INTERNATIONAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY OF LIFE

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Development of the social economy: importance, challenges, impact, prospects

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Abstract

The importance of the social economy and the benefits that organizations in this sector generate for society are recognized by governments at both European and national levels. In many countries, it is possible to address social and economic challenges more efficiently through dedicated strategies and support schemes than by relying solely on the public or private sectors. European studies demonstrate that social enterprises are much more oriented towards society and people than traditional businesses. Social enterprises represent a novel approach to enhancing the welfare mix.

The Republic of Moldova's aspirations for European integration, on the one hand, and the country's level of economic development, the social challenges the country faces, and the opportunities offered by social entrepreneurship (generating both economic and social profit, having a strong inclusive and sustainable character), on the other hand, call for the inclusion of boosting the social economy on the state's priority list to create a favorable development framework. Although several actions (legislative and political) have been undertaken to support the development of social entrepreneurship, it currently faces multiple barriers, and its internal potential and contribution to the socio-economic consolidation and evolution of the Republic of Moldova has not been fully exploited.

This research was conducted to highlight the essence of the social economy, clarify some aspects of its concept; to emphasize European approaches, policies and experiences regarding the evolution and support of this sector; and evaluate the current situation, barriers, and prospects for the development of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: *social entrepreneurship, social economy, social inclusion, social innovation, welfare.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of the social economy has gained recognition and accelerated development in many countries, including European nations. This growth is attributed to the principles and values that underpin activities in this field. Social business models are acknowledged for adding value to local economies and communities by promoting their inclusion, resilience and sustainability. By acting locally, social economy entities aim to serve their communities, keeping population, economic activities and income within the locality. They can substantially contribute to the achievement of the sustainable development goals by promoting responsible consumption and production at the local level, promoting short value chains, which help combat climate change.

However, the concept and benefits of the social economy remain relatively unknown in the business environment, among consumers and young people, and the potential of social entrepreneurship is still undervalued. Additionally, there are deficiencies in the legal regulation of the social economy, public policies, access to markets and financing, visibility, etc. These gaps justify the research carried out in the mentioned field in order to identify innovative solutions that can boost the development of social entrepreneurship.

Although multiple studies on various dimensions and aspects of the social economy have been conducted recently, there is still no unified approach to its theoretical aspects due to its relatively new status as a concept. At the EU level, having recognized the importance of the social economy, several policies and initiatives have been approved to support social entrepreneurship. However, there are differences in terms of recognition, financial support, regulation and implementation practices of the social economy across various European states.

The development of the social economy has also become imperative for the Republic of Moldova, especially considering the country's aspirations to join the EU. In this context, evaluating European experiences and analyzing the state of the social economy sector in the Republic of Moldova – focusing on creating a favorable framework for its development, promoting innovation, inclusion, environmental protection and community development - becomes an important objective. The social economy uniquely leverages such assets as trust and values, based on a new model for the relationship between work and motivations.

2. Methodology

The main purpose of this research is to analyze the social economy at both the EU level and in the Republic of Moldova, based on the study of existing documents and research conducted at European and national levels. This research specifically focuses on analyzing the context and perspectives of the social economy in European countries with advanced experience in this field and comparing them to the current situation in the Republic of Moldova. The aim is to provide suggestions and recommendations that would contribute to the development of an economic system that recognizes, promotes, utilizes, develops, and diversifies the forms and actors of the social economy.

To achieve our objectives, we employed various scientific research methods and tools, adhering to standards of objectivity and precision, validating the obtained results. These methods included documentation and bibliographic analysis, historical and logical approaches, comparative studies, case studies, and others.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The concept, essence and benefits of the social economy

The social economy, also called the "third sector", emerged from the need to identify innovative solutions to address the social, economic and environmental overlooked of communities and to meet the needs of community members who are often ignored or insufficiently supported by the authorities, and the private sector.

Although the term "social economy" was first used by Charles Dunoyer in his work "Treatise on Social Economy" (1830), the idea of organizing social economic activities appeared and manifested much earlier through the establishment of cooperatives and associations that were based on the principles of cooperation, associative democracy and mutual aid. Thus, the cooperative movement served as the prototype and facilitated the development of the social economy. Over time, driven by societal challenges, this field has developed and expanded both geographically and in terms of the diversity of activities and social services it offered to the population, thanks to the specific nature of these activities.

