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Barna, Cristina

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics
Düsternbrooker Weg 120
24105 Kiel (Germany)
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)
<https://www.zbw.eu/econis-archiv/>

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Current Socio-Economic Challenges. Approaching Sustainability and Social Economy

Guest Editor's Note

Cristina BARNA

Pro Global Science Association,  cristina_barna1412@yahoo.com

Starting with 2015, The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), the global new plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity has raised debates in the academic and research environments, and not only. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a broad and universal policy agenda, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 169 associated targets that are integrated and indivisible. Building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 2030 Agenda seeks to guide the Member States to transform their approach to achieve inclusive, people-centered, and sustainable development with no one left behind. This Agenda is recognizing that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the most significant global challenge and a requirement for sustainable development.

We are still facing and debating on many economic, social, and environmental challenges. For example, in 2020, at the end of the Europe 2020 strategy, we still discuss in Europe about some dimensions of the Horizon 2020 societal challenges such as health, demographic change, and wellbeing; sustainable agriculture and forestry, marine and maritime and inland water research, and the bioeconomy; secure, clean and efficient energy; smart, green and integrated transport; climate action, environment, resource efficiency, and raw materials; Europe in a changing world - inclusive, innovative and reflective societies, or secure societies... Trying to respond to such challenges and not only, Europe is implementing Circular Economy Package, and at the same time is strengthening the social economy sector, which can have a substantial contribution to economic development, social inclusion, as well as green and digital transitions.

Consequently, approaching Sustainability, Sustainable Development concept, and (or) Social Economy and various types of social economy entities, is becoming more and more imperative and frequently met in academia. This **Special Issue** of the **Management Dynamics and Knowledge Economy journal** on the topic of "**Current socio-economic challenges. Approaching Sustainability and Social Economy**" provides a venue for high-quality research works of academics and researchers in these actual challenging topics.

The principles of sustainability are the foundations of what this extremely actual concept represents. Sustainability is made up of three pillars: economic, social and environment. Therefore, sustainability is not only about the environment. In the race towards a better future, many companies are going green, wishing to have a lasting impact on the world. But they have stepped up to take a more active role in shaping a more sustainable future—not just from an environmental point of view, also by taking social and governance factors into consideration. It is about well-known sustainable global corporations, but it is also about various institutions and universities, or social economy entities, all of them approaching sustainability for the benefits of the society.

The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (2014) noted the importance of the Social and Solidarity Economy, indicating that it could play a key role in

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achieving the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs. Social and Solidarity Economy, as an alternative development model, holds considerable promise for addressing the economic, social, and environmental integrated approaches of sustainable development.

According to CIRIEC Intl report (CIRIEC International, 2017), European social economy provides over 13.6 million paid jobs in Europe – the equivalent of about 6.3% of the working population of the EU-28, employment of a workforce of over 19.1 million, including paid and non-paid, more than 82.8 million volunteers, equivalent of 5.5 million full-time workers, more than 232 million members of cooperatives, mutuals and similar entities - over 2.8 million entities and enterprises. Social enterprises are also an important part of the social economy, in which the 13.6 million Europeans work today. In the base of the pioneering work of the EMES International Research Network, the Communication on the Social Business Initiative introduced the concept of social enterprise as a new actor in the social economy. “Despite their wide variety, social enterprises share at least four common features: a social or societal objective, entrepreneurial behavior, democratic and/or participatory governance, and the reinvestment of profits” (GECES, 2016, p.10). Some years later, in the most recent comparative report of the European Commission on *Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe*, it is concluded that “the social enterprise is an increasingly widespread phenomenon with great potential, which is still far from being fully harnessed” (Borzaga et al., 2020, p.148).

As a natural evolution in pace with the actual digitalization phenomenon, new collaborative-economy initiatives are emerging that are based on platforms of a cooperative nature, the so-called platform cooperatives, which are collectively owned and democratically controlled. Scholtz (2016) considers that platform cooperativism is about solidarity. “Platforms can be owned and operated by inventive unions, cities, and various other forms of cooperatives, everything from multi-stakeholder and worker-owned co-ops to producer-owned platform cooperatives” (Scholtz, 2016, p.14). Como, Mathis, Tognetti, and Rapisardi (2016), in their exploratory study, identified 38 cases in Europe of cooperatives that were adapting collaborative economy principles to develop their businesses, also observing that over 80% (31 out of 38) of the collaborative economy initiatives done by cooperatives rely heavily on digital technology as a key enabling factor. This confirms the strong relationship between the collaborative economy and digital innovation, especially in sectors such as mobility, energy, tourism, finance, and food, according to their study.

But can new technologies, platforms, and on-line collaboration play an important role in harnessing the potential of social enterprises? And of the whole social economy sector? Among the EU actions for social economy and social enterprises, the pillar of Social innovation, technologies, and new business models is currently developed (GECES 2019). There is an on-going EU level study about promoting the role of new technologies and digitalization for social economy and social enterprise in order to have a vision about the potential future trajectories of digital platforms, open-source and disruptive technologies and their consequent implications upon the social economy and social entrepreneurship, in terms of impact and business models; there will be Horizon 2020 Prize on “Blockchains for Social Goods” ... Are we at the beginning of a new era for Social and Solidarity Economy? Are we moving towards a cross-sectoral collaboration perspective?

As stated in CIRIEC Intl report, “values and principles of the cooperative movement and the social economy, such as links with the local area, inter-cooperation, or solidarity, are decisive pillars for guaranteeing sustainable development processes in their triple dimension: environmental, economic and social” (CIRIEC International, 2017, p.31). Social Economy can play a crucial role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This Special Issue of the Management Dynamics and Knowledge Economy

journal represents an attempt to put together the concepts and models of Sustainability and Social Economy to respond to the actual economic, social, and environmental challenges, paving the way for further research directions in the field.

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