

Policy Briefing: Entrepreneurship: towards an EU common path for action?

YouthProAktiv is dedicated to fostering a culture of proactive engagement and entrepreneurship among young people, particularly in the context of social entrepreneurship. This policy briefing aims to communicate the crucial role of social entrepreneurship in advancing the European Union's goals for sustainable and inclusive growth, particularly within the framework of the European Green Deal and the circular economy.

This document serves as a strategic tool to present research findings and recommendations that emphasize the importance of supporting social entrepreneurs as key drivers of positive social and environmental change. By focusing on the unique contributions of social enterprises, this briefing seeks to elevate the role of social entrepreneurship in policy discussions and to advocate for comprehensive support systems that enable these enterprises to thrive. The briefing is crafted to inform and engage policymakers, businesses, and civil society through a rigorous and expert-driven approach.

Summary of key messages and policy recommendations

With this policy briefing, YouthProAktiv brings attention to the critical role of social entrepreneurship in driving the European Union's objectives for sustainable and inclusive growth, particularly within the framework of the European Green Deal. Despite the existence of robust EU initiatives and frameworks, significant challenges remain that hinder the full potential of social enterprises, including limited access to funding, legal and regulatory barriers, and a lack of visibility and recognition.

Our policy recommendations emphasize the necessity for enhanced visibility and recognition of social enterprises, improved access to tailored funding, the strengthening of legal frameworks, and the promotion of capacity building and innovation. These proposals are designed to empower social entrepreneurs with the tools, resources, and support systems necessary to effectively contribute to the EU's sustainability and social inclusion goals. By addressing these challenges, we aim to ensure that social enterprises can actively participate in shaping a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

1: Introduction to Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a critical driver of economic growth, innovation, and social change. Across the European Union, entrepreneurs are recognized for their ability to create jobs, spur economic development, and tackle pressing societal challenges. However, within this broad and diverse field, one particular form of entrepreneurship stands out for its unique capacity to address social and environmental issues: social entrepreneurship. This policy briefing focuses on social entrepreneurship as a pathway to advancing the European Union's goals of sustainable and inclusive growth.

Social entrepreneurship combines the innovative spirit of traditional entrepreneurship with a mission to create positive social impact. Unlike conventional businesses that prioritize profit, social enterprises are dedicated to solving societal problems through entrepreneurial means. This briefing will explore how social entrepreneurship can be harnessed to support the European Green Deal and drive systemic change towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

1.1 An Operational Definition

For the purposes of this policy briefing, it is important to clearly define social entrepreneurship and its relationship to social enterprises. According to the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), social entrepreneurship is the process through which social entrepreneurs create and develop organizations that are driven by a mission to address social or environmental challenges. These organizations, often referred to as social enterprises, operate with the primary objective of generating social impact rather than maximizing profit.¹

The European Commission's 2021 Action Plan for the Social Economy further clarifies that social enterprises are key components of the social economy. They share several defining characteristics. First, social enterprises prioritize the creation of positive social or environmental outcomes as their core mission, placing primacy on these goals over profit.² Second, rather than distributing profits to shareholders, social enterprises reinvest them to advance their social or environmental objectives, benefiting society at large.³ Third, social enterprises are often characterized by governance structures that involve employees, consumers, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes.⁴

These social enterprises operate across a wide range of sectors, including agriculture, construction, healthcare, education, and waste management. They play a crucial role in promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth by offering innovative solutions to societal challenges such as climate change, regional development, and social integration.⁵

Social entrepreneurship requires a distinct set of skills that combine conventional business competencies with a deep commitment to social impact. The OECD highlights the importance of innovation, business management, and social impact measurement as key skills for social entrepreneurs.⁶ These competencies enable social enterprises to maintain financial sustainability while advancing their mission to address social and environmental challenges.

In alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social enterprises create impact across various critical areas. They contribute significantly to SDG 4 on Quality Education, SDG 5 on Gender Equality, SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. Through their activities, social enterprises promote inclusive education, empower women, foster economic growth and decent work, reduce inequalities, and support sustainable urban development.⁷

1.2 Recent Data on Social Entrepreneurship in the EU

The landscape of social entrepreneurship within the European Union is dynamic and evolving. According to the European Social Enterprise Monitor (ESEM) for 2021-2022, social enterprises represent approximately 10% of all businesses in Europe, with an estimated 2.8 million social economy enterprises across the continent.⁸ However, the precise number of social enterprises remains uncertain, and there is significant variation among EU Member States.⁹

The ESEM study, conducted in 21 countries, including many EU Member States and neighbouring countries, provides valuable insights into the state of social entrepreneurship in Europe. The study analyzed responses from 1,907 social enterprises, revealing several key trends. On average, social enterprises in the sample were founded 12 years ago, with many still in the early to middle stages of development. This indicates that while social entrepreneurship has deep roots in Europe, the sector has experienced accelerated growth in recent years.¹⁰

Social enterprises are active across a wide range of sectors, with the most common being human health and social work (23.3%) and education (22.2%). Other significant sectors include service activities, information and communication, and arts, entertainment, and recreation.

Despite their growing prominence, social enterprises face challenges that must be addressed to unlock their full potential. These include the need for supportive legal frameworks, increased awareness, and access to funding. By addressing these challenges, policymakers can empower social enterprises to contribute more effectively to the EU's goals of sustainable and inclusive growth.¹¹

2. The EU Social Entrepreneurship Framework

The European Union has placed significant emphasis on fostering social entrepreneurship as a critical driver for inclusive and sustainable economic growth. This commitment is reflected in various EU strategies, notably the European Pillar of Social Rights, which outlines 20 principles aimed at ensuring fair working conditions and promoting social inclusion across the EU. These principles are essential for entrepreneurs who seek to address societal challenges while improving workplace conditions, thereby enhancing productivity and well-being. By integrating social objectives into broader sustainability strategies, businesses contribute to both the green and digital transitions, fostering territorial cohesion and overall prosperity.¹²

2.1 The EU Action Plan for the Social Economy

The EU's commitment to the social economy has been steadily advanced through a series of initiatives, beginning with the Social Business Initiative (SBI) in 2011¹³, which laid the groundwork for recognizing the importance of social enterprises and social innovation. The SBI was followed by the 2016 Start-up and Scale-up Initiative, further strengthening the EU's support for social enterprises.¹⁴

Building on these foundations, the European Commission adopted the "Action Plan for the Social Economy - Building an Economy that Works for People" on December 9, 2021. This Action Plan is a comprehensive strategy designed to enhance social investment, support the growth and innovation of social enterprises, and create new job opportunities. It aims to fully mobilize the potential of the social economy by focusing on three key areas:

- **Business Environment:** The Action Plan emphasizes the importance of creating a conducive policy and legal framework for the social economy to thrive. This includes addressing the diversity of legal forms, refining tax policies, establishing certification systems, and optimizing public procurement and State aid regulations.¹⁵
- **Opportunities and Capacity Building:** To ensure that social enterprises can access the necessary resources to grow, the Action Plan consolidates information on relevant EU funding, policies, and initiatives. It also highlights the social economy's critical role in driving the green and digital transitions, providing targeted support to help social enterprises scale up and innovate.
- **Awareness and Recognition:** Increasing the visibility of the social economy and gathering new data are crucial for promoting its positive impacts. The Action Plan aims to raise awareness among new audiences, including young people, to encourage broader participation in social enterprise activities.

To translate the objectives of the Action Plan into concrete actions, the European Commission has introduced several key tools and initiatives:

- **The Social Economy Gateway¹⁶:** Launched in June 2023, the Social Economy Gateway is a direct outcome of the 2021 Action Plan. This one-stop-shop website provides social economy organizations with essential information on EU funding, training opportunities, and more. By offering a centralized access point, the Gateway facilitates easier navigation of the various support mechanisms available, helping social enterprises and other stakeholders effectively utilize EU resources to drive their growth and impact.
- **Council Recommendation on Developing Social Economy Framework Conditions¹⁷:** Another critical element of the Action Plan is the proposal for a Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions, which was adopted by the Council on November 27, 2023. This Recommendation builds on the Action Plan's objectives by encouraging Member States to integrate the social economy into their national and regional policies. It provides guidelines on how to tailor public policies and legal frameworks to support the social economy, enhance administrative structures, and engage with stakeholders. The Recommendation aims to create favourable conditions for the social economy to flourish, particularly in creating quality jobs, fostering innovation, and promoting social inclusion.
- **EU-OECD Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy (YEPA)¹⁸:** The YEPA, launched in March 2023, is closely aligned with the goals of the Action Plan, particularly in its focus on capacity building and fostering innovation. YEPA serves as a policy-learning

network that brings together policymakers, youth entrepreneurship networks, social entrepreneurship organizations, and experts. The Academy's primary objective is to strengthen youth entrepreneurship by addressing barriers and sharing best practices. By providing a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange, YEPA helps to ensure that young social entrepreneurs are well-equipped to contribute to the social economy and advance the goals outlined in the Action Plan.

