

Entry

Social Entrepreneurship Conceptual Approaches

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Definition: Social entrepreneurship defines organizations or initiatives that, by producing and/or transacting goods or services, seek new solutions to persistent social problems, thus generating high social value. In other words, that deliberately subject their economic strategy to social priorities and place the social mission at the center of their concerns. Such social priorities include poverty, unemployment, education, health, local development, or the environment. Outside this common base, the aggregation of other characteristics or delimitations has given rise to conceptual fuzziness, namely, as to the organizational forms to be adopted (restricted to non-profit organizations or open to for-profit businesses with clear social purposes) and the weight of the social dimension in SE. Another manifestation of conceptual malleability emerges from the coexistence of different schools of thought. On the opposite side, one notes the narrowing of the concept, which mainly derives from a Westernized vision and still pays little attention to the contributions from developing countries. In addition to analyzing these topics, the current entry points out some recommendations regarding the deepening of scientific research in this field.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; social entrepreneurship; schools of thought; social enterprise; social problems; social transformation; social economy



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1. Introduction

Although relatively new, the phenomenon (concept and practice) of social entrepreneurship (SE) has been attracting growing interest and support. The concept originated in the United States and quickly spread to other Anglo-Saxon countries. More recently, and alongside some expressions of interest detected in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, in Europe initiatives to promote social entrepreneurship have multiplied: mobilization of civil society, specialized training, identification of good practices, congresses and thematic seminars, academic research, and even growing attention from the European Union itself.

Regarding research, the various literature reviews on SE [1–4] show a considerable increase in scientific production in this field, with research coming from various scientific areas and multiple geographies. It is an extremely current research field characterized by a very slow but constant trend, which began to have some expression in the 1980s and 1990s [5–10], but above all has registered a significant boom in scientific production during the last decade [11,12]. While giving visibility to and deepening the concept of SE, the heterogeneity of contributions [13] has also contributed to the fact that a relatively universal concept of what should be understood by SE has not yet been stabilized [14–17]. When talking about SE, it has become clear that we speak of organizations or initiatives that, by producing and/or transacting goods or services, generate high social value [18]—that is, that deliberately submit their economic strategy to social priorities and place the social mission at the center of their concerns. In this equation, the social mission is the “compass” that guides economic and management choices. Outside this common basis, the aggregation of other

characteristics or delimitations has given rise to multiple definitions and different schools of thought, which vary according to the authors and the contexts in which they are pronounced.

This conceptual malleability can be observed in the way that, for example, some authors consider that the pursuit of the social objectives by a social venture necessarily involves the adoption of democratic organizational models (participatory dynamics, deliberative culture, broad diffusion of decision rights or shared ownership) [19], and that this culture is essentially rooted in non-profit organizations, which are therefore more apt to being social enterprises. Meanwhile, other views argue that for a social enterprise to be viable, it must adopt a business-like behavior and be innovative and competitive in its field, and even that social goals can be included but not assumed as priorities in the organizations' activities. On the other hand, it can also be seen that the notion of SE is still very much influenced by a Westernized vision that pays little attention to the contributions from developing countries. Similarly, some definitions, placing the individual entrepreneur at the center of the action, give insufficient value to the role that context and collectives, whether organizations, groups, or communities, play in the emergence and consolidation of a social initiative.

These are just a few examples of the conceptual fuzziness that characterizes the understanding of what a social enterprise is (and can be). The observation and description of the different conceptual approaches that characterize the field of SE is one of the main objectives of this entry. Its achievement is associated with the pursuit of another objective, which even precedes the previous one: that of presenting, from the historical and scientific point of view, the genesis and evolution of the SE concept. Among other aspects, it is important to clarify the transition from the concept of entrepreneur to that of social entrepreneur, and then to pay special attention to how different schools of thought have been built around this concept, reflecting different paths and contexts. Finally, we believe it is pertinent to deepen the analysis on the importance of the social dimension in the context of SE and, furthermore, to perspective paths for the deepening of research and the consolidation of the SE concept.

As for its structure, the entry begins with the presentation of the concept of an entrepreneur, which historically precedes those of a social entrepreneur and social enterprise. Following the historical background, the paper outlines, in Section 3, a contrasted analysis of the diversity of perceptions as to what "is" and "is not" SE. In Section 4, the object of analysis is the constitution of distinct schools of thought, in its evolution from two (reflecting the separation between the European and North American views) to four approaches. In the fifth section, we focus on the place of the "social" in SE, specifying how the European tradition of the social economy interferes in determining the social principles by which a social enterprise should be governed. Section 6 presents some recommendations that have been made regarding the deepening of scientific research in this field. The entry concludes with some final considerations, as a synthesis of the path taken throughout it.

