

A 20-YEAR INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY WITH “EMES” THROUGH THE LAND OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Marthe Nyssens, Jacques Defourny, Sophie Adam¹

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• Purpose

In 2022, the EMES Network celebrated its 20th anniversary. The purpose of this paper is to trace the intellectual path of social enterprise (SE) research that has unfolded through some of the major EMES research projects.

• Design/methodology/approach

This journey is recounted through three major milestones: (1) the emergence and development of the EMES approach; (2) the identification of various SE schools of thought; (3) the International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project.

• Findings

The first section digs into the roots of the EMES approach—an ideal-type which allowed researchers to explore an SE field that was then largely unknown. In a second stage, a reading grid was developed to identify the different SE conceptions, their convergences and their divergences. In a third step, the ICSEM Project, acknowledging the impossibility to provide a single, universal definition of SE, aimed to identify SE models across the world. Defourny and Nyssens developed an SE typology and made the hypothesis that it was neither country-specific nor even context-specific. Based on the EMES ideal-type (which constituted a particularly relevant tool to inform the diversity of SE models), data were collected on over 700 social enterprises worldwide; three major SE models were found in almost all the countries covered.

• Originality

This contribution does not aim to summarise all the—numerous and fruitful—research projects carried out by EMES members, but to show the common thread that runs through several of them.

Keywords: EMES, social enterprise, social enterprise school of thought, social enterprise models

Introduction

In international conferences on social enterprise, among questions addressed to EMES scholars, some are recurrent: Why does the EMES approach propose an ideal-type and not a definition of social enterprise? How do the various schools of thought about social enterprise

¹ Jacques Defourny is professor emeritus of Economics of the University of Liège. Marthe Nyssens is professor of Economics of the Catholic University of Louvain. They have both been founding members of the EMES International Research Network. Jacques Defourny has been its first president (2001-2010). Marthe Nyssens has been president from 2016 to 2022. They have been the scientific coordinators of several EMES scientific projects. Sophie Adam has been the scientific and editorial assistant for several of these projects since 2001.

(SE) relate to the SE models identified by the ICSEM Project? What are the frontiers of the SE landscape? Can social businesses be characterised as social enterprises from the perspective of the EMES approach?

To answer these questions, we have to trace the intellectual path of the development of SE research that has unfolded through different EMES research projects over the last decades. Through this contribution, the goal is certainly not to summarise all the—numerous, fruitful and thorough—research projects which have been carried out by EMES members, but to show the common thread that runs through several of them—namely the EMES Project (1996-1999); the PERSE Project (2001-2006); and the ICSEM Project (2011-2021)—and which materialised in some publications that have since become widely cited in the literature (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Defourny, 2001; Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Defourny and Nyssens, 2012; Defourny and Nyssens, 2017; Defourny *et al.*, 2021; and the four ICSEM books, available in Open Access: Gaiger *et al.*, 2019; Bidet and Defourny, 2019; and Defourny and Nyssens, 2021a and 2021b).

Of course, retracing how such an intellectual adventure unfolded, identifying the path it followed is easier in hindsight. The reality is that the thread it followed has been woven over time, by trial and error, through many weeks of work and countless scientific discussions with EMES colleagues, during seminars and conferences. We propose to recount this journey in a way that will reflect its three major milestones: (1) The emergence and development of the EMES approach to social enterprise; (2) The identification of various SE schools of thought; (3) The International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project.

The first stage allows to explain the roots of the EMES approach—an ideal-type, an analytical tool which made it possible to explore an SE field that was still largely unknown at the time. In a second stage, a reading grid was developed to identify different SE conceptions, their convergences and their divergences. In a third step, the ICSEM Project, acknowledging the impossibility to provide a single, universal definition of SE, aimed—among other goals—to identify SE models across the world. In this perspective, Defourny and Nyssens developed an SE typology and made the hypothesis that it was neither country-specific, nor even, more broadly, context-specific. Based on the EMES ideal-type (which constituted a particularly relevant tool to inform the diversity of SE models), data were collected on over 700 social enterprises worldwide; three major models of social enterprise were found in almost all the countries covered.

1. The emergence and development of the EMES approach to social enterprise (1996-2006)

From the late 1980s onward, the notion of “social enterprise” started emerging and developing in Europe, and in 1996, a thematic research network, focusing on this new type of initiatives—the “EMES Project”—was launched; it was funded by the Fourth EU research Framework Programme. The project produced the first theoretical and empirical milestone of the analysis of the social enterprises that were emerging in Europe, mostly at the heart of what was called there the “social economy”.

1.1. The European context

In Europe, the concept of “social enterprise” as such seems to have first appeared in Italy, where it was promoted through a journal, launched in 1990, titled *Impresa sociale*. In the late

1980s, indeed, new initiatives had emerged in this country to respond to unmet needs, especially in the field of work integration as well as in the field of personal services. As the existing legislation did not allow cooperatives nor associations to develop economic activities driven by a general-interest mission, the Italian Parliament passed a law in 1991 creating a new legal form—namely that of “social cooperative”—, which proved to be very well adapted to those pioneering social enterprises.

The remarkable development of the latter also inspired various other countries during the following two decades, both across and beyond Europe. Indeed, and even though the term “social enterprise” was not always used as such in the legislation, several other European countries introduced new legal forms suited to “not-for-profit” organisations adopting an entrepreneurial approach, whose number was steadily increasing (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008). In France, Portugal, Spain and Greece, these new legal forms were of the cooperative type. Some other countries, such as Belgium, the UK and Italy (with a second law passed in 2006), chose more open models of social enterprise, not inspired exclusively by the cooperative tradition. In the UK, in 2002, the British government put forward a definition of social enterprise as “a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners” (DTI, 2002), and in 2004, the Parliament approved a law creating the “community interest company”.

In many European countries, beside the creation of new legal forms or frameworks, the 1990s also saw the development of specific public programmes targeting the field of work integration. It is clear that social enterprises may be active in a wide spectrum of activities, as the “social purpose” they pursue may refer to many different fields; however, since the mid-1990s, one major type of social enterprise has been dominant across Europe, namely “work integration social enterprises” (WISEs). The main objective of these enterprises is to help low qualified unemployed people, who are at risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market, and to integrate these people into work and society through a productive activity (Nyssens 2006). This dominance of WISEs in the SE landscape has even led, in several cases, to the concept of social enterprise being systematically associated with such employment creation initiatives.

1.2. *The emergence of the EMES Network and its approach to social enterprise*

As soon as 1996, i.e. before most of the European public policies supporting social enterprise were launched, a major research programme funded by the European Commission was undertaken by a group of scholars coming from the fifteen countries forming the EU at the time. The vast research project they carried out from 1996 to 1999 was named EMES, for “*EMergence des Entreprises Sociales en Europe*”;² the involved scholars progressively developed an approach to identify organisations likely to be called “social enterprises” in each country (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001). When the network subsequently decided to become a formal international scientific association, the acronym EMES was retained.

The network’s approach derives from extensive dialogue among several disciplines (economics, sociology, political sciences and management) as well as among the various national traditions and sensitivities present in the European Union.

² FP4-TSER - Specific programme of targeted socio-economic research, 1994-1998.