2.2 Legal Frameworks

The term “social enterprise” encompasses a broad range of organizational models, reflecting the diversity of national legal systems across the EU. As such, the definition and legal recognition of social enterprises vary significantly between Member States, leading to differences in the availability and quality of data on these organizations.¹⁹

Since 2011, several EU Member States have introduced targeted legal frameworks and policies to support social enterprises and the broader social economy. Today, 16 EU countries have enacted legislation specifically recognizing social enterprises, highlighting the increasing legal recognition of their importance.²⁰

Despite these advances, many organizations that function as social enterprises lack formal legal recognition. This can limit their access to support programs and hinder the overall growth of the social enterprise ecosystem. According to OECD research, well-designed legal frameworks are crucial for the visibility, recognition, and development of social enterprises. These frameworks provide social enterprises with a clear legal identity, enhancing their ability to contribute to social and economic development.²¹

2.3 Funding Mechanisms: EU Budget to Support Social Economy 2021-2027

Access to finance is a critical enabler for the growth and sustainability of social enterprises. Recognizing this, the EU has developed several funding mechanisms to support the sector. The Social Economy Action Plan identifies the lack of access to finance as one of the main challenges facing social enterprises and outlines various funding opportunities available through EU programs.²²

Key funding mechanisms include²³:

- Cohesion Policy Funds: These funds, particularly the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), are essential for promoting the social economy and social entrepreneurship at various levels. ESF+ is instrumental in enhancing labour market inclusiveness and access to quality employment.
- Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI): Under the ESF+, EaSI provides investments of up to EUR 500,000 for social economy organizations. With a budget of EUR 762 million, EaSI supports the development of social enterprises, the social investment market, and microfinance providers.

- InvestEU Programme²⁴: As part of the NextGenerationEU initiative, InvestEU mobilizes private investments for key EU priorities, including the green and digital transitions. The Social Investments and Skills window of InvestEU, with a guarantee of EUR 2.78 billion, supports financial products for social enterprises and microenterprises.
- Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF): With EUR 732.8 billion in grants and loans, the RRF offers Member States substantial opportunities to fund reforms and investments in social and inclusive entrepreneurship.
- European Regional Development Fund (ERDF): ERDF supports the development and scaling of social enterprises through business advice, start-up centres, innovation activities, and other forms of assistance that address societal challenges.
- Erasmus+ Programme: The 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme contributes to developing entrepreneurial skills and funds actions relevant to the social economy. The new "Alliances for Innovation" action fosters social innovation by facilitating cooperation between educational institutions, vocational training providers, enterprises, and other stakeholders.
- LIFE Programme: This program funds initiatives that address both environmental/climate and social aspects, facilitating the transition to a circular economy where many social enterprises are active.
- Other EU Funding Programs: Additional programs such as Horizon Europe, including its European Innovation Council (EIC), the Single Market Programme, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the Digital Europe Programme, among others, provide crucial support for social enterprises by funding innovation, business development, and the transition to a circular economy.

3. Fostering Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in addressing social and economic disparities across Europe. By combining business practices with a strong social mission, social entrepreneurs create ventures that generate economic value while addressing critical societal challenges. This approach is particularly beneficial for underrepresented groups, such as youth, migrants, people with disabilities, and the unemployed, by providing them opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities that contribute positively to their communities.²⁵

The European Commission, in collaboration with the OECD, has recognized the significant potential of social entrepreneurship to drive inclusive growth. This partnership led to the development of tools like the Better Entrepreneurship Policy Tool, launched in 2019, which assists policymakers in refining inclusive and social entrepreneurship policies.²⁶ This tool was designed to enhance the inclusion of diverse groups in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, helping to address social and economic inequalities.²⁷

However, entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups often face significant barriers, including limited access to skills, networks, and financing. These challenges can restrict their ability to scale their operations and maximize their societal impact.²⁸ Overcoming these obstacles is critical to unlocking the full potential of social entrepreneurship and ensuring that it contributes to a more inclusive economy.²⁹

In addition to the policy tool, the Better Incubation initiative was instrumental in addressing these challenges. Funded by the European Union's Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), Better Incubation was a two-year project (2021-2022) developed by the European Business Innovation Centre Network (EBN), Impact Hub, and the European Venture Philanthropy Association (EVPA).³⁰ The initiative aimed to empower business support organizations (BSOs) with the necessary tools, skills, and methodologies to effectively support social enterprises and entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups. Better Incubation focused on fostering an ecosystem that not only supports these entrepreneurs but also bridges the gap between social enterprise development and broader societal needs, ensuring that entrepreneurial activities lead to meaningful social impact across Europe.