2. Historical Background: From Entrepreneur to Social Entrepreneur

An entrepreneur is "someone who starts their own business, especially when this involves seeing a new opportunity," as defined in the Cambridge Dictionary. Or, as Joseph Schumpeter describes it, "entrepreneurs are a particular type of agent" [20] (p. 116), who differ in their conduct from the "rational-routine" type of agent and who possess exceptional qualities in the combination of factors of production. In addition, from his perspective, entrepreneurs are those who have no lasting relationship to an "individual holding" (firm or other organization) and who come into action only to give new forms to these holdings.

If today it is considered a central element of business activity, the figure of the entrepreneur was only incorporated into economic theory in the 19th century with the studies of Jean-Baptiste Say (1767–1832). To this author, entrepreneurs create value by moving economic resources from areas of low productivity to others of higher productivity and income [21–23]. To be considered value creation, it must respond to an unmet need or satisfy it in a more efficient or better way. Therefore, the entrepreneur plays an essential

role in the production and distribution of goods in competitive markets, being described by Say as an individual who introduces elements of differentiation and innovation in the face of competition [24]. In turn, J. A. Schumpeter (1883–1950), a leading theorist in the dissemination of this concept, developed the idea that the entrepreneur’s motive lies mainly in the challenge, in the change. Their function is to reform or revolutionize the production pattern, giving rise to new combinations of factors: the creation of a new product, opening of new markets, discovery of a new source of raw materials or semi-finished products, and forming a new productive organization [25].

Valuing a perspective that has been less explored, it is very interesting to note the affinities identified [26,27] between the Schumpeterian theory of entrepreneurship and Max Weber’s contributions to the interpretation of the relationship between “the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.” Anticipating the reading carried out by Schumpeter, Weber already considered that an entrepreneur is a type of person endowed with charisma, that is, with the ability to co-opt the enthusiasm and adherence of others, thus making room to lead change and innovation. On the other hand, both coincide in the idea that the entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial attitude are not only the result of individual, exceptional characteristics, but also of a time and context that favor them. In this circumstance, Weber analyzes how the Protestant ethos favored the development of a capitalist ethos and a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship and innovation. In turn, the concept of a “Schumpeterian entrepreneur” refers more to the behavior than to the actor [26]. A creative personality with good ideas is not enough; the entrepreneur must have the ability to read the environment in which he or she operates, react to institutional resistance, and mobilize the values and interests that favor change [27,28], namely, the resistances and rigidities imposed by the “rational-routine” bureaucracy, as Weber had already warned. Finally, it is worth noting the author’s appropriation of the Weberian methodological line by being mainly concerned with drawing the ideal type of entrepreneur, rather than extracting practical consequences from it regarding the development and achievement of the entrepreneurial spirit.

More recently, authors such as Peter Drucker [29] and Scott Shane [30] have broadened the concept of entrepreneur to include the idea of opportunity. According to their interpretation, the entrepreneur is characterized as an opportunistic economic agent who creates or helps to create a company based on an emerging and not yet exploited opportunity. In other words, the entrepreneur is always looking for change, reacts to change, and exploits it as an opportunity [21]. This leads us to recall an interesting observation made by Schumpeter himself, that “being an entrepreneur is neither a profession nor, as a rule, a durable state” [20] (p. 112). Being an entrepreneur is not a permanent state, it is innovation and change that are the foundation of entrepreneurial behavior. From the moment that routine settles in, the entrepreneur ceases to be one.

As Gregory Dees, one of the most cited authors on the subject, states, “Social entrepreneurs are one species in the genus entrepreneur” [21] (p. 3). In this sense, social entrepreneurs, like any other entrepreneurs, are driven by the desire for change and innovation. They observe opportunities, innovate solutions to unmet needs, find new ways to combine existing or possessed resources, move in context, and mobilize other interests to the dynamics of change. Yet at the same time, they are “one species” marked by distinctive traits in the entrepreneurship landscape, which comes from the fact that they are “entrepreneurs with a social mission” [21] (p. 3). Their character of exceptionality is strongly marked by the economic and social environment in which they emerge, and by the nature of the needs to which they seek to respond: increased unemployment and precariousness, an aging population, the emergence of new social needs, and retraction of the State in key sectors such as health, education, and social action. Faced with such a context, social entrepreneurs are challenged to give priority to ethical and social values and to put the economic profitability of their activity in second place.