Nine indicators were identified, and they were first presented in two subsets: a list of four economic indicators and a list of five social indicators (Defourny, 2001: 16-18). In a comparative perspective with US schools of thought (see next section), Defourny and Nyssens (2012) subsequently considered it more appropriate to present these nine indicators (without changing anything to the indicators themselves) in three subsets rather than two, which made it possible to highlight forms of governance that are specific to social enterprises. In such a slightly reshaped EMES approach, the three sets of indicators are as follows:

- Economic and entrepreneurial dimension of social enterprises

- a) A continuous activity producing goods and/or selling services

Social enterprises, unlike some traditional non-profit organisations, do not normally have advocacy activities or the redistribution of financial flows (as, for example, many foundations) as their major activity, but they are directly involved in the production of goods or the provision of services to people on a continuous basis. The productive activity thus represents the reason, or one of the main reasons, for the existence of social enterprises.

- b) A significant level of economic risk

Those who establish a social enterprise assume totally or partly the risk inherent in the initiative. Unlike most public institutions, social enterprises' financial viability depends on the efforts of their members and workers to secure adequate resources.

- c) A minimum amount of paid work

As in the case of most traditional non-profit organisations, social enterprises may also combine monetary and non-monetary resources, and voluntary and paid workers. However, the activity carried out in social enterprises requires, at least, one paid worker.

- Social dimension of social enterprises

- d) An explicit aim to benefit the community

The primacy of the social mission over all other organisational objectives is a key determinant: the main goal of social enterprises is to serve the community or a specific group of people. In the same perspective, a feature of social enterprises is their desire to promote a sense of social responsibility at the local level.

- e) An initiative launched by a group of citizens or civil society organisations

Social enterprises are the result of collective dynamics involving people belonging to a community or to a group that shares a well-defined need or aim; this collective dimension must be maintained over time in one way or another, even though the importance of leadership (by an individual or a small group of leaders) must not be neglected.

- f) A limited profit distribution

The primacy of the social aim is reflected in a constraint on the distribution of profits. However, social enterprises do not only include organisations that are characterised by a total non-distribution constraint, but also organisations which—like cooperatives in many countries—may distribute profits, but only to a limited extent, which makes it possible to avoid profit-maximising behaviour.

- Participatory governance of social enterprises

g) A high degree of autonomy

Social enterprises are created by a group of people on the basis of an autonomous project and they are governed by these people. They may depend on public subsidies but they are not managed, be it directly or indirectly, by public authorities or other organisations (federations, private firms, etc.). They have both the right to take up their own position (“voice”) and to terminate their activity (“exit”).

h) A decision-making power not based on capital ownership

This criterion generally refers to the principle of “one member, one vote”, or at least to a decision-making process in which voting power is not distributed according to capital shares on the governing body which has the ultimate decision-making rights.

i) A participatory nature, which involves various parties affected by the activity

Representation and participation of users or customers, influence of various stakeholders on decision-making and a participative management often constitute important characteristics of social enterprises. In many cases, one of the aims of social enterprises is to further democracy at the local level through economic activity.

1.3. *What the EMES ideal-type of social enterprise is... and what it is not*

The indicators identified by EMES were never intended to represent a set of conditions that an organisation should meet in order to qualify as a social enterprise. In some of the very early EMES works, it was not always clear whether the EMES approach proposed a definition or an ideal-type. It is also true that some scholars have used the EMES approach as a definition (with clear boundaries); it is precisely to overcome this misleading interpretation that Defourny and Nyssens have been insisting, since 2006 (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006), on the ideal-typical nature of the concept in a much more explicit way than what was the case in the earliest EMES works.

Rather than listing prescriptive criteria, the EMES approach describes an “ideal-type” in Weber’s terms, i.e. an abstract construction that enables researchers to position themselves within the “galaxy” of social enterprises. As an ideal-type, this construction constitutes a tool that helps to qualify the type of mission, the type of economic logic and the type of governance; in other words, it is somewhat analogous to a compass, which helps analysts locate the position of the observed entities relative to one another and eventually identify subsets of social enterprises (“constellations”) they want to study more deeply (see Figure 1). This ideal-type does not establish the boundaries of a given portion of reality; rather, it has to be used as a yardstick to locate different enterprises compared to this “abstract model”. This is the very aim of an ideal-type.

Those indicators allow the identification of new social enterprises, but they can also lead to designate as social enterprises older organisations being reshaped by new internal dynamics.

Figure 1. Constellations in the SE galaxy

Insert Figure 1

The EMES approach proved to be empirically fertile; this ideal-type, as an analytical tool, has been operationalised in various contexts and industries. It provided the conceptual basis for several EMES research projects, in different industries—such as personal services, local development (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001) or work integration (Nyssens, 2006)—and sometimes in regions other than Western Europe, where it had emerged—such as Central and Eastern Europe (Borzaga *et al.*, 2008) or Eastern Asia (Defourny and Kuan, 2011).

In some projects commissioned by the EU Commission for policy purposes and which aimed at mapping the SE field (European Commission 2020), a “common conception” of the social enterprise was adopted that drew on the definition endorsed by the European Commission through its Social Business Initiative.³ In that context, Borzaga and his co-authors (European Commission, 2020) operationalised this conception through the three dimensions of the EMES approach: the social dimension, the entrepreneurial dimension, and the governance-ownership dimension. For that purpose, they set “minimum requirements” (for example, the share of trading in the enterprise’s income should be above 25%), as well as different relevant indicators (of the “yes-or-no” type or ranging from low to very high) to determine whether an organisation could be considered as a social enterprise. This work was purposely different from the EMES ideal-typical analytical tool, as one of the objectives of this work was to set the boundaries of the field and to measure the size of the sector across Europe. This was an extremely difficult—and in some cases contested—task. Indeed, if, in some countries, the SE phenomenon can be identified by one or more specific legal forms (which can be more or less close to the operationalised criteria), in others, this is not the case. Conceptions of social enterprises may vary from one country to the other and can also adopt various legal forms, even within a same country. These factors make it “almost impossible to provide a unified, uniform and exhaustive picture of the dimensions of the social enterprise sector at European level” (European commission, 2020: 104).

The EMES ideal-type highlights the organisational features of social enterprises; these features, of course, shape the internal governance of the organisation but also their role in the ecosystem. Therefore, the EMES approach also constitutes an analytical support to examine the “institutional dimension” of social enterprises, i.e. their potential role in the development of norms and regulations, both at the level of the organisation and beyond (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

Indeed, social enterprises pursue simultaneously economic goals; social goals, connected to their social mission; and political goals (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006), linked to their “political embeddedness”, defined as the set of interactions between public authorities and social enterprises. The EMES approach also sheds light on the fact that social enterprises have a role in the constitution of a democratic framework for economic activity (Laville *et al.*, 2006). The historical perspective and deep analysis of the various national contexts and concepts in use provided by numerous EMES works show that these innovative entrepreneurial initiatives have contributed to the development of new public schemes, legal frameworks and, more

³ “Social enterprises run commercial activities (entrepreneurial/economic dimension) in order to achieve a social or societal common good (social dimension) and have an organisation or ownership system that reflects their mission (inclusive governance-ownership dimension).” (European Commission, 2011: 2).

widely, social norms.⁴ Social enterprises shape new institutions and norms in society, and it is necessary to recognise their “institutional work” at the meso-economic level.

