



# HOW SOCIAL ENTERPRISES CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

The food system produces 4 billion tons of food; one third of the food produced gets lost or wasted. The food currently wasted in Europe could feed 200 million people. Approximately 795 million people suffer from chronic undernourishment, while two billion are overweight or obese. Thus, we can consider that one out of three individuals suffers at least of malnutrition. No country is immune. We have to bear in mind that the world demand for food will increase substantially in the next decades, due to demographic growth. World population should increase from 7.1 billion in 2013 to 9.6 billion by 2050, while we need to face the constant decrease of agriculture soil. Food production causes significant pressures on the environment. According to FAO (2014), agriculture uses 70 % of total global freshwater and the food sector accounts for around 30% of the world's total energy consumption.

It is essential to reconsider our food system in the optics of sustainability. According to a public consultation held last year by the European Commission (EC) new and different strategies of actions from farm to fork are necessary.

The Europe 2020 Strategy highlights that a *resource efficient Europe* calls for an increase in resource efficiency, in order to: "...*find new ways to reduce inputs, minimise waste, improve management of resource stocks, change consumption patterns, optimise production processes, management and business methods, and improve logistics.*"

Social Enterprises are able to develop innovative solutions that increase productivity while delivering better services in social, health, and education services. Social Economy is an important economic sector in Europe, with a significant occupational relevance. The contribution of the social economy to economic development and well-being has been confirmed by the recent economic crisis that has highlighted the resilience of social economy and social enterprises as well as their capacity of generating new employment and preserving existing jobs.

What does it mean for a social enterprise to take into account food? Social enterprise experiences being part of the sustainable food chain are spreading in various regions of Europe and include a wide range of initiatives. These experiences indicate the search for new ways of interacting in the production and consumption of food as well as an active and participatory commitment to their communities.

We have investigated social enterprises that are part of Sustainable food systems across Europe. Through existing experiences we want to highlight the role of social enterprises as an alternative pattern to interacting in the production and consumption of food and an active and participatory commitment to the communities.

**Literature Review Synthesis** and analysis of existing data through desk research into 3 different sections: a section dedicated to Social Economy/Enterprises/ Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development; another dedicated to System Food and Sustainable Development. A third section is dedicated to Social Economy and/or SFS. At the same time several European projects related to at least one of the sections themes of this research were analysed.

**Interviews with experts.** The experts were identified mainly through the network of Diesis – one of the widest at EU level, national networks or support structures of Social Economy and Social Enterprises, European incubators, etc. The experts have a policy background in social economy and specific knowledge in promoting sustainable food and social enterprises. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone/email/ meeting. We asked them to identify some good practices of social enterprises involved in sustainable food system in their country.

**Collection data of good practices, analysis and conclusion.** So far we collected examples of more than 50 social enterprises involved in supporting the transition towards SFS in Europe. The examples come from literature sources, suggestions from the main national federations or networks at the EU level (many of them are part of DIESIS' network), European mappings or surveys on social enterprises or direct interviews with experts and practitioners. From these groups we selected 20 cases to be analysed through semi-structured interview and questionnaires. A presentation for each social enterprise involved in the research is available.

### **Sustainable Food System (SFS)**

Accordingly to the FAO, "*SFS is a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised*". Sustainability means ensuring human rights and well-being without depleting or diminishing the capacity of the earth ecosystems to support life, or at the expense of others well-being. FAO's vision for sustainable food and agriculture is that of "*a world in which food is nutritious and accessible for everyone and natural resources are managed in a way that maintains ecosystem functions to support current as well as future human needs. In this vision, farmers, pastoralists, fisher-folk, foresters and other rural dwellers have the opportunity to actively participate in, and benefit from, economic development, have decent employment conditions and work in a fair price environment. Rural women, men and communities live in security, and have control over their livelihoods and equitable access to resources, which they use in an efficient way*". (FAO, 2014)

In agreement with the input emerged during the European Commission High Level Conference Food 2030 our future food system should be more *“sustainable, resilient, responsible, diverse and inclusive”*.

## **Social Enterprises**

The Social Business Initiative (SBI), launched in 2011, is an important collection of actions to support the development of social enterprises. It was the first stage to develop a framework favorable to social business in Europa. It contains 11 priority measures, organised around three themes: facilitation of access to funding, improvement of the visibility of social entrepreneurship and a simplified regulatory environment.

With specific regard to social enterprises, the European Commission has proposed an operational definition as *“an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their 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, involves employees, consumers and stakeholders affected by its commercial activities.”* (SBI, October 2011).

With the term of Social Business the Commission intends to cover:

- those for which the social or societal objective of the common good is the reason for the commercial activity, often in the form of a high level of social innovation,
- those where profits are mainly reinvested with a view to achieving this social objective,
- and where the method of organisation or ownership system reflects their mission.