The major difference between the social economy and the market economy lies in their specific goals and activities. The social economy is primarily focused on improving living conditions and providing new opportunities for disadvantaged people or those belonging to vulnerable groups, while the market economy opts for obtaining and maximizing profit.

Although the concept and understanding of the social economy have penetrated and become common in society, there is still no unified theoretical framework for this concept. This lack of consensus results in different perceptions, attitudes and policies regarding the support for social economic activities among political decision-makers and different economic actors and countries.

Generalizing the multiple definitions of the social *economy,* it can be concluded that it *represents the economic sector that combines economic efficiency with social inclusion and democratic governance systems, collaborating with both public and private sectors to adapt to the needs of the population.*

The essence of the social economy is well expressed in the OECD studies, presented in Figure 1. Organizations in this field implement specific business models, which are characterized, on the one hand, by the fact that they address societal needs, and, on the other hand, they are organized differently from mainstream economic actors. The business models of the social economy are unique in their way, because they prioritize human needs, are anchored in local communities, effectively utilize diverse resources, incorporate inclusive and democratic governance systems, implement sustainable practices and circular models, and opt for the best solutions of social innovation.



Figure 1. The framework of social economy (OSCE, 2020)

Thus, the Social Economy includes various organizational and/or legal ownership forms such as: cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations, etc. However, the primary type of entity within the entire range of social economy organizations are cooperatives, which have a history of about two centuries and have established themselves as an important sector of the world economy with a strong impact on socio-economic development. They initiate actions and develop response programs to global challenges, enhancing resilience to global crises.

In the UN Secretary-General's report "Cooperatives in social development" (UN, 2017) it was mentioned that the social economy accounted for around 7% of global GDP and contributed to increased employment in various economies. In times of multiple challenges, social economy organizations have strengthened the resilience of communities and helped them navigate the transitions of these periods. For example, during the financial crisis of 2008, employment in the social economy grew by 12-20%, while the public and private sectors experienced considerable job cuts (World Economic Forum, 2022a).

It should be highlighted that the social economy currently contributes substantially to the advancement of sustainable development objectives by reducing poverty, promoting responsible consumption and production, and supporting the transition to sustainable communities. In the European Commission's reflection paper "For a Sustainable Europe by 2030" (EC, 2019), it is mentioned that the social economy presents both an opportunity and a driver for implementing the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals at both the European and global levels, especially for achieving SDG8 Goal "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all".

The social economy continuously aligns itself with the challenges of the times and can provide innovative solutions to many of today's global challenges, such as climate change, digitization, social inclusion, because it is anchored in local communities, has a great potential for job creation, and works with and for these communities.

However, the social economy field faces several challenges and barriers that hinder its development and expansion in different countries. These include the lack or imperfection of the regulatory framework, as well as the absence of policies to support social economy actors; inadequate allocation of financial resources and the lack of financial support mechanisms; limited access to markets and public procurement; limited visibility etc.

Overcoming these barriers and fully harnessing the potential of the social economy can provide new generations with an inclusive and sustainable future. For these reasons, international organizations recommend that governments support the social economy in its multiple forms by creating the appropriate regulatory framework, through the implementation of public policies, provision of financial support, and ensuring fair market access conditions.

Thus, in the Insight Report titled *Unlocking the Social Economy: Towards an Inclusive and Resilient Society* (May 2022) by the World Economic Forum, two key shifts are identified to mainstream the social

economy. The first shift involves five policy areas that governments could develop for building a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient society: recognizing the social economy and building supportive regulatory frameworks; offering incentives for funding, taxation and investment, expanding education and research to make public and private procurement channels more inclusive; and collecting, measuring and visualizing social impact data. For the second shift, it is crucial to promote public policies that enhance accountability and adopt taxonomy; as well as support innovation and participatory business models (Figure 2).