The process of institutionalisation of social enterprises has often been closely linked to the evolution of public policies. As underlined by authors like DiMaggio and Powell (1983), objectives and practices of organisations are partly shaped by their external environment, including the regulations under which they operate. Such a perspective however neglects an essential dynamic of social enterprises, namely the fact that the relationships these enterprises have with public policies are not one-sided: indeed, social enterprises are not just “residual” actors filling gaps of the market or the state; they also significantly influence their institutional environment, and they contribute to shaping institutions, including public policies. For example, social enterprises were pioneers in promoting the integration of excluded persons through a productive activity. A historical perspective shows that they contributed to the development of new public schemes and legal frameworks, which in turn have become channels for social innovation.

This first milestone has allowed us to explain the roots of the EMES approach—an ideal-type, an analytical tool which makes it possible to explore a field that is still largely unknown: that of social enterprises. This first step was still largely exploratory in nature. But the journey does not stop here. Research cannot limit itself to developing ideal-types, except in an exploratory step, aimed at developing conceptual tools for future analytical purposes.

2. The identification of various SE schools of thought

In the first years of the 2000s, EMES scholars presented their work at various international conferences and seminars, sharing their reflections on the European approach. Nyssens, for example, presented a paper on the European concept of social enterprise at the Social Entrepreneurship Colloquium organised by the Skoll Centre at Oxford University (UK) in 2007. Through these various presentations, it appeared that the concept of social enterprise had emerged *simultaneously* in the US and in Europe, in the 1990s, in reference to a set of new entrepreneurial initiatives pursuing social goals.

Kerlin (2006) was one of the first scholar to compare the emerging social enterprise concepts and practices across different regions of the world. She did so on the basis of the social origins theory (first introduced by Salamon and Anheier, 1998) and broadly defined social enterprise as the use of market-based approaches to address social issues.

Defourny and Nyssens presented contributions on the convergences and divergences between the European and the US conceptions of social enterprise at the conference jointly organised by the EMES Network and the International Society for Third-Sector Research in Barcelona (Spain) in 2008 and at the International Conference on Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University, in Durham (US) in 2009. These presentations and discussions as well as exchanges and interactions they generated with scholars from all over the world paved the way to a contribution (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010) that has often been regarded since as a seminal paper. It was published in 2010 in the *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, under the title “Conceptions of Social Enterprise and Social Entrepreneurship in Europe and the United States: Convergences and Divergences”.

⁴ See for example the various “national contributions” of the ICSEM project in Gaiger *et al.*, 2019; Bidet and Defourny, 2019; and Defourny and Nyssens, 2021a and 2021b.

In this paper, following the work of Dees and Anderson (2006), Defourny and Nyssens distinguish between three main “schools of thought”: the EMES approach (developed in the previous section), the earned-income school, and the social-innovation school—each of which constitutes a lens through which to observe the constantly evolving field of social enterprise. If each of these SE schools of thought is also shaped by geographical contexts, the different conceptions of social enterprise coexist to varying extent in most parts of the world and especially in Europe, so one could certainly not claim that the EMES approach is by itself fully representative of the conceptual landscape in Europe.

2.1. *The earned-income and the social-innovation schools of thought*

For the *earned-income school of thought*, social enterprise can be defined, as suggested by the Social Enterprise Alliance, as “any type of earned-income business or strategy undertaken by a non-profit to generate revenue in support of its social mission”. Within this school of thought, Defourny and Nyssens (2010) distinguish two streams. They name the first (and older) one the “commercial non-profit” approach, with a view to underlining the fact that the organisations considered as social enterprises by scholars belonging to this first stream were all non-profits. This constitutes a key difference with the second stream, which developed later, and to which Defourny and Nyssens refer as the “mission-driven business” approach; this stream indeed embraces all types of organisation—be they non-profit or for-profit—launching business activities to address social problems.

To a large extent, the concept of social business as promoted by Muhammad Yunus (2010) can also be related to the “mission-driven business” approach, although it also involves stronger conditions: “A social business is a non-loss, non-dividend company designed to address a social objective” (Yunus, 2010). This concept was mainly developed to describe a business model that focuses on the provision of goods or services to (very) poor customers, which constitute a new market segment (often called the “bottom of the pyramid”) in developing countries. Such a social business is supposed to cover all its costs through market resources. It is owned by (often large) investors who, at least in Yunus’ version, do not receive any dividend, as profits are being fully reinvested to support the social mission.

The *social-innovation school of thought* focuses on the very specific nature of the social entrepreneur and on their creativity, dynamism and leadership in coming up with new responses to social needs (Dees 1998). The emphasis here is on the systemic nature of innovation and the scope of its social or societal impact, rather than on the types of resources mobilised.

Some authors (such as Emerson 2006) emphasise the need to combine these different approaches into a common characterisation of social entrepreneurship based on four key criteria: the pursuit of social impacts; social innovation; the mobilisation of commercial revenues; and the adoption of managerial methods, whatever the legal status of the organisation (for-profit or not-for-profit, private or public). These authors emphasise the double, or even triple, bottom line of these organisations, and the creation of mixed or economic and social added value (“blended value”), with closely linked economic and social dimensions.

Figure 2. The SE schools of thought

Insert Figure 2

2.2. *Specificity of the EMES approach*

What are the specificities of the EMES approach compared to the other two schools of thought?

The governance structure

In Europe, social enterprises are mainly embedded in the social economy tradition, which is marked by a long-lasting quest for more democracy in the economy. As a result, the governance structure of social enterprise has attracted much more attention in Europe than it has in the United States, as shown by the EMES approach as well as by various legal frameworks (European Commission, 2020), across Europe, promoting social enterprise. Since the governance structure can be seen as the set of organisational devices that ensure the pursuit of the organisation's mission, it can be analysed along several dimensions.

First, the ideal-typical social enterprise defined by EMES is based on a collective dynamic and on the involvement of different stakeholders in the governance of the organisation. The various categories of stakeholders may for example include beneficiaries, employees, volunteers, public authorities and donors. They can be involved in the membership or in the board of the social enterprise, thereby creating a "multi-stakeholder ownership" (Bacchiega and Borzaga, 2003). Stakeholders can also participate through channels that are less formal than membership or involvement in the board, such as representation and participation of users and workers in different committees in the everyday life of the enterprise. In many cases indeed, one of the aims of social enterprises is to foster democracy at the local level through economic activity.

This focus on a collective dynamic clearly contrasts with the emphasis put by the social innovation school of thought on the individual profile of the social entrepreneur and their central role. Let us note however that these two points of view are not necessarily incompatible: the importance of a strong leadership by one or several founders may also be found in organisations characterised by a truly collective dynamic.

Secondly, one of the EMES indicators states that the decision-making power is not based on capital ownership, again reflecting the quest for more economic democracy, in line with the cooperative tradition. The rights of shareholders are also firmly limited as far as the appropriation of profits is concerned. Indeed, according to the EMES indicators, the field of social enterprise includes organisations that are characterised by a total non-distribution constraint and organisations which may only distribute profits to a limited extent, thus avoiding a profit-maximising behaviour.