3. The Concept of SE and the Different Understandings

When addressing the idea of a social entrepreneur, there is a broad consensus around one key idea: A social entrepreneur combines economic boldness with a social mission [4,31–33]. This is the fundamental characteristic of some social entrepreneurs who have become true global references in this field, as is the case of Muhammad Yunus (Bangladesh), Nobel Laureate in 2006 and founder of the Grameen Bank. His institution actively offers microcredit to millions of families. The bank lends without collateral or papers and is mainly sought after by women: They are 97% of the 6.6 million beneficiaries. The recovery rate is 98.85%. Another example is that of Michael Young (England), pointed out as a central figure in the promotion and dissemination of social entrepreneurship through the creation of the Institute for Community Studies and the School for Social Entrepreneurs. His legacy is assumed by institutions such as the Young Foundation. A third example is that of Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka, identified as the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs and which today supports almost 3000 Ashoka Fellows in 70 countries. He is also the author of a phrase that has become famous in this milieu, that "the social entrepreneur is not the one who gives the fish, nor teaches how to fish; he is the one who will not rest until he revolutionizes the fishing industry".

Ashoka and other networks are today fundamental supports for the emergence of countless social entrepreneurs whose actions are recognized as particularly meritorious in solving local problems that are invisible to the media and public opinion. This group includes Cybele Amado (Salvador, Brazil), who in 1996 created the Teacher Development and Assistance Program. When she came across the high illiteracy and dropout rates among the students of Palmeiras, a rural district in Bahia, she took on the goal of contributing to improving the quality of public education by supporting the training of educators and educational managers. The project has reduced school dropouts by up to 80%. This is also the case of Frederick W. Day (Chicago, USA), founder of the Buffalo Bicycle Company, who created a special bicycle to facilitate transportation in African terrains. Compared to walking, bicycles represent a huge leap in productivity and facilitate access to health, education, and economic opportunities. In addition, the simple and sustainable nature of bicycles empowers individuals, their families, and their communities.

However, according to this logic, can the epithet of "social entrepreneur" also be extended to John Rockefeller, André Citroën, or Mark Zuckerberg? Alongside the consolidation of a powerful financial empire, Rockefeller created a foundation to support various activities in the fields of working-class education, research, and health. The Citroën brothers, on the other hand, were proud of the support provided to their employees in terms of their children's education or health care. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of the social network Facebook, stated in 2012 in an open letter to potential investors that "Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission—that of making the world more open and connected". Further on, he assures that "we don't build services to make money, we make money to build better services." In this sense, and according to Groot and Dankbaar, these entrepreneurs are not only not anti-social but also run businesses with a strong social impact and are profitable enough to support themselves. In their view, "... there is no a priori reason why social entrepreneurs should be less profitable than normal entrepreneurs" [34] (p. 20). This is, however, a perspective that does not meet with consensus, particularly on the part of those who, looking at the actions of these entrepreneurs as undeniably bringing significant social effects, include them in what is known as corporate social responsibility (CSR)—that is, an active and voluntary contribution by these entrepreneurs aimed at improving economic, social, or environmental conditions, internally or externally but that, in essence, does not invert the framework of priorities regarding the articulation between the economic and social dimensions of business activity, always maintaining the former as dominant over the latter [35,36].

Consequently, the way in which the concept of social entrepreneurship is defined reflects this plurality of views on the reality of the organizations and initiatives that emerge, and of the protagonists that shape them: "Some use the term social entrepreneurship to

describe any form of moneymaking enterprise with a social mission. Others use it to describe any type of nonprofit organization that is new to them. Still others use the term to make a new case for an old idea" [32].

Within the broad spectrum that has been adopted to define the concept of SE, transforming it into an "immense tent" [22], one of the extremes lies in the acceptance that this idea may include undertakings where social goals are added to the firm's objectives, even where they may not rank in the firm's priorities and may be assumed with instrumental purposes. It is in this sense that Peredo and McLean [37] define it as being some person or persons who (1) aim at creating social value, either exclusively or at least in some prominent way; (2) recognize and exploit opportunities to create this value; (3) employ innovation, ranging from outright invention to adapting someone else's novelty in creating and/or distributing social value; (4) tolerate risk; and (5) decline to accept limitations in available resources. In the context of this definition, it is the first characteristic, i.e., the commitment to the provision of social value, that separates SE from other forms of entrepreneurship. However, it is not possible to define the exact degree of importance that social purposes should have in the context of the goals of an enterprise. It is a variable geometry, where the enterprise goals may be exclusively social or, on the other hand, may only be among the objectives of the social entrepreneur, and may even be subordinate to the aim of personal gain. The remaining characteristics are common to SE and business entrepreneurship, making the adoption of a "business methods" approach very crucial in achieving the social mission: exploitation of opportunities, innovation and risk, and strategic management, with an emphasis on profitability.

