrate persons from disadvantaged groups into the labor market and increase their employability; (2) enterprises providing public benefit services, which, in general, improve the quality of life of local community residents (or persons of certain social categories); and, (3) enterprises focused on local development, whose key aspect is the economic mobilization of local communities. This typology is not exclusive in a logical sense: enterprises exist that have more than one mission (especially often combining the social and economic reintegration of individuals with the economic activation of the community) – in such situations, categorizing the type is determined by the mission which clearly dominates.
- The legal form. This includes in particular: social cooperatives, vocational rehabilitation centers,<sup>3</sup> limited liability non-profit firms and social enterprises operated by associations, foundations and social organizations associated with churches and religious communities;
- Location of the operations: the level of urbanization, regional cultural diversity.

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<sup>3</sup> Vocational rehabilitation centers are a particular type of social enterprise, whose aim is to improve the employability of disabled persons preparing to enter the open labor market or sheltered workshops; vocational rehabilitation centers are supported to a great extent by public financing.

The selection was made following the criteria listed above and using a data base developed earlier through desk research, which includes basic information on 341 social enterprises.

The fieldwork was conducted from October 2010 to March 2011. Field researchers were persons experienced in both the methods used and the subject matter of the study.

Ultimately, 37 social enterprises took part in the study. The structure of the studied group of enterprises by type of social mission was as follows: 24 WISE (the dominant group of Polish enterprises in the social economy), seven enterprises focused on local development, and six enterprises providing public benefit services. Of all the enterprises studied, 22 were social cooperatives, vocational rehabilitation centers or limited liability firms (and so having a legal forms specific to the WISE), the remaining enterprises (15) were operated by foundations, associations or social organizations associated with churches and religious communities (and thus having the legal forms of third sector organizations).

## WHAT DIFFERS AMONG THE DISTINGUISHED TYPES OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES?

The first difference is that the distinguished types of social enterprises obviously differ by their social mission. Not only does its subject differ, but also the conditions under which the mission is implemented (its "logic").

Those with the WISE mission link the economic and social goal in such a way as to provide employment (if possible - profitably) to persons who otherwise would have no chance of entering (or returning to) the labor market. Additionally, having these persons employed should provide the opportunity for them to raise their self-esteem, have their respect restored in the eyes of others and increase their level of competence and vocational skills (employability). It should be noted that these objectives are largely met when the enterprise begins its operations, whereas the true challenge is in maintaining the activities. In practice, the activities undertaken by a work integration social enterprise to meet its social aims require that it concentrate on two tasks: maintaining itself in the market (including maximizing profits) and/or increasing employment. Economic goals, therefore, gain in importance.

The mission of enterprises oriented toward local development is expressed in the concept of *sustainable development*. In practice, this means, among other things: activating a community, promoting it, sharing what it has of value – its culture and/or local natural environment, stimulating the local economy and entrepreneurship.

In general, the public benefit enterprises (studied) concentrated on meeting certain specific categories of social needs by undertaking health, welfare and cultural activities. They often realized the mission that inspired the founders of the social enterprises.

The observations above show that even though each type of social enterprise under study ends up linking social and economic goals, the principle behind this connection differs. WISE structurally connect social aims with economic ones, somewhat on the basis of their identity. In other words, the interconnection of these objectives is an inherent, structural feature of these social enterprises. In the case of public benefit enterprises, social and economic objectives are linked in the effective "consumption" of services, which have an additional social value perceived by community members. This means that social enterprises with this type of status may be controversial, because attributing a social value to anything is of its nature relative and discretionary, and this includes the services being offered. Essentially, this is actually decided by axiological considerations. However, in the case of local development-oriented enterprises, the relationship between economic and social goals is causal. Economic activities are undertaken to produce the desired social and socio-economic effects.

It can therefore be assumed that the achievement of these results depends on the effective operation of the enterprise, and so on praxeological considerations.

Second, different criteria are used to define the area of business activity in each of the distinct types of social enterprises.