A convergence must be noted here with the "commercial non-profit approach" (within the "earned-income" school of thought), which explicitly locates social enterprise in the field of non-profit organisations, i.e. entities which are not in the hands of investors and whose surplus is entirely retained by the organisation for the fulfilment of its social mission. By contrast, for the "mission-driven business approach" as well as for the "social-innovation school of thought", social enterprises may adopt any kind of legal framework and they may therefore distribute surplus to shareholders and have a decision power based on the number of shares. It is possible here to argue that such governance structure might in some cases challenge the primacy of social objectives: in very broad conceptions of social enterprise, the latter may include an increasing number of firms that claim to take into account a double or

triple bottom line, but analysis of these firms' actual practices may reveal that the economic line clearly dominates the other—social and environmental—dimensions.

The understanding of the concept of economic risk

Social enterprises are generally viewed as organisations characterised by a significant level of economic risk. The EMES approach shares this view, but the EMES indicator about economic risk does not mean that social enterprises should rely (mainly or fully) on market resources. Indeed, bearing economic risks does not necessarily mean that economic sustainability must be achieved only through a trading activity; it rather refers to the fact that those who establish the enterprise assume the risk of the initiative. In the EMES conception, social enterprises are not exclusively embedded in the rationality of the market, and their resources can have a hybrid character: these resources may come from trading activities, but also—to borrow concepts from Polanyi's substantive approach—from redistribution and reciprocity (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006).

This conception appears to be shared to a large extent by the "social innovation" school of thought. Indeed, according to Dees (1998), the centrality of the social mission in social enterprises implies a mix of human and financial resources, and social entrepreneurs explore all types of resources, from donations to commercial revenues. By contrast, for the "commercial non-profit approach" and the "mission-driven business approach" (forming together the "earned-income" school of thought), social enterprises should rely mainly on market resources. For the authors belonging to this school, the economic risk tends to be correlated with the share of income generated through trade. This vision is shared by some public policies, which require a market orientation from social enterprises.

The production of goods and services and their relation to the social mission

In a rather classical way, most approaches use the term "enterprise" to refer to the production of goods and/or services. As explained above, social enterprises, unlike some other non-profit organisations, are normally neither engaged in advocacy, at least not as a major goal, nor in the redistribution of financial flows (as, for example, grant-giving foundations) as their major activity; instead, they are directly involved in the production of goods or the provision of services on a continuous basis.⁵

However, differences appear between the various schools of thought when considering the nature of this production activity. When speaking of social enterprise in Europe, it appears that the production of goods and/or services generally constitutes in itself the way in which the social mission is pursued. In other words, the nature of the economic activity is closely connected to the social mission: for instance, the production process involves low-qualified people if the goal is to create jobs for that target group; if the social enterprise's mission is to develop social services, the economic activity is the delivery of such social services, and so on. This type of approach is also found in the social innovation school, which considers that social enterprises implement innovative strategies to tackle social needs through the provision of goods or services. Although the innovative behaviour may only refer to the production process or to the way in which the goods or services are delivered, it always remains linked to the

⁵ We are aware of the possibility to argue that advocacy non-profits may also be described, to a certain extent, as service providers.

latter; the provision of such goods or services therefore represents the reason, or one of the main reasons, for the existence of the social enterprise.

By contrast, for the “commercial non-profit approach”, the trading activity could simply be considered as a source of income, and the nature of the traded goods or services does not really matter as such. So, in this perspective, social enterprises can develop business activities which are only related to the social mission through the financial resources they help to secure. More precisely, it is common for a US non-profit to establish a separate business entity under its control, with a view to generating revenue from sales; in such case, it is only this latter entity that is referred to as a social enterprise.

In terms of Alter’ typology (2007), we would conclude that for the EMES approach and the social innovation school, social enterprises’ business activities are “mission-centric” (i.e. embedded in the social mission) or “mission-related”, whereas for the “commercial non-profit approach”, these activities could be “mission-unrelated” (i.e. just focused on earning income to financially support the social mission, but not otherwise related to this mission).

This second milestone allowed us to highlight three conceptions of social enterprise. In fact, when we talk about social enterprise, everyone has some—more or less explicit or implicit—conception of social enterprise in mind. These conceptions are shaped by the context, but different conceptions can coexist in the same geographical space—or even within the same university: the conception of social enterprise in a university’s business school may differ from that in the same university’s social science department. The aim of the classification presented here is not to identify the “right” conception but to provide a reading grid to identify the main schools of thought, their convergences and their divergences.

This mapping of SE approaches can also be enriched by the conceptions that emanate from the South: in such perspective, the reader is invited to consult Gaiger, Nyssens and Wanderley (2019) to discover contributions from Latin America, and Bidet and Defourny (2019), for contributions from Asia.

3. The International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project

Various definitions of social enterprise coexist. This is a direct consequence of the existence of different SE schools of thought: the different definitions are rooted in different conceptions. And even within each school of thought, some conceptual debates can still take place regarding the definition of social enterprise. These debates, rather than clarifying matters, have often increased the feeling of confusion among researchers, observers or newcomers in the “SE field”. Today, the lack of a shared understanding and definition of social enterprise is acknowledged by most researchers, and it even seems reasonable to speak of the impossibility of reaching a unified definition of social enterprise.

This recognition that the field of social enterprise is too wide and too diverse to be embraced by a single definition that would be unanimously accepted was the starting point of the ICSEM Project, a major research project initiated within the EMES International Research Network and which gathered more than 230 researchers from some 60 countries, under the scientific coordination of Jacques Defourny and Marthe Nyssens. Its main goal was to identify and compare SE models across the world. In the first phase of the ICSEM project, all the researchers involved provided a “country contribution” about the SE landscape in their respective countries. Among other things, researchers were asked to develop a deep

understanding of the national context and concepts in use, and to identify and characterise the various SE types they could observe. Two major distinctive features of this approach should be underlined here. First, no *a priori* strict definition of social enterprise was imposed for these national contributions.⁶ The field of analysis was delineated as “made of organisations that combine an entrepreneurial dynamic to provide services or goods with the primacy of their social aims”. The emphasis was put on the embeddedness of the SE phenomenon in local contexts. Secondly, most research was carried out by teams rather than by individual researchers, and this fostered discussion at the local or national level, thereby reducing the risks of biases induced by purely personal perceptions. In a second phase, with a view to addressing the lack of reliable data sets at enterprise level to undertake international comparative analysis, information was collected about social enterprises, on the basis of a common questionnaire.

In the following, we will summarise the different analytical steps as well as some of the main results of this ambitious research project.

3.1. *From schools of thought to typologies*

Various existing SE typologies already provided useful lenses to grasp SE diversity, but many of them were mostly inductive and country-specific, and only very few were built upon solid theoretical foundations (Defourny *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, these analytical grids did not generally rely on systematic data collection at enterprise level.

Indeed, various authors have tried to identify categories or types of social enterprise and to propose typologies. The degree of market reliance is certainly a dominant criterion in the eyes of many researchers looking for a basic typology of social enterprises. Dees (1996) paved the way for such an approach when he presented social enterprises along a single-dimensional continuum between two extremes corresponding respectively to a “purely philanthropic” pole and a “purely commercial” one. From the point of view of Dees’ spectrum, all social enterprises can be seen as “intermediate organisations” and they may all be labelled as “hybrids” (Doherty *et al.*, 2014).