In addition, in an approach very close to the business logic, Schumpeterian-inspired definitions can be observed that place the entrepreneurial individual at the center of the action. The strong idea is that SE and the initiatives that embody it place their genesis in the inspiring figure of individuals endowed with special talents, who are intelligent, creative, optimistic, and obstinate in the face of risk and ambiguity and who, above all, have a vision for which they mobilize all their energy. This personalist approach is, for example, present in the Ashoka definition of social entrepreneurs as visionaries who change the pattern of how society operates [38,39]. According to Light [32], a vision focused on the individual is "too tight" and faces four main problems: firstly, because it is based on the "personality cult" and makes the entrepreneurial success depend on individual traits; secondly, because it diminishes the role of organizations and the resources they mobilize for the consolidation and achievement of an idea; thirdly, because it ignores that in many circumstances the idea precedes the entrepreneur, i.e., it already exists and is mature when someone appears who provides the resources to translate ordinary good practice into ultimate success; and finally, because it only looks at the side of the winners and does not take into consideration the lessons provided by those who fail or did not have the desired success.

However, the same author fails to highlight other limitations that this interpretation imposes on the concept of SE. One might say that the most important is the neglect of the role that collectives, not only in the form of organizations but also groups, communities, and others, play in the implementation of a social venture. More specifically, these collectives are the starting and ending point of an initiative, given that SE aims at combating persistent social problems and benefiting, through its action, the lives of disadvantaged, underserved, or neglected populations. As such, they directly interfere in the design of the problem (or need) and the success of the outcome depends on their adherence to the solutions provided. This leads to another factor, which is the importance of deliberative dynamics and the emergence of multi-stakeholder coalitions and arenas in increasing the social value of a social venture [40,41]. As mentioned by Petrella and Richez-Battesti, "... if social entrepreneurship is led by participative and democratic governance processes that imply a diversity of stakeholders and resources, it can be seen as a building block for an alternative model. Only under these conditions, will social enterprises be part of a third sector, separate from the private capitalist and the public sectors" [42] (p. 155). From this perspective, SE is seen as being close to the

social economy and to the ethical and social values that the latter protagonizes: solidarity, democracy, participation, territoriality, and open and multi-level governance.

Finally, the opposite pole to that of a primarily market-driven conception of SE is filled by an interpretation that, above all, emphasizes the connection between this concept and a transformative vision. From this perspective, the success of a social venture is not only measured by the resolution of social problems, but also by the ability to go beyond and catalyze a sustainable social transformation [43–45]. Such transformations may involve “capacity building initiatives,” which, by changing local norms, roles, and expectations, transform the cultural contexts in which marginalized populations live; “package distribution initiatives,” which aim to transform the relationships of individuals with the economy through empowerment and qualification actions; and “movement building initiatives,” or actions that increase the voice of marginalized groups, reflecting on the transformation of political contexts and their ability to influence key decisions. Under this approach, the social dimension is not limited to designing solutions to social problems but also extends to changing social dynamics and the systems that created and maintain those problems.

4. Different Schools of Thought

Faced with such a diversity of interpretations, the constitution of different schools of thought would be almost inevitable. Going beyond the sharing of perspectives among some authors, each school of thought brings together systemic thinking about the SE reality, conceptually influencing new research and empirical studies, and even serving as a reference for legislative initiatives. One of the priorities of analyses on social entrepreneurship has been to understand how the phenomenon has evolved and acquired distinct meanings on both sides of the Atlantic. History, “different forms of capitalism” [46], social movements, and the legal frameworks that characterize each of the contexts are not extraneous to this dichotomy. At first glance, it stands out how a broader definition assumed in the United States contrasts with a more restrictive vision on the part of Europe [47]. In the former, the definition of social entrepreneurship ranges from commercial companies engaged in socially beneficial actions (for example, through patronage) [48–50] to companies that combine the purpose of profit with social objectives (hybrids), to non-profit organizations that engage in commercial activities to support their social mission. In turn, in Europe this definition has been mainly reserved for the so-called “social enterprises,” i.e., organizations linked to the non-profit sector and often endowed with the status of cooperatives, which provide goods or services directly related to the achievement of a mission to benefit the community.