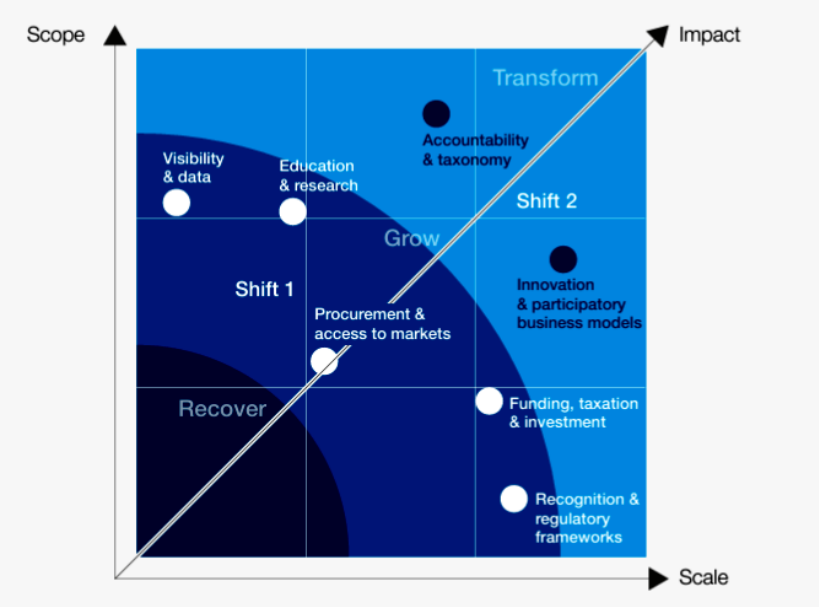


Figure 2. Policy priorities enabling the two shifts to mainstream the social economy (World Economic Forum, 2022b).

The synergistic actions of all key players (governments, businesses, social investors, multilateral organizations, social economy entities, research and academia, civil society organizations) on all these dimensions can maximize the impact of the social economy on economic development and society as a whole.

3.2. The social economy: European approach and context

The social economy is considered to be that part of the European Union (EU) economy that encompasses a specific range of businesses, organizations and legal entities that focus on *social objectives.* According to the European view, the term "social economy" refers to four main types of entities that provide goods and services to their members or society at large: cooperatives,

mutual aid societies, associations (including charities), and foundations. These entities operate independently of public authorities and have specific legal forms. Additionally, social enterprises are also considered part of the social economy, engaging in entrepreneurial and often innovative activities while pursuing social goals.

According to a study carried out by the European Economic and Social Committee on the recent development of the social economy in the European Union, in the European Community there are 2.8 million social economy enterprises and organizations, providing jobs for 13.6 million people (equivalent to approximately 6.3% of the active population), paid jobs ranging between 0.6% and 9.9 % across different states; more than 232 million members belong to cooperatives, mutual societies and other similar entities (EU, 2017). These businesses contribute 8% to EU's GDP (Social Economy Europe, 2024). In countries where the social economy is particularly developed, such as France, this contribution is even higher, reaching 10%.

Recognized for diversifying business models in Europe, the social economy offers consumers a wider range of choices and enhances product and service quality. Consequently, the social economy was considered the core of the "Proximity and Social Economy" ecosystem, one of the 14 industrial ecosystems identified in the updated EU Industrial Strategy (EC, 2021).

However, the level of awareness about the importance and benefits offered by the social economy, as well as that of training in social entrepreneurship, varies significantly from one country to another. While employment in the social economy represents between 9% and 10% of the active population in countries such as Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, France and the Netherlands, in new EU member states such as Slovenia, Romania, Malta, Lithuania, Croatia, Cyprus and Slovakia, the social economy remains a small, emerging sector, employing less than 2% of the working population (EU, 2017). Accordingly, actions are needed to raise the awareness of society regarding the opportunities and values of the social economy, the forms of achievement, impact on employment and development of communities, etc.

The social economy can contribute to the implementation of the principles of *the European Pillar of Social Rights*, to the diversification of forms of enterprises in Europe, to the achievement of the EU's main objectives for 2030, including increasing employment rates and reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

In order to facilitate the development of the social economy, the European Commission has launched and facilitated the implementation of a series of initiatives and actions to support this sector. Thus, starting in 2011, it

introduced the "Social Business Initiative - Creating a favourable climate for social enterprises, key stakeholders in the social economy and innovation" (EC, 2011). This initiative outlined 11 key actions, divided into 3 focus areas: facilitating access to financing for social enterprises; improving the visibility of social entrepreneurship; and enhancing the legal framework for social enterprises. A subsequent initiative on start-ups and their expansion was implemented (2016) (EC, 2016), oriented towards social transformation.