For a social enterprise to exist, there must be an area of commercial activity. On one hand, the selection of this activity can be an expression (and often is) of the social mission carried out by the social enterprise. Therefore, different criteria must be applied by WISE, other criteria in the case of public benefit enterprises, and yet other criteria by local development enterprises. On the other hand, this choice must take into account the realities of the market, that is, the likelihood of success in bringing a product/service to the real market. So it must be a choice that will find willing consumers of the product. This criterion is common to all types of social enterprises (and not only "social" ones). A feature of the modern economy is the primacy of the service sector over manufacturing. This is also seen in social enterprises. Among those social enterprises studied, only a few are involved in the production of goods, generally niche items or those whose market value is determined by their symbolic value.

The type of services offered by public benefit and local development enterprises derives from their very nature. The former bring care services, medical/therapeutic services, cultural services, etc. to the market. Local development enterprises focus on an entire range of services reflecting the tourism, recreation and vacation sectors. Both groups of services are qualified services in the sense that the social enterprise offering them must have the required human resources – the appropriately skilled staff to provide the services. In fact, if this condition is not met, starting the business does not make sense and does not occur. The risk in this situation is related, above all, to finding something that is in demand, and not in developing/maintaining quality services, although, of course, this too may be a problem. Because the services offered by social enterprises often are unique, they have customers – so their position in terms of sustainability is not bad - their situation is stable and management can think in real terms about developing.

The services offered by WISE have a different character. Here, the choice of services must be adapted to the "level of employability" of the employees undergoing the process of integration. This level is generally limited by: (1) the lack of or low occupational qualifications of these persons, which is related to their educational level, long-term unemployment or intellectual disability, or (2) the disability, if it is other than intellectual. In the first case, the services offered can be based only on relatively simple activities, while in the second - of critical importance is not so much the level of complexity, but how to adapt working conditions to the type of disability encountered that will enable the services to be provided.

Third, each of the specified types of social enterprises has different groups of employees. They vary in terms of their composition, the problems faced and challenges that must be addressed.

WISE essentially provide jobs for persons who are disadvantaged in the labor market. It is worth noting that, in general, such persons do not freely choose to work in these enterprises, but do so as a result of participating in a work activation program or a referral by the employment office. To work in a WISE does not automatically mean staying there; almost all the enterprises studied had problems with staff turnover, which, depending on the type of WISE (Davister, C., Defourny, J., Gregoire, O., 2004) was the result of different factors.

In those WISE intended to be a place of temporary employment – a stage on the path to the open labor market – employees should be changing regularly. This does not happen because employees do not treat their jobs as temporary. They become accustomed to working there, identify with their workplace and do not want to leave, despite their dissatisfaction with low wages. Management is also interested in reducing employee turnover, as it does not want to lose already trained personnel. This

loss weakens the market position of the social enterprise, which – in a competitive environment – threatens its survival.

In turn, WISE, which are supposed to provide relatively stable employment to persons excluded from the labor market – primarily social cooperatives in Poland – have a turnover rate that is too high. While the surveyed cooperatives included cases where all of the founding members remained currently involved, there were also those where half, 75%, or even more of the members had changed. In these cases, in order to survive, the enterprise had to select new persons able to function effectively in the role of cooperative members, and above all, able to undertake the responsibilities of an employee. This seems to be the level of involvement in a cooperative's affairs that can be realistically expected of these members. In the social cooperatives studied, members did not exhibit greater involvement in management or strategic planning. The cooperative is treated as a place of employment and its members were not eager to be held jointly responsible for its fate. It could be that cooperative members with an awareness of this expectation may actually have difficulty coping with this, as often these are people who suffer from the syndrome of learned helplessness. This may lead to conflicts, which in some cases result in a crisis.

