

MESMER+

Mapping European Social Economy: Employment, Social Dialogue and the European Pillar of Social Rights

Project nr. 101052222

Final event

2nd of July 2024

From 9.00 to 13.30

Venue:

COOP Brussels Quai Fernand Demets 23 1070, Anderlecht

SUMMARY

The in-person event brought together not only the representatives of co-partners, experts and associated organisations but also representatives of stakeholders such as the ILO, European Commission / DG Employment, European Trade Union Confederation and Social Economy Europe - all together more than 50 participants from all around Europe. The final conference of the Mesmer+ project, focused on sharing the projects outcomes by presentations of various speakers.

Gianluca Pastorelli (Executive President, Diesis Network, Belgium) welcomed the participants and opened the event.

The first speaker of the conference was **Miia Rossi-Gray** (Policy Officer, Social and Inclusive Entrepreneurship, DG Employment (EU)) with her presentation The Action Plan for the Social Economy. The Social Economy Action Plan was adopted in December 2021, aiming to boost social economy across Europe. The plan focuses on improving framework conditions, opening new opportunities, and enhancing recognition of social economy. Miia Rossi-Gray has informed the audience that Member States have until November 2025 to adopt strategies or policy measures supporting social economy. These strategies should serve as roadmaps, providing policy guidance and political commitment to create an enabling environment for social economy. The Commission will support Member States in implementing the Council Recommendation through workshops and webinars. Key topics include state aid, strategy development, taxation, access to finance, and social impact measurement. The Commission is also setting up a technical support instrument for social economy to assist Member States in policy reform and strategy development.

The next speaker of the conference was **Sarah de Heusch** (Director, Social Economy Europe (Belgium / EU)). Sarah de Heusch outlined the strong connections between social economy, social policies, and social dialogue. She highlighted that the Social Economy Action Plan includes specific elements to develop social dialogue within the social economy. The plan aims for coherent policies that are both vertical and horizontal. Social economy in European countries is at different levels of development. It can go from 1% to 10% of GDP, which means that it

is very fragmented in terms of representation, so the voice of the social economy as an employer is difficult to have in a unified way, unless countries have developed specific strategies. Social Economy enterprises and associations are willing to endorse their role of employer, to support unions in better working conditions as well as to improve democratic practices through its unique approach of democracy.

The next speaker of the conference was **Marina Monaco** (Senior Policy Advisor, European Trade Union Confederation (Belgium / EU)). Marina Monaco focused on the importance of Trade Unions in representing workers within the social economy. The discussion emphasized the need for democratic methodologies in social dialogue and the representativeness of different social economy entities. The speaker highlighted the pressing challenges of environmental distress and digital disruption, emphasizing the need for innovative solutions to balance economic disparities. The aim is to align economic returns with societal benefits, ensuring they serve the entire community. The social economy should contribute to creating a more inclusive and democratic society. This involves addressing both economic and social objectives, countering far-right politics, and promoting progressive, inclusive strategies.

The closing speaker of the first part was **Anne Guisset** (Senior Research Associate, Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven (HIVA)). Anne Guisset highlighted that social dialogue is a critical but often overlooked aspect in the strategies and action plans aimed at fostering the growth of the social economy. This dialogue is essential for designing effective labour market policies and improving working conditions in the social economy sector. The presentation detailed the MESMER+ project, which focused on mapping and understanding how social dialogue is incorporated into the social economy across various countries. The project aimed to provide benchmarks, dimensions, and insights to improve the representation of social economy organizations in social dialogue structures. Anne Guisset discussed the complex landscape of social dialogue and the challenges faced by social economy organizations. She emphasized the need for better integration of these organizations into social dialogue structures to ensure that entrepreneurship in the social economy leads to quality employment through robust employer-worker dialogue. The research conducted under the MESMER+ project revealed significant cross-national variations in how social dialogue is implemented and recognized within the social economy. This highlighted the need for tailored approaches to improve social dialogue practices in different countries. Anne Guisset called for a better recognition of the employment relationships and power dynamics in the social economy. The speaker also gave some short insights based on the country study on France and Belgium.