To increase private investor interest in social enterprises, the Regulation (EU) on European social entrepreneurship funds (EuSEF) was approved (2013). Additionally, numerous initiatives have been launched to support the social economy, including the Employment and Social Innovation Programme (EaSI), SheSI Guarantee Instrument, the Social Impact Accelerator, EaSI Capacity Building Investments Window etc. However, according to experts, a special European budget policy specifically targeting the social economy has not been developed yet.

Recognizing the importance of the social economy, to help this important sector to exploit its full potential, the European Commission adopted in 2021 an Action Plan *"Building an economy that works for people: an action plan for the social economy"* (EC, 2021*)*. This Action Plan proposes a series of activities for the period 2021-2030, focusing on three dimensions: creating favorable conditions for the social economy to thrive; opening opportunities for the establishment and growth of social economy entities; and enhancing recognition of the social economy and its transformative potential. The action plan aims to bolster social innovation, support the development of the social economy, and harness its capacity for social and economic transformation. To the same purpose, the Commission also launched a "transition pathway" to facilitate the green and digital transitions of the social economy, collaborating with public authorities and other stakeholders for this purpose.

In order to support social entrepreneurship, many European countries have enacted specific laws regarding the social economy (such as in Spain, Greece, Portugal, France, Romania, Belgium, etc.), as well as national plans and institutional initiatives. Reforms have also been implemented to diversify the types of enterprises and social activities within this sector.

However, the concept of the social economy and its regulation differs from country to country. There are also differences in attitudes towards this important economic segment. Thus, in terms of recognition of the concept of social economy, EU countries can be divided into 3 categories: *countries where the concept of social economy is widely recognized* (Spain, France, Portugal, Belgium and Luxembourg); *countries where the social economy concept*

enjoys a moderate level of recognition (Italy, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Latvia, Malta, Poland, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Romania and Slovenia); *countries where the social economy concept is poorly recognized or not recognized at all* (Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Croatia) (EU, 2017). The potential of the social economy is still insufficiently explored. Greater efforts and national recognition are needed for the concept of the social economy to expand in most EU countries.

The implementation of European policies to support the social economy, as well as the reconsideration of this field in countries where social entrepreneurship is underestimated and underdeveloped, the involvement of state institutions in supporting social economy through appropriate financial mechanisms and stimulating actions will facilitate the development of social economy, the increase of social inclusion and the well-being of the population. To accomplish these goals, tailored policies and actions are necessary in each country. These measures should be grounded in the realities, conditions, and socio-economic perspectives unique to each state.

3.3. The social economy in the Republic of Moldova: current situation, challenges, perspectives

In terms of the Republic of Moldova's aspirations to integrate into the EU, having obtained candidate country status (2022) and with accession negotiations opening by the Council of Europe (2023) — the implementation of European economic and social policies has gained prominence. This strategic orientation prioritizes the well-being of the population and fosters inclusive growth, including adherence to social economy principles.

Although conceptually, social economy and social entrepreneurship have seen significant development internationally and in several European Union states, Moldova has not fully capitalized on them for several reasons. These include legal and normative deficiencies, lack of understanding or non-acceptance of the concept of social economy by public authorities and regulatory bodies, weak relations with local public authorities, reduced motivation for engaging in social activities, and limitations in the necessary competencies for social entrepreneurship, etc.

In many countries of the European community, as mentioned above, a specific regulatory framework for the social economy has been adopted and implemented. In Romania, the neighboring country, for example, social economy activities are governed by the Social Economy Law (2015). In the Republic of Moldova this field has been regulated much more narrowly.

Certain general provisions in support of the social economy are stipulated in art. 126 of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova (art. 126), which outlines that the *country's economy is a market economy, socially oriented, based on private and public property, and engaged in free competition*. Although this article outlines the foundational premises for the development of the "third sector" of the economy, the current state of the social economy in the Republic of Moldova remains at an underdeveloped level and confirms the need to adopt and implement a specific regulatory framework for the social economy as an environment of this activity.

In the Republic of Moldova there is no special law on the social economy (as in many European countries, including Romania). Instead, the activity of different entities of the social economy is regulated by various legislative acts, such as the Civil Code (which regulates the establishment and functioning of cooperatives, associations, foundations), the Law on production cooperatives, the Law on consumer cooperatives, the Law on entrepreneurial cooperatives. But none of the above-mentioned normative acts contain express references/provisions regarding their attribution to the social economy or social entrepreneurship, although, according to the mission and nature of their activity, they pursue goals and carry out social activities. Consequently, cooperatives cannot benefit from the facilities and support granted to social enterprises.