Relying mainly on an analysis of the US social enterprise landscape, Young *et al.* (2016) proposed the metaphor of a “social enterprise zoo”, in which different types of animals seek different things, behave differently and may (or may not) interact with one another in both competitive and complementary ways... just like social enterprises, which combine social and market goals in substantially different ways. The authors propose “six major species of zoo animals”: for-profit business corporations developing programmes of corporate social responsibility, in which social goals play a strategic role; social businesses looking for an explicit balance between social impact and commercial success; social cooperatives maximising their members’ welfare while also including a general public-benefit dimension; commercial non-profit organisations driven by their social mission; public-private partnerships; and hybrids.

⁶ These “national contributions” were published as *ICSEM Working Papers*, all of which are available on the EMES website (<https://emes.net/research-projects/social-enterprise/icsem-project-home/icsem-project-working-papers/>); most of them were also published in the books that resulted from the ICSEM Project. All four books (Gaiger, Nyssens and Wanderley 2019; Bidet and Defourny 2019; Defourny and Nyssens 2021a and 2021b) are available in Open Access on Routledge’s website (links are provided in the list of references).

Kerlin (2017) adopted an institutional perspective, identifying key features of macro-institutional frameworks to suggest how any set of socioeconomic and regulatory institutions at country level tends to shape a specific major SE model per country.

3.2. *Theorising the diversity of SE models*

While taking stock of the various existing typologies, which were inductive or/and country-specific, Defourny and Nyssens (2017) tried to go one step further by providing strong theoretical foundations to theorise the diversity of SE models. Indeed, if the EMES approach provides an ideal-type that constitutes a precious analytical tool to locate different SE models, this ideal-type does not provide any hypothesis as such regarding the various types of social enterprise. Defourny and Nyssens developed a framework by combining principles of interest and resource mixes and identified institutional trajectories generating four major SE models. They represented this framework under the form of a triangle (see Figure 3).

When speaking about “the economy”, the first type of organisation that generally comes to mind is the for-profit firm, which is driven by capital interest and relies mainly on market resources. For-profit enterprises, however, face market failures, which call for an intervention of the state, which is driven by the general interest, and relies mainly on non-market resources. Some associations seeking a public benefit are located close to the general interest angle, although not in the vertex itself, as their general interest (the community they serve) is usually not as wide as the one served by the state. There is also a third principle, beside the capital interest and the general interest, which is often neglected when describing the socio-economic purpose: it is the mutual interest. Mutual interest refers to services or goods provided to members under their own control. In other words, mutual benefit organisations include all the traditional types of cooperative enterprises, which usually rely mainly on market resources, as well as those voluntary associations that are driven by the interest of their members (such as sports clubs, professional associations, and so on), and which usually rely more on non-market resources.

On the basis of this triangle, Defourny and Nyssens identified, as just said, four major SE models. These four models are characterised by different institutional trajectories, which can be grasped through two movements.

The first movement can be observed among public and non-profit organisations. It is the movement towards marketisation; it results from dramatic changes in the funding of goods and services of general interest. Public organisations and non-profit organisations had traditionally been relying mainly on non-market income; they used to be fully subsidised by public authorities or to mix public financing and philanthropic resources. Nowadays, they are being pushed towards more market-oriented activities in order to complement their existing resources, thus giving rise to two SE models.

“*Entrepreneurial non-profits*” (ENP) are typically non-profit organisations developing any type of earned-income business in support of their social mission. A growing number of associations are developing income-generating strategies that can take various forms. Some associations are developing market activities as a way to implement their social mission (mission-centric or mission-related, according to Alter’s classification). Other associations are developing market activities to finance the activities linked to their social mission (and these market activities can also be mission-unrelated activities). Many associations are also

encouraged to develop more entrepreneurial dynamics when they find themselves competing in public markets with private for-profit enterprises and public operators.

“Public-sector social enterprises” (PSE) result from a movement towards the marketisation of public services; this type includes “public-sector spin-offs”. These social enterprises are usually launched by local public bodies, sometimes in partnership with third-sector organisations, to provide services which are outsourced (such as care services) or new services (such as those offered by work-integration social enterprises).

The second movement corresponds to a shift from the capital and mutual interests towards the general interest.

“Social cooperatives” (SC), like traditional cooperatives, aim at implementing democratic forms of governance, i.e. equal voting power in the general assembly, and a limitation of the remuneration of capital shares. However, this model goes beyond that of most traditional cooperatives, in that it combines the pursuit of the interests of its members with the pursuit of the interests of the community as a whole or of a specific target group. Cooperative-type social enterprises may also result from the evolution of mutual-interest associations that wish to develop their economic activities in order to respond to a specific social problem and, in so doing, move towards a more explicit general-interest objective.

“Social businesses” (SB) are rooted in a business model driven by shareholders’ interest, but they mix this logic with a “social entrepreneurial” drive aimed at the creation of a “blended value” in an effort to balance and better integrate economic and social purposes. In this model of social enterprise, it is then a question of aiming at and balancing financial results with social—and sometimes also environmental—results (double/triple bottom line).

At first sight, when looking at Figure 3, the four SE models seem to arise from new dynamics at work in pre-existing organisations. Thus, it may seem that social enterprises cannot be created from scratch. Such an interpretation would be clearly misleading, as a new (social) enterprise can emerge everywhere in the triangle; its location will depend on its “interest orientation” and on its “resource mix”. It should also be stressed that this basic typology does not deny the existence of the many hybrid models that can be observed in the field. For example, partnerships between for-profit companies and associations or partnerships involving local public authorities are relatively common.

Figure 3. Institutional trajectories and social enterprise models

Insert Figure 3

Source: Defourny and Nyssens (2017, p. 2479).

3.3. Testing social enterprise models across the world

These “theorised” models were then put to test on the basis of the data collected through the survey carried out in the second phase of the ICSEM project. The driving hypothesis was that the typology was neither country-specific, nor even, more broadly, context-specific.

With that purpose, ICSEM research partners interviewed the managers of three to five social enterprises that were deemed emblematic of each SE type identified in the project’s first phase. As a result, detailed data were collected in a rather homogeneous way for 721 social enterprises from 43 countries. Needless to say, the sample was by no way representative of

the SE population across the world. Indeed, not only was the distribution across continents particularly uneven, with a quasi-absence of Africa; more fundamentally, the whole SE population is simply unknown, as there is no universal definition of social enterprise.

The ICSEM questionnaire relied on the EMES ideal-type as an analytical tool: data was to be collected about the three dimensions of this ideal-type (the nature of the mission, the type of economic model and the governance structure). This decision did by no way mean that an enterprise should meet a defined set of conditions linked to these dimensions in order to qualify as a social enterprise; simply, it was considered that collecting information about these dimensions would particularly inform the diversity of SE models and make it possible to locate the position of the observed social enterprises in relation to one another: this is the purpose of an ideal-type.

Could the EMES ideal-type have introduced a bias into the results of the project, to the extent that researchers might have restricted their collection of data to social enterprises close to this ideal-type? We cannot totally exclude this bias, whose possible existence has been acknowledged by Defourny *et al.* (2021), even though the scientific coordinators of the ICSEM Project purposely delineated the field of analysis in a very broad way. Empirical results, though, show that this bias has been limited. Indeed, the results of the ICSEM Project led to the identification of seven groups (Defourny *et al.*, 2021), some of which display quite significant divergences from the ideal-type. For example, there is a cluster (which we could refer to as that of “social businesses”) made of small- and medium-sized enterprises that operate on the market while simultaneously pursuing a social mission, and whose governance structure is clearly not participatory.