The second part of the conference started with a video presentation by **Simel Esim** (Programme Manager, ILO/UNTFSSSE). Simel Esim emphasized the importance of the SSE in promoting inclusive growth and social cohesion globally, highlighting various regional initiatives and their impact. Simel Esim also stressed the integration of social dialogue principles within SSE enterprises as essential for fostering mutual understanding, resolving conflicts, and advancing shared goals. Simel Esim discussed the pivotal resolution from the International Labour Conference (ILC) 2022, which underscored the importance of ensuring that SSE entities and workers benefit from freedom of association and collective bargaining. The resolution emphasized the need for social partners to engage in dialogue with a collaborative attitude toward SSE. The SSE encompasses a diverse array of organizations that prioritize social objectives over profit maximization. These entities create

employment opportunities, promote decent work practices, and provide social protection, addressing socio-economic disparities and enhancing community well-being. In Europe and globally, SSE entities contribute significantly to economic resilience and local development. Despite its contributions, the SSE faces challenges in gaining recognition within established social dialogue and industrial relations frameworks. **Simel Esim** highlighted the need for tailored approaches to improve these integrations, demonstrating the SSE's value as a complementary force in the industrial relations landscape. **Simel Esim** emphasized the importance of global collaboration to scale SSE initiatives. Integrating SSE principles into broader economic policies can unlock new avenues for job creation, innovation, and social cohesion. She highlighted the role of the European Commission in advocating for policies that enhance the SSE's visibility and impact.

A **short video** was also introduced. The Mesmer+ animated video is available on the project website. The narration emphasizes the significant role of the social economy in today's dynamic European landscape, where it stands as a powerful force with millions of enterprises contributing to employment and sustainable development. The social economy's resilience is particularly noteworthy in its ability to create jobs and tackle societal challenges during crises, thereby promoting inclusive growth. The European Social Economy Action Plan, adopted to empower social economy initiatives across the EU, was highlighted. However, as it was pointed out a critical oversight in this plan: the lack of focus on social dialogue. Social dialogue is essential for ensuring fair working conditions, enhancing democratic governance, and effective policy-making.

Samuel Barco started his presentation with introduction to the Spanish industrial relations system. He began by signalling key challenges such as the existing gaps in the institutionalised Social Dialogue, while highlighting some opportunities for an enlarged participation of SE actors in it. During his intervention, he provided valuable regional insights, particularly from Spain. It was noted that regional differences lead to varying levels of social economy integration into social dialogue, influenced by local laws and policies. Understanding these regional nuances is crucial for addressing the unique challenges and opportunities within the social economy sector. He also shared some recommendations for the stakeholders. He highlighted the need to encourage the associativeness of enterprises, especially MSMEs. Other recommendations referred to issues such as the need to improve further the effective participation of the representatives of SE in the institutionalised civil dialogue, to advance the institutionalisation of social dialogue, social economy players to reinforce their capabilities to participate in social dialogue with a bottom-up perspective, and also must reinforce their collaboration with trade unions and with CEOE/CEPYME on bilateral issues.

The next speaker was **Yuliya Simeonova** (Researcher, Isturet (Bulgaria)). Bulgaria has adopted legislation focused on social and solidarity economy, particularly a significant law enacted in 2018. This legislative foundation supports the development and integration of social economy practices. Yuliya Simeonova mentioned that a substantial portion of the Bulgarian population is reluctant to join the official economy, creating a barrier to formal economic engagement. High unemployment among young people and a significant number of individuals not participating in the workforce are critical issues. Yulia Simeonova emphasised that there is an emerging movement of volunteers who are actively contributing to the social economy. Effective solutions to local challenges are seen as achievable through grassroots efforts, emphasizing a "bottom-to-top" approach. Yulia

pointed that an agreement has been signed between Bulgaria and Spain to collaborate in the field of social economy. This international cooperation aims to leverage experiences and practices from both countries to foster social economy development. The speaker also said that challenges exist in determining national representation for employees' organizations and trade unions. Five nationally represented employees' organizations and two major trade unions play a pivotal role in the social dialogue. The process of identifying the largest and most influential employers' organizations is complex and involves coverage of collective bargaining agreements. Despite the challenges, there are positive developments within the social and solidarity economy sector in Bulgaria. Stronger employers' organizations at the European level contribute to the democratic processes and the overall strength of the social economy.

The next speaker of the conference was **Aleksandra Iloska** (Expert, Association for research, communications and development "PUBLIC" (North Macedonia)). During the presentation, Aleksandra Iloska highlighted several critical points regarding the social dialogue and economy in North Macedonia. Firstly, she emphasized the underdeveloped state of both social dialogue and the social economy in the country. These two sectors operate independently without recognizing or cooperating with each other, which hinders progress. Trade unions and employers' associations often do not acknowledge the social economy sector, reflecting a significant gap in awareness and integration. Aleksandra Iloska pointed out the challenges in implementing existing policies effectively. While North Macedonia has policies in place, there is a need for robust mechanisms to translate these policies into practice. The country should learn from the experiences of EU member states to enhance its approach. Despite having two technical assistance projects to support the social economy sector, the efforts have not led to a strong and sustainable sector. Sustainability remains a major issue. Although there have been attempts to establish a national resource centre and regional support centres, these initiatives have not achieved long-term success. Speaker recommended that future projects prioritize planning for sustainability from the outset to ensure their durability. Inclusivity in social dialogue is another area needing improvement. The current social dialogue framework lacks diversity, particularly in representing young people and women. There is a need to strengthen workplace democracy and introduce mechanisms for better employee consultation. Lastly, Aleksandra Iloska noted the absence of cooperative models in North Macedonia, such as workers' councils and cooperatives, which are successful in other EU countries. The country lacks practical examples of these models, which could be beneficial for its social economy.