In 2017, amendments were made to the Law on Entrepreneurship and Enterprises through the Law on Amending and Completing Certain Legislative Acts. These changes, which came into force on May 24, 2018, introduced a separate chapter titled "Social entrepreneurship and social enterprise". According to this law," social *entrepreneurship is defined as an entrepreneurial activity whose main purpose is to solve some social problems in the interest of the community. The social entrepreneurship activity, carried out by social enterprises and social insertion enterprises, is aimed at improving living conditions and offering opportunities to people from disadvantaged categories of the population by strengthening economic and social cohesion, including at the level of local communities, through employment, by developing social services in the interest of the community, by increasing social inclusion*".

The law establishes (art.2) that non-profit organizations (public associations, foundations, religious cults, and private institutions) can carry out social entrepreneurship activities after obtaining the status of social enterprise (SE) or social insertion enterprise (SIE). However, this list does not include cooperatives, which are considered and appreciated as the backbone of the social economy in international vision and practices. Later (2018), the types of

activities that can constitute social entrepreneurship activities were regulated, as well as the National Commission for Social Entrepreneurship's organization and operation, which is empowered to grant the status of social enterprise or social insertion enterprise (GD, 2018).

To truly support the development of the social economy field, in addition to legislative regulations, coherent public policies are needed, adapted to the context of the realities and long-term development objectives of the Republic of Moldova. The design of such policies must be based on a multilateral and broad analysis of the current situation and challenges regarding the development of social entrepreneurship.

With the assistance of international experts and external technical support, relevant studies were conducted to assess the development stage of social entrepreneurship in Moldova. Their findings are reflected in *the Report of the analysis of the current situation and challenges regarding the development of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova* (Report, 2019),"*Social Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova: Findings and Recommendations"* (Regulatory Analysis, 2021) which contains an evaluation of the problems and social challenges the country faces, of the existing legislation, of the applied financial mechanisms, access to public and private financial resources, of the perception of the actors involved in social activities, and proposals aimed at creating a favorable framework for boosting the development of this sector.

Their conclusions and recommendations formed the basis for developing the project of the National Program for the enhancement of social entrepreneurship between 2021-2025, intended to ensure the necessary policy framework for the creation of an ecosystem that facilitates the development of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova. The program encompasses a series of ambitious actions structured around the following general objectives: developing and fostering a culture of social entrepreneurship among population; creating a normative framework favorable for social entrepreneurship and harnessing the potential of this sector; facilitating access to the market and financial instruments specific to the social entrepreneurship sector; improving social entrepreneurship and professional skills in this field. In the document provided for the annual establishment and authorization of at least 20 social enterprises, i.e. 5 years after the implementation of the Program, it was estimated that approximately 100 legal entities will hold the certificate of social enterprise, creating at least 5,000 jobs, with at least 30% reserved for people from vulnerable groups. The estimated cost of implementing the Program for the period of 2021-2025 accounts for 36.2 million lei.

Although it had followed public consultations, this Program was not approved and implemented by the Government. According to experts, the main reason was the change of government. It should be noted that the mentioned Program was specifically tailored to the field of social entrepreneurship.

In another policy document, the National Program for Promoting Entrepreneurship and Increasing Competitiveness in 2023-2027 (GD, 2023), the topic of the social economy is addressed in a more limited scope. It is found in one of the specific objectives - *sustainable economic growth by encouraging the green transition, development of a transparent economy, the social economy in order to ensure a sustainable, socially and ecologically responsible, inclusive and fair economic development*. The program focuses on the development of the capital market and entrepreneurs' access to new forms of financing, the stimulation of new forms of economic activity, such as start-ups and electronic commerce, and the direction of economic development towards green practices and financing, promoting underrepresented groups (women, young people, etc.) in entrepreneurship, as well as strengthening the support infrastructure (consulting and training companies, accelerators, hubs, incubators, specialized parks) and entrepreneurial culture.

Nonetheless these actions do not specify specific mechanisms to support social entrepreneurship, except for the provision for the elaboration of a separate law on social entrepreneurship and the increase in the number of social enterprises from 7 (2022) to 14 in 2025. The total cost for the implementation of the Program in 2023 -2025 is estimated at 828.3 million lei, of which 634.9 million lei come from the state budget.