More detailed analyses of the two realities allow us to go further and note other distinctions beyond the one listed above and also points of convergence. One of the first consistent essays came from Gregory Dees and Beth B. Anderson [51], who distinguish in the North American panorama the emergence of two schools of practice and thought. In an effort to translate into knowledge the conventions already adopted in practice, the authors call the first one the Social Enterprise School of Thought (albeit “reluctantly,” as they do not agree with the term) and the other the Social Innovation School of Thought. According to the authors, the first school is inspired by the figure of the “entrepreneur” and grew around two motivations: One motivation was an increasing interest among nonprofit organizations in finding new sources of revenue to supplement donor and government funding; the other was a desire amongst some business executives to promote the provision of human social services by for-profit companies. Both motivations denote an interest in aligning economic and social value creation—therefore, using market-based strategies at the service of solutions that promote positive, lasting, and significant social change. In turn, the Social Innovation School of Thought results from the connection between entrepreneurship and innovation, and Bill Drayton (the founder of Ashoka) is said to have been one of its main drivers. According to Dees and Anderson, this approach replaces the income-centered approach with one more focused on results, that is, the ability to produce social change from new ways of satisfying unmet social needs. They quote Bornstein to emphasize that social entrepreneurs act as “transformative forces” with new ideas and obstinacy in

pursuing their visions. They conclude by stating that, “Despite occasional tensions between these schools, there are encouraging signs of convergence. Furthermore, a strong case can be made that neither of these schools on its own justifies the creation of a new field of academic inquiry. They simply involve applications of current knowledge. However, focusing on the convergence of these two schools holds greater promise, both socially and academically” [51] (p. 47).

Later, Defourny and Nyssens [52,53] take the previous distinction and make a comparison with the European reality. The result is a new typology that maintains the two orientations suggested by Dees and Anderson, although they change the name of the former to Earned Income School of Thought and compare them with the European conception of social enterprise, which they call the EMES Approach. This name comes from the fact that it was fundamentally based on the studies carried out by EMES—a European research network on social enterprises.

While some authors [46,54] adopt and deepen this tripartite vision of the “multiple faces of social entrepreneurship,” Hoogendoorn et al. [55] propose the division of the European reality into two schools, the already mentioned EMES Approach and the UK Approach. The latter distinction is relevant in the context of the European reality, insofar as Great Britain has its own specificities arising from its liberal tradition [53] and that are also reflected at the level of the situation of social enterprises [56,57]. Thus, the authors admit the possible coexistence of four schools of thought regarding the concept and practice of social entrepreneurship, two of them originating in the American tradition and the other two coexisting in the European space (see Table 1). Following this, they propose an exercise of comparison between these schools, based on seven dimensions:

Table 1. SE schools of thought.

Distinctions	American Tradition		European Tradition	
	Social Innovation School	Social Enterprise School	EMES Approach	UK Approach
Unit of observation	Individual	Enterprise	Enterprise	Enterprise
Link mission—services	Direct	Direct/indirect	Direct	Direct/indirect
Legal structure	No constraints	Nonprofit	Some constraints	No constraints
Innovation	Prerequisite	Not emphasized	Not emphasized	Not emphasized
Profit distribution	No constraint	Constraint	Limited constraint	Limited constraint
Earned income	Not emphasized	Prerequisite	Not emphasized	Important
Governance	Not emphasized	Not emphasized	Multiple stakeholder involvement emphasized	Multiple stakeholder involvement recommended

Reprinted from Ref. [55].

Summarizing the main differences and similarities, we observe that the figure of the entrepreneur (1) is central only in the Social Innovation School and is replaced by models of collective dynamics in the other trends. According to the EMES Approach, any social venture is by definition launched by a collective of citizens, whereas in the Innovation School it is mainly associated with the initiative of an individual entrepreneur. The remaining schools admit both possibilities. The social mission (2) is clearly identified by all approaches as the primary objective of social enterprises. However, the Social Enterprise School and the UK Approach do not identify a necessary link between the mission and the nature of the goods and services provided. In other words, they admit greater flexibility in the strategy followed by organizations in the search for sources of income and consequent financial autonomy. As regards the legal structure (3), the Social Innovation School and the UK Approach consider that there is no place for any restriction, whereas the Social Enterprise School restricts it exclusively to non-profit organizations and the EMES Approach considers