Employment can assume its classical form in local development social enterprises. Here, employees are persons recruited from the open labor market and employed under standard conditions in response to professional competence. In other words, from the employee's perspective, working in a social enterprise is just like work in any other place. But it can also take on a specific form. In some local development social enterprises, it is difficult to categorize their employees within the definitions of the Labour Code. The work required to keep an enterprise in business is performed by the officers of the association (usually the president) free of charge. Such persons, when needed, mobilize "associates" from a relatively fixed group of local community members, employing them to perform certain tasks. The size of this group of "associates" may vary, ranging from a dozen to several dozen persons. Their primary source of income is not derived from working in the enterprise, this is additional income. Those who are recruited to work are persons who want to perform the job and are able to do so, though intentionally the job offer is generally targeted to the unemployed/professionally inactive as a form of activation. It seems that a key feature of some local development enterprises is that their workers are not bound by formal employer-employee relations, but by informal social relations or membership in the association whose founding was based on such relationships. These enterprises are deeply embedded in the local social fabric and it seems that their fate largely relies on the quality of those ties.

The nature of public benefit enterprises requires that their employees can only be persons with the relevant competencies. In fact, without a permanent, full-time staff, these enterprises would not be able to function and only the scale of their operations determines their size. A feature of this category of studied enterprises is generally the specific atmosphere they generate, ensuing from both their social mission and the character of the work they perform, as well as the dedication of their leaders/founders to the idea of the enterprise.

The composition of the staff and the form and character of their relations to each other may be an aspect of social enterprises which most strongly and clearly differentiates them by type. The empirical evidence presented above shows that the "employees' worlds" of WISE-oriented, local development and public service enterprises differ greatly: the problems and challenges they face depend on who founds them. It should be noted that an especially sharp distinction is drawn between integration enterprises and those focused on local development functioning at a low level of formalization. This is because WISE employees are generally recruited not for their competence, but because of their social status (belonging to a disadvantaged group or a particular community). Even more, this principle cannot be changed, because abandoning it would contradict the identity of this type of enterprise. At the same time, it has far-reaching consequences, because it requires the profile of the company to adapt to the group of employees, and not vice versa. In those enterprises where recruitment is conducted as in typical, commercial firms, i.e. on the basis of competence, the dissimilarity in

employees does not have to be as fundamental, as is the case with public benefit and local development enterprises.

Fourth, the circumstances of establishing the distinguished types of social enterprises differ.

Basically, two basic types of circumstances can be identified in the establishment of WISE enterprises. The first is when this is previously planned by an organization already working with a disadvantaged group as the next phase in its development. It is worth noting that in this case, the choice of legal form of the enterprise being established is generally the result of a conscious decision made by the founding organization, even though a social cooperative is the form suggested publicly and preferred by the state for a WISE. In this case, the impetus for deciding to establish the enterprise, but not the cause, is generally an opportunity to apply for public funds needed for its launch. In other words, the enterprise being discussed would have been established sooner or later. Another consequence of this is that from the very start, enterprises established in this way operate in a friendly and supportive environment, which is ensured by the founding organization. The second type of circumstance is when a WISE is established solely as a project in reaction to a program initiated as part of the government's social policy. When the initiative to establish a social enterprise originates with the central/local government, the enterprise can count on their favor and support also when it begins its business activities. This may not be the case when the enterprise is established through the personal resourcefulness of private individuals.

Social enterprises focused on local development were established differently. Here, of crucial importance was the level of local communities' potential. When it was sufficiently high, the social enterprise was established either as a result of the initiative of local grassroots activists or the inspiration to undertake the effort may have come from an external (but not top-down) source. The communities in which they were established – and operate – and this includes all the social enterprises studied in this group, are linked by at least two features: a) the communities were economically weak, neglected, in a state of stagnation or crisis where development was critically needed; b) some resources existed (cultural, environmental) that prior to the establishment of the enterprise were either insufficiently taken advantage of or not used at all.

The founding of public benefit social enterprises seems to be the least different. It may be that most frequently they originate as the result of the coexistence of two factors: the recognition of certain unmet social needs and having a relatively original way of meeting those needs.

The fact that other circumstances accompany the establishment of each of these distinguished types of social enterprises may be significant for two reasons. It suggests that, first, other social forces may be "hiding" behind their formation and operation. Second, they are embedded in a different social and institutional network, as well as legal environment, which is significant in terms of their identity, the support they can count on and the legal and institutional rules that they have to consider in their functioning.