However, in 2022, 11 enterprises were certified in the Republic of Moldova (7 social enterprises and 4 insertion enterprises) (Ciumac, I. Turcan, A., 2022); in 2023, 15 social enterprises were registered in the country, according to the Catalogue of Social Enterprises from the Republic of Moldova (Catalogue SE, 2023), and presently, 23 social enterprises are listed on the "Initiative for Social Entrepreneurship in Moldova" Platform (Initiative for social entrepreneurship, 2024). However, the expansion rate of social economy entities is very slow, and the potential of this sector is still not fully exploited. The actors in this field highlighted, among other causes for this situation, the difficult process of obtaining the status of a social enterprise, the mandatory fees paid upon registration, the lack of mechanisms for the application and implementation of support measures, and fiscal facilities from public institutions as provided by legislation. Additionally, there is a lack or insufficiency of skills for conducting social businesses and insufficient public

information about the social economy and its contribution to society's development, etc.

It should be noted that, due to the lack of knowledge and limited information about non-profit organizations, or insufficient promotion of the social economy in their area, out of 15 existing social enterprises and social insertion enterprises, none of them has the status of being a cooperative, while their potential is huge for activities with a social character.

The previously mentioned converge towards the conclusion that *the social economy and social entrepreneurship represent and continue to be little-known and exploited concepts in the Republic of Moldova*. Those activities, that have been carried out so far, are largely due to the support provided by foreign donors, with minimal assistance from national authorities. And this is happening under the conditions where the Republic of Moldova, according to the World Bank, has a low-middle-income economy, being classified as the poorest country in Europe, with a poverty rate of 15.0% in 2023 (World Bank).

In light of these challenges, effective actions are required to "take" the field of social economy "out of the shadows", to dynamize its development in the multitude of its forms and to engage a diverse range of stakeholders to enhance the well-being of the population.

First of all, it is fortunate to adopt a *special law* that would regulate the field of social economy, as they do in several other European states, including Romania. A distinct law would emphasize the importance of the social economy, regulate all types of businesses (including cooperatives) and the way of functioning of social economy actors, as well as support actions (financial and non-financial) from public authorities, would make the political factor and public authorities more responsible for supporting the expansion and boosting the development of the social economic sector, etc. At the same time, adjustments are needed to be made in connection to the related legislative framework regarding taxation, public procurement, etc. in order to facilitate the implementation of support mechanisms. Currently, for example, according to art. 365 (1) of the law on entrepreneurship and enterprises "the state grants tax facilities for the development of social entrepreneurship according to the Fiscal Code", but this Code does not contain provisions with reference to such facilities. Moreover, introducing a preferential tax regime for newly established social enterprises would be advantageous to support their initial stages of growth.

Access to the market and public procurement is another problem faced by social economy entities in Moldova. Due to theirb small numbers, they lack visibility and are often overlooked by authorities and other economic actors in

the procurement process. In this context, legislative amendments to the legislation on public procurement are needed, which would regulate/establish the obligation to auction a certain share of the budget for procurement, intended specifically for social entrepreneurship entities (called ”reserved procurement”), and expand the list of services that social enterprises could offer.

According to the “Report of the analysis of the current situation and challenges regarding the development of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova” (The Report, 2019), our country has a low degree of *understanding of the concept of social entrepreneurship*. This lack of understanding extends not only to the central and local public authorities, but also to the population and consumers. This finding is also confirmed in the Report on the results of the sociological study “Knowledge, skills and behaviours in the field of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova” (The Report, 2022). This issue requires information, training and promotion of educational programs focused on social entrepreneurship on the entire LLL dimension, on dissemination of experience and good practices in the field of social entrepreneurship, consultancy and advice in the development of social businesses, etc. In this regard, the EU and Sweden supported the creation of the Platform for the Development of Social Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova. It is a very useful tool that provides information on social economy, expresses the voice of civil society and organizations that practice social entrepreneurship. However, this aspect requires an integrative, systemic approach.

Surveys/interviews with social entrepreneurs have outlined the fact that people who want to start a business are very poorly informed about the legislative framework, the social businesses specifics, the management of social enterprises, etc. In this sense, it is opportune to organize guidance and consultancy assistance, as well as training in the domain of the social economy, especially for newly created enterprises.