the degree of autonomy of social enterprises fundamental, so they should not be managed directly or indirectly by public bodies or other organizations. Regarding innovation (4), only the Social Innovation School elects it as an essential and distinctive criterion, whereas the other approaches interpret it as a desirable strategy or output. Surplus distribution (5) is admitted by the aforementioned school without any constraint, whereas the Social Enterprise School restricts it due to the non-profit status of the ventures. The EMES Approach and UK Approach combine legal figures that do not impose constraints on the distribution of profits, with others, such as the cooperative, that limit its distribution. Whereas the Social Enterprise School and the UK Approach believe that generating income (6) is a fundamental condition for the sustainability and self-sufficiency of social enterprises [58], the EMES Approach focuses its attention on financial viability, which can be achieved through different strategic options and should be decided upon by its members. Finally, the governance issue (7) is particularly valued by the EMES Approach, in the sense that it identifies social entrepreneurship with democratic and participatory management practices (the participatory nature of the initiatives, involvement of multiple stakeholders, “one person, one vote”). As far as the UK Approach is concerned, and according to the authors of the typology, the rule of broad participation varies according to the legal structure of the enterprise. The Social Innovation School advocates for partnership and networking, but democratic management is not a fundamental characteristic. The Social Enterprise School advocates for the founders’ freedom of choice to associate or not with other stakeholders, according to the criteria of the best management for the social enterprise.

5. What’s “Social” about Social Entrepreneurship? The Social Economy Legacy

The perspective consolidated by the European EMES network is based on a figure, the one of the “social enterprise” [59–61], electing it as an organizational model that embodies the principles and ways of doing business specific to social entrepreneurship. This new solution assumes the heritage and extends experiences implemented over the last decades in several countries in Central and Southern Europe: the social cooperatives in Italy [62] and in Poland [63], the social solidarity cooperatives and insertion companies in Portugal [64,65], the social purpose companies in Belgium [66], the social initiative cooperatives in Spain [67], and the cooperative societies of collective interest, or SCICs [68], in France. In some of these countries, such as Italy and Belgium, the status of “social enterprise” is not limited to cooperatives but can also be claimed by enterprises that assume a clear social purpose and commit to principles of limited profit distribution and democratic management.

The definition of social enterprise that EMES proposes does not result from any of these types in concrete but is rather the exercise of constructing an “ideal type” that synthesizes the characteristics of the different national experiences [53]. This definition comprises nine indicators.

The indicators of the economic dimension are:

- A continuous activity of producing goods or services;
- A significant level of economic risk-taking;
- A minimum level of remunerated employment.

The social dimension indicators are:

- An explicit goal of service to the community;
- An initiative emanating from a group of citizens;
- A limitation on the distribution of benefits.

The governance structure indicators are:

- A high degree of autonomy;
- A decision-making power not based on capital ownership;
- A participatory dynamic involving the different stakeholders.

The EMES network stresses that these are not normative criteria, but the main characteristics of a new entrepreneurship linked to the social economy.

The originality of this approach lies precisely in the way it assumes a connection with the social economy, which historically precedes the social entrepreneurship movement,

seeking inspiration in the ends, the processes, and the mode of organization, governance, and operation, but also in the values and principles that mark the identity of the latter, where cooperation, reciprocity, and solidarity are combined. Contrary to other schools of thought, which prioritize the heritage of business entrepreneurship and adopt a “business-like behavior” [69]—reflected not only in goals of “producing economic and social value,” but also extending to concerns about efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of goods and services—the EMES Approach focuses on strengthening the social aspect of social entrepreneurship not only through the creation of social value, but especially by assuming a strong social mission. In other words, it seeks to clearly determine what is (or should be) “social” about social entrepreneurship.

In a brief contextualization, the social economy became institutionalized at the end of the 19th century, raised against the excesses of liberal capitalism. It was inspired by the French republican ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as well as by British utopian socialism, and its matrix, not only legal but also organic, is associative and cooperative in nature. The social economy can be defined as a set of activities that contribute to the democratization of the economy through the involvement of citizens, based on cooperation, solidarity, and reciprocity. Its functions are determined according to the primacy of the social [70–72]. After a period of some fading, the social economy re-emerged strongly in the 1970s [73] and, in a definitive way, began to occupy an important space in the economy and society of several countries, particularly within the European Union [74]. According to the data published in the report “Recent evolutions of the Social Economy in the European Union” [75], European SE would consist of more than 2.8 million entities and enterprises, corresponding to over 13.6 million paid jobs or the equivalent of about 6.3% of the working population of the EU-28; would employ a workforce of over 1.9 million, including paid and non-paid; would benefit from the contribution of more than 82.8 million volunteers; and would have more than 232 million members of cooperatives, mutuals, and similar entities. It also benefits from institutional recognition, with countries such as Belgium, Spain, Greece, and Portugal approving social economy framework laws.