Fifth, the distinguished types of social enterprises prefer different financing strategies.

It seems that social enterprises have access to two basic financing strategies. The first could be called the market – this means that the business is treated as the primary source of income, whereas public funds granted in the form of subsidies are eventually supplementary. The second strategy – which can be called redistribution – assumes that the basic support for the enterprise is from subsidies granted from public funds, supplemented by business income.

The empirical evidence gathered in this study suggests that the market strategy decidedly dominates in local development and public benefit enterprises, while the redistribution strategy coexists with the market strategy in WISE.

Sixth, the distinguished social enterprises differ by their overall condition.

The social enterprises studied were not subject to the procedures of a reliable social audit based on "hard" data. Therefore, an effort was made to assess their condition by using "soft" criteria. (Needless to say, the risk of making incorrect assessments using such a procedure is very high.) Based on the analysis of the empirical data collected, a three-step scale could be identified, enabling the general condition of the social enterprise to be "measured". An enterprise could be at a level of:

- fighting for survival, reflected in the situation where income is so low that employment is decreasing, the balance sheet is negative, and there is real danger of collapse,  
or
- achieving stability, reflected in the situation where revenues and expenses are generally balanced and the enterprise can consider further development,  
or
- development, reflected in the situation where it either has the resources to develop or is encouraged to do so by its position in the market (e.g., orders surpass current ability to meet them).

The examples of the enterprises studied seem to suggest that it is more difficult for WISE to achieve a relatively good condition than for other types of social enterprises. While local development enterprises and, especially, public benefit enterprises are found more frequently in the development phase, WISE are either fighting to survive or have achieved stabilization.

## COMMON ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Social enterprises, regardless of the social mission they serve, are similar in two respects: a) they are organizational hybrids and b) they use the same arsenal of marketing strategies.

a) All WISE, local development and public benefit enterprises surveyed were linked by the characteristics of classic third sector organizations and traditional companies while also having to comply with the rules governing the public sector. This hybridity – in light of what is already known about the nature of social enterprises – is, of course, nothing unusual, just the opposite – it would be extraordinary if it were any other way (Brandsen, van de Donk, Putters, 2005, Bode, Evers, Schulz, 2006, Evers, 2008 Billis, 2010). Acting at the junction of three sectors, combining social and economic aims, social enterprises must somehow be hybrids (Nyssens, 2006). This indeed is their distinctiveness in relation to all types of other organizations.

What is interesting, however, is that regardless of the social mission, social enterprises take advantage of this hybridity in the same innovative way, developing their own formula to ensure optimum opportunities for stability, growth and to enhance their competitiveness. This formula is based on the fact that one social project essentially acts as a structure composed of several formally separate organizations. Informal ties provide the full complementarity, integration and coordination for such a structure. Among the social enterprises studied, two types of such structures able to be identified.

The first is when a social enterprise with clear, formal autonomy is made part of another organization that incubated the enterprise and now supports it in various ways. In this type of hybrid, the social enterprise is in fact one organism with its parent organization. The empirical data collected provides examples of incubated enterprises that adopted the formula of a social cooperative, vocational rehabilitation center and limited liability company. It should be noted that the "complexity" of these hybrids is not only the fact that one organization is embedded in a second one; there are also cases where more of such relatively independent structures are embedded in a parent organization. In one of the organizations studied, except for unrelated departments/organizational units, three social cooperatives were operating next to three production/service workshops, all operated by same group.

The second type of hybrid structure is essentially a conglomerate – an economic entirety consisting of a number of relatively equally important and closely related organizations. It is worth noting that the most famous and spectacularly successful business in Poland's social economy sector is just this type of hybrid. One such organization is a WISE, made up of two associations, a vocational training center and a limited liability company. The second example is a local development enterprise consisting of two associations, a foundation and a limited liability company. This hybrid formula allows the organization to make best use of the opportunities available to social enterprises and reduce the risks to which they are exposed.

b) The type of social enterprise, it seems, does not influence the choice of marketing strategy used. The empirical data collected enabled the identification of several such strategies.