Although *entrepreneurship education programs* (in general) are implemented at different levels of education (from general to higher), aspects related to the social economy and social entrepreneurship are not found in the curricula in most cases. In such conditions, promoting social entrepreneurship in educational programs is imperative, especially in the context of the social responsibility of enterprises. It includes developing educational contents, integrating the fundamentals of social entrepreneurship into educational programs, training trainers and attracting experienced teachers for teaching.

Although a series of courses for the development of social enterprises have been held in the Republic of Moldova with the support of external donors and European funding, there are no *coaching and mentoring programs specialized in social entrepreneurship* on the market. The main reason for this is the lack of funding to support the social economy. This issue also extends to continuing education programs.

At the same time, it needs to be mentioned that the support structures for social enterprises, created and supported by different donors, have made a substantial contribution to the development of this sector. However, they mainly focus on certain project objectives or specificactivity segments, often without sectoral coordination, and without an integrative vision and a systemic approach to the development of the social economy in Moldova.

Implementing a *system for keeping records of social enterprises*, as well as for monitoring and evaluating their social impact, is another objective for boosting the development of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Moldova. The information obtained would provide an objective assessment of the impact that social enterprises have on the employment rate, meeting the needs of different categories of people, and community development. This will allow for improving the performance of enterprises, identifying and substantiating the most relevant initiatives and projects aimed at increasing the well-being of the population and accessing financial resources.

Access to financing is a priority for accelerating the expansion of social entrepreneurship. Until now, the main source of funding for the field of social entrepreneurship has been external donors. But in this process, state institutions must also be involved in order to ensure the sector's sustainable development. In this respect, effective tools are needed to support the social economy, including tax or non-tax facilities, non-refundable state-financed projects, the application of subsidy mechanisms, the provision of subsidies and preferential loans, etc.

Although several studies have been carried out on the social economy situation in Moldova and multiple recommendations have been formulated regarding the development of this sector, it is still apparent that state institutions do not prioritize its development. Raising awareness at the political level about social entrepreneurship and the social economy, including the objective of developing the social economy into the list of public authorities' priorities and implementing the actions required to boost its development, will contribute to increasing the number of jobs, enhancing social inclusion, reducing poverty, creating an ecosystem favorable to development, fostering

social innovation, and, finally, improving the standard of living and the well-being of the population.

4. Conclusions

The social economy, a relatively new concept, has seen significant development across many European countries and has emerged as a global trend in sustainable business practices that are people- and environment-friendly internationally. In the Republic of Moldova, social entrepreneurship is still in its early stages of development. However, there are promising conditions for rapid growth and a substantial impact on the country's socio-economic development, on condition that an appropriate culture of social entrepreneurship will be developed; a legislative framework specific to this field will be implemented; efficient financial mechanisms in support of social entrepreneurs will be adopted, including tax and non-tax facilities; access to markets will be ensured; the development of human resources will be promoted (training, guidance and counselling of interested parties in the development of social businesses); the experiences in this domain will be largely disseminated. Achieving these goals necessitates continuous and sustained efforts from all stakeholders involved in social economy development.

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Mindful consumption: Enhancing quality of life through food waste awareness

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Abstract

Mindful consumption is a framework that emphasizes the significance of awareness and deliberate action in resource utilization and consumption, aiming to decrease overconsumption and food waste. Globally, approximately one-third of the food designated for human consumption is wasted. This significant food waste primarily originates from households and public food services. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concept of mindful consumption, examine the various factors contributing to food waste in households and restaurants, and present strategies to mitigate this waste through mindful practices.

Keywords: *mindful consumption, minimizing food waste, sustainable practices, households, restaurants.*

1. Introduction

Mindful consumption is a concept that emphasizes awareness and intentionality in the use and consumption of resources, promoting the reduction of the resources overconsumption , minimizing waste as a key component of reducing overall environmental impact and encouraging a healthier lifestyle [Manchanda et al. 2023; Sheth et al. 2011]. Statistics on global/regional FW (food waste) highlight significant waste along the FSC (food supply chain), from agricultural production through farm-level/industrial processing to consumption (households – home eating, private/public food services – dining out) [Osei-Owusu et al. 2023; Stoica et al. 2022b; Stoica et al. 2023]. In higher-income countries (European, Asian, American), the largest FW fraction occurs during consumption. Approximately one-third of the food intended for human consumption is wasted globally, amounting to around 1.3 billion tons annually, being attributable to the households and public food services (the third-largest generator of FW in Europe, right behind households, primary agricultural and