

## Book Review

# **SOCIAL ECONOMY. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN EIGHT MEMBER STATES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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Before going into the technical details of this book I would like to emphasize that the social economy, although a new concept, received a lot of attention in the recent years, mainly due to the efforts of the European Union to develop this sector. The European Social Fund boosted the development of the social economy in the member states through the Operational Program Human Resources Development, 2007-2013. The coordinators of this book have also displayed a constant interest for the social economy, as shown by the number of reference papers they have published (Cace S., Nicolăescu V., Scoican A., 2010; Cace S, Nicolăescu V., Anton A.N., Rotaru S., 2011; Neguț A., Nicolăescu V. Preoteasa A.M., Cace C., 2011; Cace C., Cace S., Cojocaru S., Nicolăescu V. 2012; Nicolăescu V., Cace C, Hatzantonis D., 2012; Cace C., Nicolăescu V., Katsikaris L., Parcharidis I., 2012)

The book I intend to describe briefly in this article was developed within the framework of the project „INTEGRAT – Resources for the socially excluded women

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and Roma groups”, co-financed from the European Social fund through the Operational Program Human Resources Development, 2007-2013 and implemented by the Association for Socio-Economic Development and Promotion Catalactica, Bucharest branch, in partnership with the Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV) and with Bolt International Consulting – L. Katsikaris – I. Parcharidis O.E. (Greece). The regions targeted by this project were Bucharest-Ilfov and South-East (Bucharest City, Ilfov, Buzău, Brăila, Galați, Constanța, Vrancea and Tulcea Counties). The coordinators of this manual - Victor Nicolăescu, Sorin Cace, Eleftheria Koumalatsou and Simona Stănescu, give an overall image of the social economy in eight member states of the European Union (United Kingdom, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain), showing the way in which social economy contributes to the enhancement of social inclusion in each studied member state.

The text of the book is divided into four chapters. It starts with the description of the context and of the way in which social economy developed in Europe and continues with a chapter dedicated to the eight member states that were surveyed in terms of the relevant characteristics of the social economy. Chapter three makes a comparative analysis of some social economy organisations and projects in the eight member states, while the last chapter explores the ways in which the social economy activities can be financed and the ways in which investments can be done in social initiatives.

The first chapter describes the evolution of the social economy starting with the very first use of the term, in 1830, and passing through all the stages of its development, both conceptual, theoretic, and applied, by describing the institutions and systems that contributed to the evolution of the social economy to its present stage. The chapter gives a description of the types of organisations that belonged and/or belong to the sector of social economy, together with the criteria of classification as such. An increased attention is given to the social enterprises, a rather new concept compared to the other types of organisations included under the umbrella of the social economy, concept that has yet to reach its maturity and which is understood and used in many different ways. The social enterprise is a global phenomenon and the authors analysed the development of this type of organisation in different regions and states of the world. The present current of promoting social economy seems to revolve around the social enterprises which are, in many ways, caught in the trap of the context which often hinders their access to public and private funds (Nicolăescu V., 2011, p. 114). In most European states the social enterprise is seen as a cooperative or social association whose purpose is to provide employment or care taking services in participative ways. The perception of social enterprises in the United States is that of a non-profit organisation that produces income (Pîrnu D., Ungureanu E., Hagi A., 2009, p. 53). Another important concept approached in this chapter is that of “social investment”, investments that are “private contributions for

the public benefit” (p. 50) and which “bring additional benefits more than the monetary transactions and financial transfers in general” (p. 50). The financing of the small enterprises and of the social enterprises will most probably one of the main dimensions to be considered by the policies concerning entrepreneurship development as a whole, because the entrepreneurship has this general characteristic that it can be applied both to the economic field (of businesses) and to the social field, referring to a behaviour that can take many ways of manifestation (Cace C., Cace S., Nicolăescu V., 2011).

The second chapter starts with the description of the social economy within the boundaries of the European Union, starting from the premises that the “organizational forms, the social objectives and the areas of activity of the social enterprises can vary from one country to another” (p. 55). The authors correlate, in this chapter, the development of the social economy with the type of welfare state from which it started, explaining the different mechanisms which determined the evolution of social economy to its present stage. The chapter continues by describing the national frameworks of the social economy in the eight EU member states that were studied: United Kingdom, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain and, more detailed, Romania. The concluding section of this chapter presents several support measures for the social economy observed in the eight member states. It also presents several operational characteristics of the social economy noticed in the same countries.

Chapter three shows the results of the comparative study conducted in the eight EU member states, which included 40 social economy projects and organisations. The first part of the chapter presents at length the methodology used for the analysis of the 40 surveyed social economy projects and organisations. In the final part of the chapter the authors present the results of this analysis, showing that the “analysis of the projects and enterprises/organisations showed that there is no particular pattern to follow; on the other hand, each case is unique, because many conditions influence its development, such as the socio-economic framework, the sources of financing, the experience and expertise of the professionals involved in it, etc. (p. 254). However, the study displayed several common operational characteristics that should be adopted by all social economy organisations.

The last chapter of the book focuses on the concept of social investment and on the different forms of making social investments. The authors show that the European Social Fund is the main instrument financing the social economy, together with the progresses achieved lately in Europe in the consolidation of the socio-economic environment.

The European socio-economic framework has been and still is dominated by the economic crisis, a crisis for which “there is no universal remedy that the national

policies can apply in order to limit the effects of the crisis and get past it" (Cace C., Cace S., Cojocaru Ș., Nicolăescu V., 2012, p. 51). The economic crisis stressed several problems that already existed both among the large communities and within the groups of vulnerable population. The consequences of the current economic crisis reflect on the vulnerable groups in terms of the social tensions generated by the increasing level of poverty of the population, of the fear of losing the job, of the increasing number of families that have serious financial problems, of the restrictions in financing the consumption credits and of the effects determined by workforce mobility (Bostani I., Grosu V., 2010, p. 20).

Social economy may bring a major contribution to the decrease of the socio-economic gaps confronting the different disfavoured groups, but it is very important that social economy activities receive financing (Nicolăescu V., Cace C., Cace S., 2012; Nicolăescu V., Cace C., Hatzantonis D., 2012), and that the results of social economy activities are properly evaluated and monitored (Cace C., Nicolăescu V., Katsikaris L., Parcharidis I., 2012; Neaguț A., Nicolăescu V. Preoteasa A.M., Cace C., 2011; Katsikaris, L., Parcharidis, I. 2010)

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