First, social enterprises try to find a *niche* in the market (usually local, but not necessarily) and *fill it*. It sometimes happens that starting an enterprise is preceded by appropriate, professional analyses, which suggest where these niches may be found. A niche can be both an ordinary service/product (e.g. catering, cleaning or organic production), as well as something unique (e.g. music classes taught with special methods, theme villages) or specific (e.g. care of cemetery graves).

Second, social enterprises try to enter the market with a service that is already available, in the hope that a *better price-performance ratio* will outdo the competition. Some of the social enterprises studied confirmed the effectiveness of this strategy. Also, surveyed enterprise leaders everywhere emphasized the importance they attach to quality. If the quality is too low, the firm's survival is in doubt.

The third strategy, which is gradually entering Poland, relates to patterns of post-materialistic consumption, guided by the *symbolic value* of goods and services rather than their utilitarian value. This includes, among others, the phenomenon of socially responsible consumption and the growing demand for health foods, organic products and custom made goods.

The fourth strategy is to *capitalize on local resources* - cultural (historical) or environmental. This strategy, if other conditions for the success of the company are met, can provide truly remarkable results.

It appears that the first two of the above-mentioned business strategies are those used most frequently. However, capitalizing on local resources seems to be particularly important for enterprises focused on local development.

In concluding the review of similarities, it should be added that social enterprises do not differ by size: in each of the separate types, there are enterprises employing just a few people, as well as those where there are from 20 to even several hundred persons.

## CONCLUSIONS: TOWARD A SOCIAL MISSION-BASED TYPOLOGY OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

The study results show that the social mission is the factor most strongly differentiating social enterprises. So strongly, that saying that WISE-oriented social enterprises, local development enterprises and public benefit enterprises seem to create their own "separate worlds" does not seem to be an overstatement.

This conclusion applies primarily to the enterprises studied. It is very likely that this is also true of other Polish social enterprises. And if so, the key significance and impact of the type of social mission on a social enterprise's functioning may be a universal factor – an inherent feature of the social phenomenon known as the social enterprise.

The adoption of such an assumption would, I believe, have significant implications, both practical and theoretical.

The main theoretical implication would amount to suggesting that in addition to searching for – let's say – a general theory of social enterprise, a search must be made for a theory of a given type of social enterprise, as defined by its social mission. In other words, it would mean conducting research on theories related to WISE, local development enterprises and public benefit enterprises, to refer to the typologies revealed in the research presented above, but surely it is possible that other typologies exist based on the social mission. In fact, this brings to mind the type of theorizing that, in his time, Robert Merton described as theories of the middle range. It seems that in reference to social enterprises, the most advanced theoretical work has been accomplished in the direction of a theory on WISE (as the theory of the middle range), due to the great contribution of research and studies carried out under the auspices of EMES (Spear, Bidet, 2005; Nyssens, 2006).

The practical implications are, above all, the opportunity to better understand the problems, barriers and restrictions that social enterprises with different social missions experience, and on the other hand, the challenges they face in ongoing and strategic management. The scope and types of issues that come into play here can be illustrated by referring to the multi-dimensional model of social entrepreneurship, formulated by Weerawardena and Sullivan Mort (Weerawardena, Sullivan Mort, 2006). They state that three conditions – mutually dependent and constraining – three functional prerequisites – must be met for a social enterprise to be able to create social value: adaptability to the external environment, organizational sustainability and implementation of social mission. These in turn require enterprises to be innovative, proactive and able to manage risk. Note – this is what the research under discussion showed – that the possibilities and conditions of meeting these challenges are different for each of the distinct types of social enterprises. There is reason to believe that relatively, the riskiest type of social enterprise, and therefore the most difficult to manage, is the WISE, while the least risky is the public benefit enterprise. Answers to the question of whether this is actually the case should be sought in empirical research.

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