Social enterprises are able to provide solutions to social issues in an entrepreneurship way that is economically sustainable and in some ways more effective and efficient than what could be done by the institutions alone. The strong social vocation of these enterprises implies that the profits earned are mainly reinvested in supporting its social mission.

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## **GOOD PRACTICES**

We have interviewed more than 50 social enterprises implementing alternative models of food systems in order to be more sustainable. The good practices selected are SEs that cover the food systems from the production to the food waste, in order to have a whole picture of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, we have chosen also those enterprises with different social aims and with different way to pursuing them, in particular on issues, such as:

- Counteracting the desertification of rural area
- Women employment
- Migrants
- Decent job conditions
- Work integration of disadvantaged workers
- Raising awareness of communities on the importance of adopting more sustainable eating habits.

The main thing that links all these cases is the strong will to deal with social and environmental issues of their territory, so that entrepreneurial and local development go hand in hand because they are closely interlinked. Thus, social enterprises contribute to develop more sustainability in the food production and consumption as well as the food issues is a tool to achieve social aims, like social cohesion or integration and access to labour market. Through these experiences we got in touch with different approaches able to achieve similar goals: in some cases we found innovative solutions while in other cases the preservation of the tradition revealed to be the right way to deal with the challenge of that specific territory.

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS. MAIN FINDINGS

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We have asked the social entrepreneurs we got in touch with during our survey: Why Social Enterprise?

The answers tell about community, participatory, integrated, local, resilient and co-operative approaches.

- Social enterprises engender alternative solutions that work at different level, where actions support each other.
- Social enterprises should not be considered as a niche sector of food production but they have the potential to be scaled up to increase their impact.
- Social enterprises are able to optimise their economic, social and environmental resources, where the results are more than the sum of their parts.

Social Enterprises are a reference for the territory where they are raising awareness of people towards a more sustainable approach to food with the involvement of the community. On the other side, food can be a tool to develop social cohesion,

employment, mitigate social issues and promote local economic development.

Five key elements are present in all the experiences we analysed: inclusion, equity, respect, responsibility and opportunity. These elements can be seen as keywords and important aspects for the transition towards more sustainable food systems.

**Inclusion.** Social enterprises play a major role to promote integration among the community. While we are building sustainable food systems we can contribute to develop a community more inclusive and integrated. There are a lot of initiatives that use food as a tool of integration for creating double values for the environment and the society.

**Equity** is an important aspect of sustainable economy. We should learn to share, given that resources are limited while population keeps to increase. The co-operative model, i.e., has always been about sharing the value of production. From these cases experiences emerged where producers and consumers want to cooperate together.

**Respect** is important for a sustainable development. All the practices based their business on the respect of the environment and the community. But they are also respectful of the tradition and the territory in order to preserve the peculiarity of their land. All of them aim to support local farmers and small producers, through actions addressed to promote decent job conditions.

**Responsibility.** Making our food system more sustainable requires responsibility. All the social entrepreneurs of these good practices have taken the responsibility to do more for their community. The point is neither profit nor organic food itself: they are a mean for a greater community involvement and relational empowerment.

**Opportunity.** The good practices selected are great examples of the opportunity we have to create decent and equitable employment conditions. These social enterprises turned out to be a solution for creating new jobs, both for the youth and for people in need to come back at work.

Since “Food is essential to life and people are the key of the change”, to be more sustainable we need to change our behavior. Our communities’ awareness is a way to make them more participative and responsible of our food systems and show that changes are possible. Social enterprises, thanks to their formal and informal networks, are able to be closer to the community. They influence their community because they make real the change of habits and make people being part of this change. Social enterprises operate in a way that generates creative solutions where the crisis is turn into an opportunity. They think differently and work differently. They are flexible to address complex issues and consider collaboration as a winner strategy. They think global to act local.

## ABOUT DIESIS

Since 1997 DIESIS has supported the development of the Social Economy, Social Entrepreneurship and social Innovation in Europe through the implementation of knowledge-based activities, such as training, project design, consultancy and advisory services, technical assistance and research.

DIESIS is one of the widest EU networks specialised in supporting Social Economy and Social Enterprises development. We cover 10+ EU countries through major national federations and national support networks.

DIESIS is part of **GECES**, the European Commission's expert group on social entrepreneurship that assists the EC in the implementation of the Social Business Initiative.

DIESIS is quoted by the European Parliament as a good practice example of fostering the institutional and social visibility of the Social Economy (par. 4.3.3 page 71).

DIESIS works in partnership with European thematic networks and platforms such as **ETUC, REVES, Social Economy Europe, EMES**. It is also member of **CECOP**. DIESIS expresses also the Thematic Expert of the **ESF Social Economy Network**, that assists Member States on the transnationality aspects of ESF.

Furthermore DIESIS has been selected to take part in the European Migration Forum, organised by the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee, a platform for dialogue between civil society and the European institutions on issues relating to migration, asylum and the integration of third-country nationals.



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