The link between social economy and social entrepreneurship is politically driven in Europe. SE is pointed out as an important part of the strategy to strengthen social economy, given the magnitude of social problems and the challenges of its sustainability. In this sense, the European Commission defines social enterprises as an integral part of the social economy: “A social enterprise is an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their [sic] owners or shareholders. It operates by providing goods and services for the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion and uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives. It is managed in an open and responsible manner and, in particular, involve [sic] employees, consumers and stakeholders” (Communication from the European Commission, Social Business Initiative, COM/2011/0682 final of 25/10/2011). This Communication from the Commission also identifies social enterprises’ main fields of activity: “businesses providing social services and/or goods and services to vulnerable persons (access to housing, health care, assistance for elderly or disabled persons, inclusion of vulnerable groups, child care, access to employment and training, dependency management, etc.); and/or businesses with a method of production of goods or services with a social objective (social and professional integration via access to employment for people disadvantaged in particular by insufficient qualifications or social or professional problems leading to exclusion and marginalisation) but whose activity may be outside the realm of the provision of social goods or services” [76]. Some national governments [77,78] also follow the same logic of symbiosis between the social economy and social entrepreneurship, advocating for the strengthening of this sector through the diversification of funding sources, more public mechanisms for monitoring and financing innovation, and improving the instruments for measuring social impact.

Meanwhile, the subject is hotly debated in the intellectual field, and there is more reticence about the suitability or adequacy of SE to represent and defend the crucial values of social economy. In France, for example, the debate is taking place on blogs, in the media,

and among the academic community. Jean-François Draperi is one of the participants who goes the furthest in criticizing the idea that SE incorporates the heritage and evolves in the field of social economy. The author recalls that the latter represents a social movement that articulates a movement of thought and a movement of enterprise, with the latter finding in the former a place of inspiration and modeling of its alternative aspirations: “The central object of the social economy is the grouping of people, simultaneously thought of as a place of production and/or distribution, a place of education, and a place of a nonviolent change” [79] (p. 67). It does not recognize, in the current configuration of SE and its promoters, the boldness to think about the need to overcome a fundamentally unjust and inequality-producing dominant economy [80]. On the contrary, the strength of the ideas of social business and venture philanthropy tends to prolong the colonization of the economy by capitalist companies and to dissociate SE from the alternative and emancipatory principles that inform the political project associated with the social economy [81].

This is not, however, the understanding of organizations such as Mouves (Mouvement des entrepreneurs sociaux) or Avise (Agence de Valorisation des Initiatives Socio-Économiques) and of authors such as Hugues Sibille. Recognizing that “social economy and social entrepreneurship are not synonymous” [82,83], the challenge posed by these authors is for the social economy to accept the “winds of change” brought by the SE movement and, consequently, to “reduce the differences” between these two fields. SE could be the way to update the social economy and increase its recognition. They even argue that SE can be a return to the origins of the social economy and the will of its founding fathers by refusing to be fatalistic and moving to respond to unmet needs by seeking collective answers to social needs and by bringing people who have been excluded back into the economic game (microcredit, fair trade, collective management of land and housing) [84].

The fundamental idea to retain from this confrontation of positions is that the dilemmas facing social entrepreneurship are not only related to statutes, organizational models, or management forms. They are also about values and principles. Here, the question being debated in the European space is whether the social entrepreneurship movement is willing to inscribe itself in the same movement of thought and focus on the social mission of driving transformative alternatives, or whether it will instead prioritize business practices (social value creation, innovation, competitiveness, social and environmental impact) to the detriment of democratic renewal [42].

6. Future Perspectives

Despite the investment made in recent years, the literature on social entrepreneurship is still in an early stage of development, and there are many grey areas—some of which have been highlighted throughout this entry. As we observed from the review of the existing scientific literature on social entrepreneurship [4], three phases can be identified in the development of research on this topic. In the initial phase (2014–2016), attention focused on the conceptual definition of SE, particularly through comparison with commercial entrepreneurship. This is an extremely important period because it constitutes the theoretical basis for the development of SE as an independent research field. In the second phase (2016–2018), scholars focused on the concept of hybridity. This marked a shift in focus from conceptualizations to a more empirical analysis of SE, tracing the emergence of hybrid organizations and the birth of sustainable entrepreneurship. The introduction of the concept of hybridity marked a significant change in research by influencing scholars to also consider the ethical aspects of social entrepreneurship. Finally, in the third phase (2018–2020), the research shifted to the analysis of the factors that stimulate social entrepreneurial intention: education, social network, culture, and gender, to name a few. Emphasis was also placed on distinctive traits that distinguish the personality of social entrepreneurs, such as risk-taking propensity and proactivity, empathy and prosocial motivation, resilience and self-efficacy, and moral obligation.