3.1 The Role of Youth Social Entrepreneurs

Youth social entrepreneurship is a growing and vital component of the social economy in Europe. According to the 2023 Eurobarometer report on social entrepreneurship and youth, a significant majority of young people in the European Union (EU) value employers who have clearly defined social (75%) and environmental (73%) goals.³¹ This growing awareness among young people underscores the importance of creating supportive ecosystems that encourage and nurture youth-led social enterprises.³²

The interest in youth social entrepreneurship has increased significantly among policymakers, driven by high youth unemployment rates and the need for innovative solutions to social and economic challenges.³³ There is a strong push within the EU to implement entrepreneurship education that not only fosters entrepreneurial skills and mindsets but also equips young people with the transversal skills necessary for the future labour market. This education is designed to help young entrepreneurs create and lead social enterprises that address critical societal issues.³⁴

Young social entrepreneurs are increasingly taking leadership roles in the social economy across many EU countries and also non-EU ones. For instance, in France and Spain, up to 20% of leadership positions in social enterprises are held by young people, and in Western Europe, more than one in four social entrepreneurs are under the age of 34 (OECD, 2022).³⁵ However, despite this increasing participation, young people face unique challenges that can hinder their entrepreneurial success.³⁶

The Better Incubation 2022 Report highlights several barriers that young social entrepreneurs encounter. Despite the enthusiasm around start-ups, entrepreneurship may not be seen as a viable career path for many young people due to a lack of awareness, societal encouragement, and tangible role models. Additionally, young entrepreneurs often face systemic barriers, such as high registration costs, complex administrative procedures, and limited access to finance

and networks. These challenges are compounded by a lack of entrepreneurship education and a generally weak entrepreneurial environment for youth.³⁷

To effectively support young social entrepreneurs, it is crucial for incubators and business support services to address these specific barriers. By providing targeted support, these entities can help young entrepreneurs develop the skills, networks, and resources they need to succeed in their ventures. This support is essential for enabling young people to harness their potential, contribute to social innovation, and lead the next generation of social enterprises that drive inclusive and sustainable growth in the EU.³⁸

4. Policy Recommendations: Empowering Social Entrepreneurship for a Sustainable Future

As the European Union seeks to advance towards its ambitious goals of sustainability and inclusivity, social enterprises stand at the forefront of driving positive change. These organizations, which blend entrepreneurial principles with social and environmental missions, are essential in addressing the most pressing challenges of our time. However, realizing their full potential requires a supportive policy environment that recognizes their unique contributions and provides the necessary resources and frameworks for them to thrive. European policymakers are thus faced with a critical question: How can we create and sustain an environment that fosters the growth and impact of social enterprises?

To guide policymakers, businesses, and stakeholders in shaping an ecosystem conducive to the flourishing of social enterprises, we present six integrated policy recommendations:

A. Enhance the Visibility, Recognition, and Identity of Social Enterprises

Social enterprises often operate under the radar, despite their significant contributions to societal well-being. To fully leverage their impact, we recommend that the European Commission, Member States, and social enterprise organizations work collaboratively to increase the visibility and recognition of social enterprises. This can be achieved by gathering and disseminating stronger evidence of their added value, which will help to build a more assertive and coordinated social enterprise community.³⁹

Furthermore, we urge policymakers at all levels to mainstream the social enterprise dimension within relevant policies, programs, and practices. This includes engaging social enterprises in the policy-making process, ensuring their perspectives and needs are fully integrated into new initiatives. By doing so, we can strengthen the identity and presence of social enterprises within the broader economic landscape.⁴⁰

B. Facilitate Access to Funding and Financial Resources

The growth and sustainability of social enterprises are often hindered by limited access to funding. We advocate for an expansion of financial resources directed at social enterprises, with increased investment in training programs, incubators, and intermediaries that provide tailored capacity-building support. This will help social enterprises build the managerial skills necessary for financial sustainability.⁴¹

In addition, we recommend that the European Commission and Member States implement concrete measures to unlock and attract more funding that is better suited to the unique needs of social enterprises. This includes public funding aimed at mobilizing private capital, through mechanisms such as investment de-risking, which can be complemented by grant support for building social enterprise finance markets across Europe. Member States should also ensure that social enterprises can easily identify and access these funding opportunities through centralized platforms like the Social Economy Gateway.

C. Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Policy Coherence

A robust legal framework is essential for the development and growth of social enterprises. We call on the European Commission and Member States to ensure that legal frameworks are coherent, supportive, and tailored to the specific needs of social enterprises.⁴² This involves the adoption or updating of national social economy strategies in close cooperation with social economy stakeholders.

Additionally, we emphasize the importance of stakeholder inclusion in the development of these legal frameworks. By collecting inputs from a diverse array of stakeholders, policymakers can ensure that the legal frameworks are responsive to the real-world needs of social enterprises, preventing potential legislative conflicts and enhancing the overall effectiveness of these laws.⁴³

D. Promote Capacity Building and Support Networks

Building the capacity of social enterprises is crucial for their long-term success. We recommend that the European Commission continue to support the development of social economy representative networks, particularly in Member States where the social economy is underdeveloped. This effort should include the encouragement of mainstream business incubators to extend their support to social economy entities.

Moreover, we propose an expansion of initiatives like the Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy, which plays a vital role in fostering youth social entrepreneurship. By working closely with national policymakers and youth entrepreneurship networks, the Academy can help young entrepreneurs overcome the barriers they face and successfully launch and scale their social enterprises.

E. Encourage Innovation, Transformation, and the Replicability of Best Practices

Innovation is the lifeblood of social enterprises, enabling them to address societal challenges in new and effective ways. We advocate for the promotion of best practices and the replication of successful models across Europe. Initiatives like the Better Incubation program should serve as a blueprint for similar efforts, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted support for entrepreneurs from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.

Policymakers should also integrate lessons learned from programs like the 2023 Year of Skills and regional/national ESF+ funds into future initiatives. By adopting a Triple Bottom Line approach (People, Planet, Profit), these programs can better support new entrepreneurs and ensure the sustainability of social enterprises.

F. Address Specific Barriers for Underrepresented Groups within Social Entrepreneurship

Underrepresented groups face unique challenges within the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. We call on the European Commission and Member States to develop targeted solutions for

these groups, including migrant and refugee entrepreneurs, as well as entrepreneurs with disabilities. This involves improving access to funding, providing culturally sensitive business support services, and fostering environments that reduce discrimination and social exclusion.⁴⁴ In particular, we recommend that public support measures reflect the diversity of social enterprises, offering long-term partnerships with public authorities for work integration enterprises and tailored support for non-profits engaging in commercial activities. Additionally, Member States should prioritize meeting the Digital Compass objective to ensure high-quality digital connectivity, particularly in remote and rural areas, to support the digital transformation of social enterprises.⁴⁵

Conclusions

Social enterprises across Europe are consistently driving innovative solutions and business models aimed at fostering positive social and environmental change. With their focus on impact, these enterprises need and deserve dedicated support, funding, and representation to thrive in their mission.

European integration is deeply rooted in the principles of democracy, equality, and diversity. Social enterprises exemplify these principles by implementing unique organizational models that prioritize collaboration, solidarity, pluralism, and sustainability—values that are essential to the European ethos. As dynamic contributors to the European economic landscape, social enterprises play a crucial role in creating jobs, innovating welfare provision, enabling economic participation, and facilitating demographic, green, and digital transitions without leaving anyone behind.

For these reasons, the social economy and social enterprises must be prioritized by public authorities at all levels—European, national, and local. They embody the potential for transformative change, placing people at the heart of the economy and demonstrating that business interests can align with social responsibility.

As highlighted throughout this policy briefing, the European Green Deal and related initiatives have created a robust framework for advancing the social economy. However, the success of these initiatives hinges on the active engagement and support of social enterprises. By aligning economic growth with social and environmental sustainability, social enterprises not only contribute to the EU's strategic goals but also ensure that this progress is inclusive and benefits all members of society.

Looking ahead, the integration of social enterprises into the broader European economy represents not just an opportunity but a necessity. Their commitment to addressing societal challenges through entrepreneurial means offers a blueprint for sustainable development. It is imperative that we continue to support and elevate these enterprises, ensuring they have the tools, resources, and recognition needed to lead Europe into a future where economic success and social equity go hand in hand.

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