The next speaker of the conference was **Ingrid Landin** (Business developer, Coompanion). **Ingrid Landin's** presentation provided a comprehensive overview of the social economy in Sweden, highlighting its current state, challenges, and potential paths forward. The social economy in Sweden comprises approximately 4.5% of the national labor force, involving around 230 organizations that employ about 178,000 individuals. Despite its significant role in the workforce, the social economy has limited influence on social dialogue and industrial relations within the country. Sweden's unique historical relationship between Trade Unions and employer organizations, dating back to 1929, contributes to the complex dynamics in industrial relations. This long-standing relationship poses significant barriers for the social economy to gain recognition and impact. To address these challenges, there is a critical need to enhance general knowledge about the social economy's specific forms, possibilities, and conditions. Improving the organization and visibility of the social economy is essential

for achieving better representation and influence. Without these improvements, the sector will continue to struggle for recognition and impact. In conclusion, Ingrid Landin emphasized the necessity for the social economy to gain better representation and knowledge within Sweden. The sector must strive to consolidate its voice and increase its visibility to effectively participate in social dialogue and industrial relations. By organizing more cohesively and enhancing its presence, the social economy can work towards greater recognition and impact.

The next speaker was **Weronika Chodacz** (External expert). Weronika Chodacz's presentation provided an in-depth analysis of the current state and challenges of the social economy in Poland. Weronika began by introducing the recent legislative changes in Poland concerning the social economy. A new law has been passed that more narrowly defines social economy activities to include professional and social reintegration, job creation for people at risk of social exclusion, local development, and community building. The law also introduces the status of social enterprises, but notably excludes such entities as mutual organizations from the definition. She pointed out that employment within Poland's social economy sector is quite low, making up only about 2% of the total employment and less than 3% of the GDP, even when including voluntary work. This highlights a significant area for potential growth and development. Weronika Chodacz explained the structure of social dialogue in Poland, highlighting the Social Dialogue Council, which includes Trade Unions and employers' associations. Despite its importance, the council suffers from a lack of engagement and visibility among the wider populace and employers. The presentation emphasized the importance of professionalizing the social economy sector. That can lead to better working conditions, higher salaries, and increased attractiveness of the sector. It can also enhance the sector's ability to provide essential services such as education, social care, and healthcare, which are vital for maintaining a stable democratic system. In conclusion, Weronika Chodacz called for greater integration of the social economy into social dialogue, increased visibility, and professionalization to fully harness its potential and contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable growth in Poland.

The last speaker of the conference was **Francesco de Rosa** (Expert, DIESIS Network (Italy)). Francesco de Rosa's presentation on Italy focused on the structure and significance of the social economy within the country. He highlighted that there are approximately 500,000 social economy organizations in Italy, with about 90% of the workforce employed in cooperatives. Both, cooperatives and social dialogue are guaranteed by the Italian Constitution. Social Economy is notably well-developed and diverse, comprising various forms of cooperatives, association, foundations, and social enterprises. Francesco de Rosa emphasized the unique aspects of the Italian model of social dialogue of the social economy. Social economy in Italy have their own industrial system and their own collective bargaining, in example, cooperatives in the agriculture sector have a specific collective bargain different from the one of the mainstream SMEs in agriculture. This is due to the dual role of cooperative members, who are both employees and owners. Additionally, Italy's social economy includes bilateral organizations that provide support, especially from a welfare perspective. A significant point raised was the internal challenge within the Italian social economy, where cooperatives not registered as "social cooperatives" under the 381/91 Law, do not identify themselves as part of the social economy, instead seeing themselves as mainstream enterprises. This leads to an under-representation of cooperatives within the broader social economy sector. Francesco de Rosa also mentioned the importance of international support and alignment, noting the role of organizations like the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in advocating for the social

economy. The recent UN resolution on social and solidarity economy underscores this global support, which can be leveraged for advocacy and policy development.

At the end **Melinda Kelemen** and **Luca Pastorelli** thanked the audience for their active participation and all project partners for their work that resulted quality outputs during the two years long project.

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