This systematization also helps reveal spaces where scientific debate has been minor and more conceptual depth is needed [85–87]. In this regard, Hota [88] has identified six dimen-

sions that can serve as the basis for future research. The first of these is a critical evaluation of the ethical aspects involved in an SE practice. The second dimension is of an organizational nature, where questions are raised about the implications arising from the hybrid nature of many organizations, the involvement of stakeholders, the entrepreneurial orientation of this type of organization, and the resources to grow. The necessary reconciliation between entrepreneurial approach and the generation of social value may be reflected in undesirable drifts and discontinuities in the fundamental mission of organizations, particularly when orientations to business growth override social priorities [89,90]. Still in the organizational field, other authors draw attention to the challenges posed by the implementation of democratic organizational models [19,91], aligned with social and solidarity economy principles [61], knowing that hierarchy is and remains the dominant form of organization. Going back to the analysis made by Hota, the author considers that the third dimension to be deepened is the collaborative one, with particular attention to the processes and consequences of cross-sectoral collaboration. A fourth dimension to retain is the community dimension and is linked to the primary intention of SE to create social value for the members in the community in which they operate. Thus, important research opportunities are offered regarding the involvement of marginalized communities, the nature of the social mission, and the social impact generated. The fifth dimension pointed out by the author is the individual dimension, where he identifies research needs in the areas of motivation, the influence of the social entrepreneur's profile on the design of the venture, and how macro factors interfere in his or her decision process. Finally, several questions remain to be answered regarding the influence of context on the creation of social enterprises.

In addition to these dimensions, some other domains can be recognized as challenges to research around SE. One of these challenges is related to the deepening of knowledge about the influence of external variables on the design and development of social enterprises. These include the role of education and culture, and the importance of support from the social network and the community learning, on the consolidation of transformative ventures [92,93] at a time when the ability to learn and adapt is crucial for sustained social change [94]. On the other hand, the literature review shows a low participation of developing countries in the context of SE research. In the analysis by Cardella et al. [4], it stands out that out of a total of 1425 scientific articles analyzed, half of the SE studies (51%) were derived from a narrow range of countries, specifically the United States ($n = 361$), the United Kingdom ($n = 177$), Spain ($n = 82$), Canada ($n = 77$), and Australia ($n = 77$). In contrast, only 12% of the contributions came from developing countries. In other words, it is a concept essentially drawn from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies [95]. It also reveals that there are national contexts where the phenomenon of entrepreneurship [96], and SE have not yet been sufficiently studied, but where social entrepreneurs already play a significant role in local development, the fight against poverty, and women's empowerment [97–99]. Quite interestingly, some of the most referenced social entrepreneurs are citizens of these countries—for example, Muhammad Yunus from Bangladesh [100,101] or Mahatma Gandhi from India [102,103]. This is just one signal that the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship is far from being a fully explored field, and there is still much to analyze on the topic.

7. Concluding Remarks

Like any new idea, the SE phenomenon is making its way, asserting itself through projects that give it practical expression and with the support of scientific research that seeks to interpret the specific character of this reality while consolidating the theoretical bases of the new construct. Throughout this paper we have focused our attention on the emergence and consolidation of the concept of SE: firstly, its connection to the original concept of "entrepreneur" and the differentiating characteristics, and then, how the definition of SE is sheltered under an "immense tent" where very differentiated and broad spectrum interpretations coexist. In the sequence, the effect of the constitution of different schools of thought is observed as a reflection of traditions proper to distinct geographies. Due to

the importance it acquires, the debate in place regarding the “social” in SE is analyzed specifically to, finally, identify some gaps in research on this field, arising in part from the very growth of the phenomenon.

From this conceptual digression emerges the idea that the concept of social entrepreneurship is today structured around two components: one component that justifies the specificity of this new concept based on the way it reflects the growing emergence of initiatives for the production and/or transaction of goods or services, oriented towards the satisfaction of social needs and generating high social value and that deserves a broad consensus among researchers; and another component, still undefined, where distinct interpretations coexist as to the delimiting boundaries, characteristics, and principles to be respected by social ventures.

The coexistence of different conceptual approaches and different schools of thought regarding SE does not necessarily mean a weakness of research in this field. On the contrary, it may be understood as a reflection of the demands that social contexts place on the necessary plasticity of the concept. Unlike business entrepreneurship, which relates to an increasingly globalized and uniform market, SE aims to fulfill a social mission in circumstances that are very variable, both social and economic, cultural, and legal, among other aspects to be taken into consideration. Likewise, being a more recent concept, SE inherits traditions and national experiences that are unique, namely, in what concerns the intervention of civil societies and their articulation with the market and the State, in the search for solutions to persistent social problems. Hence, we may consider the need, and even the advantage, of continuing to view the SE phenomenon (concept and practice) as naturally polysemic and open to various interpretations.

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