The empirical data collected were statistically analysed (through a factor analysis followed by a clustering analysis) with a central objective: to see if groups of enterprises emerged that presented characteristics which made them appear as groups that were significantly homogeneous and, at the same time, significantly distinct from one another. The next step was to analyse these groups to see if they provided any empirical support to the typology of SE models presented above. This analysis was conducted both at the global level and separately for Asia, Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe.

Results at the global level

This statistical processing of the ICSEM database confirmed the existence, at the global level, of three of the four major SE models proposed in the typology: the social-cooperative model, the entrepreneurial non-profit model and the social-business model. The data collected show that these three major models of social enterprise are found in almost all the countries covered—namely 39 countries out of the 43 countries studied. The key results of the statistical work at the global level are displayed in Table 1, where the seven clusters are described through the various dimensions listed in the first column (for full results, see Defourny *et al.*, 2021).

Table 1. Identification of SE models at the global level: key results of the ICSEM Project

Insert Table 1

Regarding the *social cooperative* model, two groups emerged. Although organisations in the first cooperative group produce a diversity of goods and services, practically all these activities

are meant to serve social objectives: they aim at creating jobs for the unemployed, at generating income for poor people, at pursuing community development, at addressing ecological issues, etc. In the second cooperative group, most social enterprises provide financial and insurance services. Access to financial services has always been a main concern for poor populations and a central issue for a substantial component of the cooperative movement.

Four groups are converging towards an *entrepreneurial non-profit* model. Two of them gather organisations that are mainly driven by a mission of employment generation and may therefore be considered as work-integration social enterprises (WISEs), whereas the other two groups cover a wider spectrum of social missions. The largest “non-profit-type” group gathers rather large organisations providing mainly education, health and social services. The other is made of much smaller organisations, providing a very wide spectrum of services aiming to foster local development, ecology, access to education, capacity building... These “non-profit-type” organisations display a much wider diversity of resources than what is found in the two cooperative-type groups, with maximum 40% of income coming from the market. Such resource mix could be seen as somehow surprising since a usual approach to social enterprise sees it as “a market solution to a social problem”. However, for the EMES school of thought, as underlined above, the entrepreneurial dimension of social enterprise lies, at least partly, in the fact that the initiative bears a significant level of entrepreneurial risk—but not necessarily a market risk. In this broad perspective, the resource mix which can best support the social mission is likely to have a hybrid character, as it may combine trading activities with public subsidies and/or voluntary resources.

A last, smaller group is indicating the existence of an SME model of *social business*; this group brings together the newest and smallest social enterprises in the sample. It includes for-profit enterprises that combine a strong commercial orientation with a social mission. The data show that these enterprises have business models that are very similar to those of cooperative-type organisations: they too rely on market resources. However, their governance models are markedly different. In this last group, many enterprises are in the hands of a single person. With regard to rules and provisions regarding profit distribution, it is striking that in the majority of organisations in this group, there are no rules limiting profit distribution. Some of these companies adopt an accreditation that requires social objectives to be predominant in their mission (e.g. the “B Corp” accreditation), but generally, these accreditations do not impose any limits on profit distribution. This does not mean that all or most of the profits are usually distributed to the owners: a fairly common practice is to reinvest the profits in the business. As this combination of economic and social objectives is implemented here within less regulated frameworks than those defined by the rules and governance structures of “cooperative-type” social enterprises, the balance between these (potentially conflicting) objectives and the evolution of this balance over time raises the question of the sustainability of the social mission.

The existence of the *public-sector SE* model is not confirmed by the identification of a distinct group of enterprises. However, one should not conclude too quickly that the public sector is absent from the field of social enterprise. In fact, it is found within some clearly identified groups, where it is often involved as a partner in the creation of social enterprises—in particular work-integration enterprises. It is also possible that local researchers, considering *a priori* social enterprises as inherently private initiatives, did not consider public-sector initiatives as potential social enterprises.

In certain configurations, these “(para)public” social enterprises can emerge as “spin-offs” of the public sector. In the context of local development policies targeting disadvantaged urban areas, for example, local authorities may take the initiative to set up social enterprises to stimulate economic revitalisation efforts. They can also launch work-integration social enterprises targeting job seekers in great difficulty, and then remain involved in the management of these initiatives.

Regional specificities of SE models

At the regional level, SE patterns proved to be very similar to those emerging at the worldwide level: all three SE models identified at the global level were also clearly identified in the four regions analysed. However, results also revealed some region-specific features.

The cooperative type—especially worker cooperatives—constitutes the dominant SE form in *Latin America*. In many cases, the mutual interest pursued by member-workers lies in the creation of jobs for these workers under their own control, but it is combined with a clear and broader social orientation, because these workers are generally living on the margins of society, and their work ensures the survival of poor families or local communities.

Although Europe displays SE patterns quite similar to the overall worldwide sample, a few distinctive characteristics are interesting to point out. In *Central and Eastern Europe*, after decades of mistrust in cooperatives, which were formerly controlled by the state, the cooperative SE type is just beginning to attract interest again. And in this region, the importance of funds coming from EU-supported programmes and projects may partly explain why the SE landscape is dominated by the non-profit form, which appears to be the most suitable form to obtain support from EU institutions. In *Western Europe*, a new wave of “citizens’ cooperatives”, embedded in the social-cooperative model, is emerging. These initiatives strive to fulfil unmet social and ecological needs and develop practices based on alternatives to economic growth as a main goal. This quite recent generation of cooperatives can be analysed as clearly embedded in the so-called “transition movement” (Hopkins 2013).

Finally, with regard to *Asia*, the social-business model represents the largest group and displays features which are quite specific: most of these social enterprises are rather small social businesses, launched and managed by a single entrepreneur. Much more should be said to really describe the Asian SE landscape, regarding for instance the influence of the diversity of religions and the legacy of communism or dictatorial regimes; for a fuller and more complete analysis of social enterprise in this region, we refer the reader to Bidet and Defourny (2019).

Conclusion

To conclude the story of this EMES journey, let us retrace, in a nutshell, the path followed by some of the major EMES projects that constituted important milestones of this development.

A first important milestone was the emergence and development of the EMES approach to social enterprise, which put forward an ideal-type articulated around three dimensions to help situate the emerging “social enterprises” and the various “constellations” they formed in the changing landscape of social economy in Europe.

But the SE concept had not only emerged in Europe; it had also appeared, simultaneously, in various contexts, and the rise of the awareness of this simultaneous emergence in several

places, as well as the identification of different “schools of thought” (the EMES approach, the earned-income school and the social-innovation school) offering various theoretical prisms to analyse this emerging phenomenon and its constantly evolving field, constituted the second major milestone in EMES’ intellectual history.

It gradually appeared that reaching a unified definition of social enterprise would be impossible: the field of social enterprise is indeed too wide and too diverse to be embraced by a single definition. The ICSEM Project—which constituted the third major milestone of SE research development within EMES—acknowledged the vanity of the quest for a single definition; its goal was to identify and compare SE models across the world.

With this goal in mind, the scientific coordinators of the ICSEM Project put forward some fundamental elements for the development of an international typology; the typology they proposed included four SE models. The hypothesis they made was that this typology was neither country-specific, nor even, more broadly, context-specific. Data were collected on over 700 social enterprises worldwide. This collection of data relied on the EMES ideal-type, whose three dimensions appeared as a particularly relevant tool to inform the diversity of SE models. On the basis of the data thus collected, the typology was tested, with a view to discovering to what extent each SE model might be identified across countries, in every world region and across regions.

Figure 4. A 20-year intellectual journey with EMES through the land of social enterprise

Insert figure 4

Having come so far in our tale of the journey of scientific research on social enterprise, it seems right and fair to take a moment to acknowledge and salute the mobilisation and commitment of the great community of ICSEM researchers (a community which came to include some 230 researchers from some 60 countries, all of them voluntary!), without whom the ICSEM Project would simply not have existed.

The emergence of different entrepreneurial forms centred on social goals and the identification of three—or even four—major models through the analysis of the principles of interest (mutual interest, capital interest and general interest) and of the resource mix mobilised by the considered enterprises open up several interesting perspectives.

First, this identification allows us to make an additional step towards a clearer and better view of the landscape of social enterprises, too often “caricatured” and described by monolithic discourses. Far from aiming at any “unification”, it highlights the existence of very different major models, which themselves open up to a diversity of effective practices within them. An in-depth understanding of the different models of social enterprise makes it possible to identify future challenges that are anything but trivial—such challenges are analysed in detail in the four “ICSEMs books” (Bidet and Defourny, 2019; Gaiger, Nyssens and Wanderley, 2019; Defourny and Nyssens, 2021a and 2021b).

Secondly, and most importantly, it shows in a structured way that social entrepreneurship can emerge from all parts of our economies, including those—different from one part of the world to the other—that were least thought of. So why not recognise, in these four major models of social enterprise, the emergence of new distributions of roles and tasks in the pursuit of the common good? Historically, the state has often been tempted to take sole responsibility for the general interest, even though traditions of solidarity or philanthropy have almost always

coexisted with official forms of public monopoly. In this context, the emergence—or rather the strengthening—of a genuine associative entrepreneurship, as well as the development of a new family of cooperatives, more focused on the general interest, underline the relevance and the potential of new sharing of responsibilities, as well as the need to deepen partnerships of all kinds around specific issues of common good. Within such partnerships or along more individual lines, a growing number of entrepreneurs (concerned with integrating a general-interest dimension into the heart of economic activity) are also questioning the pursuit of profit at all costs.

Although the social and ecological transition cannot be fully achieved without deep systemic transformations at the macro level, social enterprises also contribute to the evolution of production processes and consumption patterns. The challenge is therefore to take the full measure of their contribution and to broaden their influence. In this sense, social enterprises are indeed a driving force for the transition.

Though we come here to the end of our tale so far, the intellectual journey through the land of social enterprises is of course not over—nor will it be any time soon. For the scientific community, many questions remain to be investigated, many areas to be explored, many new territories to be discovered... The journey continues!

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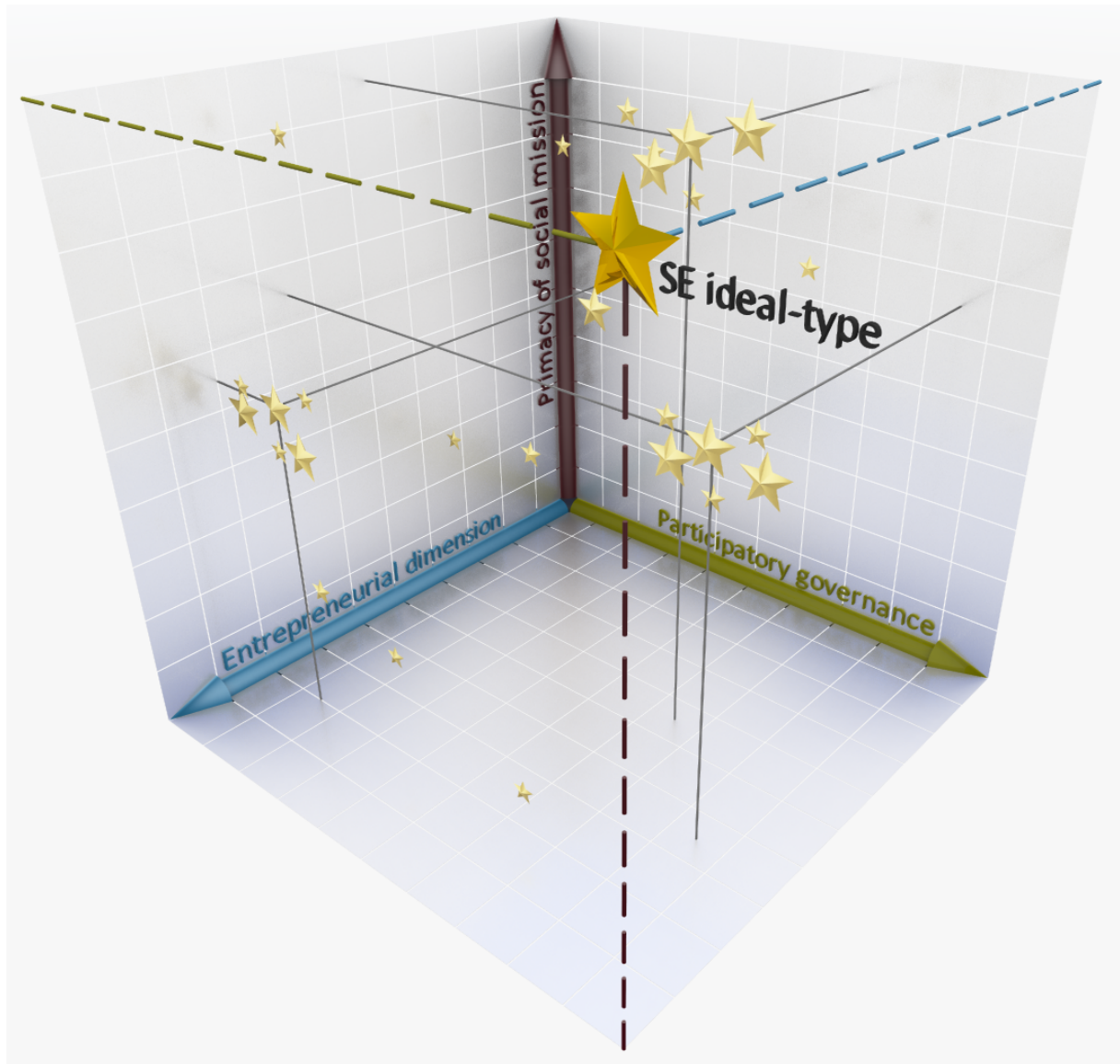
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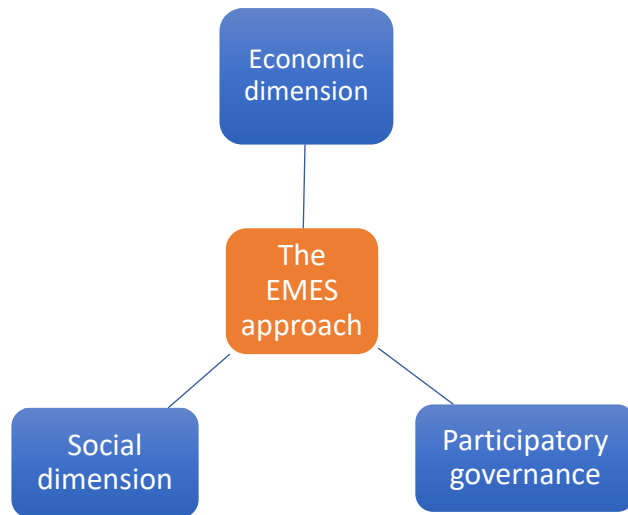
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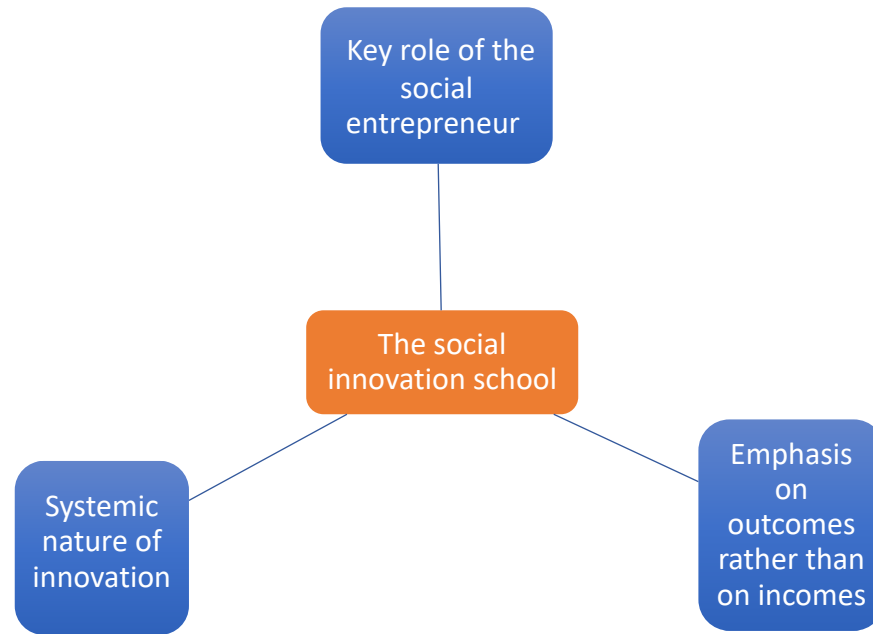
Figure 1. Constellations in the SE galaxy

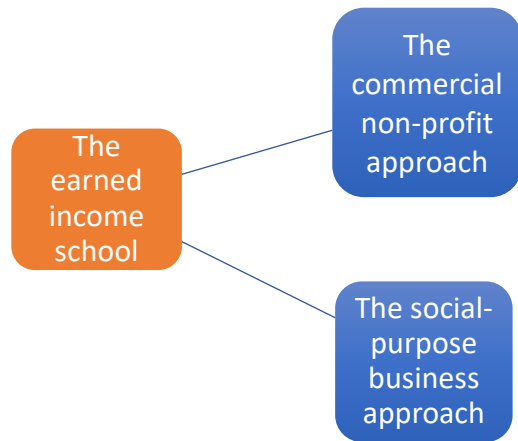


Source: Author's own creation'

Figure 2. The SE schools of thought







Source: Author's own creation'

Figure 3. Institutional trajectories and social enterprise models

Source: Defourny and Nyssens (2017, p. 2479).

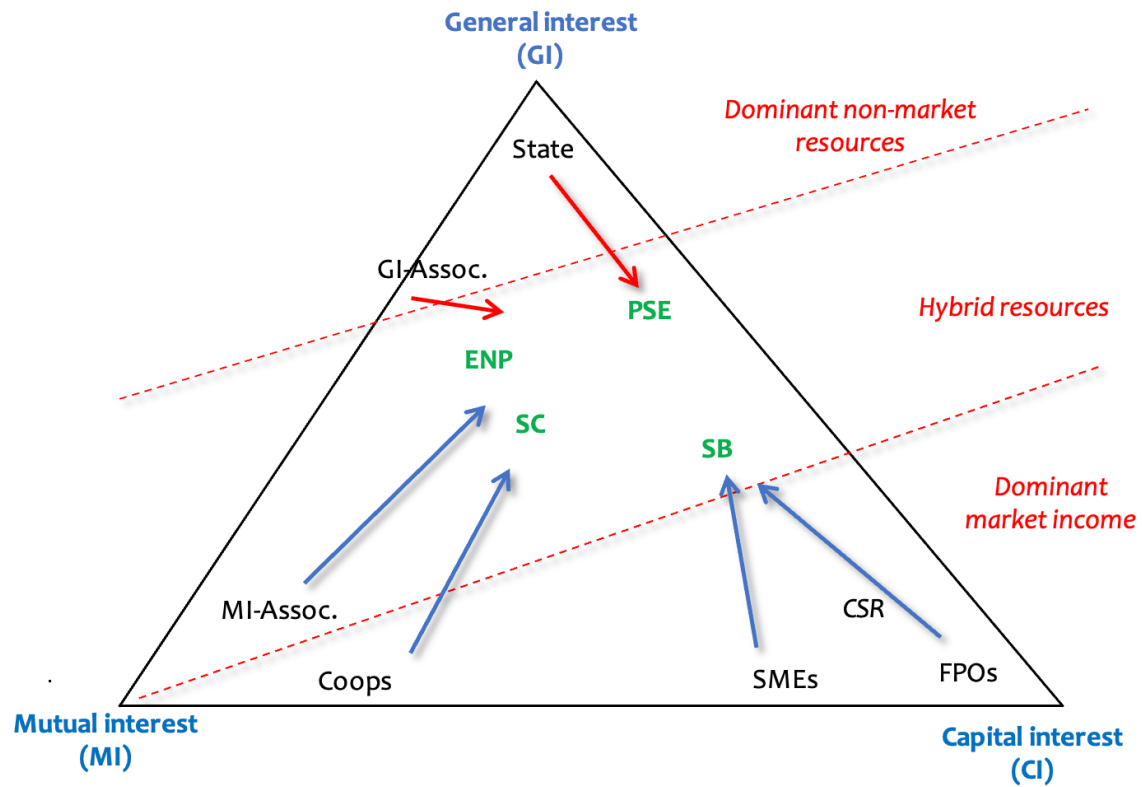


Table 1. Identification of SE models at the global level: key results of the ICSEM Project

SE models	SB model	SC model	Entrepreneurial non-profit (ENP) model				
	Small and medium SB	Coop. SE	Coop. micro-finance SE	NP-parent-launched WISE	NP WISE	Local development ENP	Health and social services ENP
Legal form	In most cases, companies	In most cases, cooperatives	Wide variety		In most cases, NPOs, some companies	In most cases, NPOs, some companies, coop., informal	In most cases, NPOs and foundations
Social mission	Various	Various	Access to finance	Work integration	Work integration	Local and community development	Access to health and social services
Economic resources	Dominant market income				Hybrid		
Governance	Independent or capitalist	Democratic	Mainly democratic Some independent		Democratic	Mainly democratic Some independent	Democratic

Source: Author's own creation'

Figure 4. A 20-year intellectual journey with EMES through the land of social enterprise

Source: Author's own creation'

