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UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS' VIEWS ON STRATEGIES FOR ENSURING SOCIAL ECONOMY SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The research purpose. This study aims to probe the internal consistency of survey questions aligning with priorities outlined in the World Economic Forum Insight Report "Unlocking the Social Economy" within Latvia and Georgia. It delves into the structural makeup of contemporary social entrepreneurs in these nations, their attitudes towards report priorities, and perceptions on fostering social economy development. Additionally, it explores how social entrepreneurship impacts Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like 11, 12, and 8, and proposes ways to enhance collaboration between public bodies and social economy actors in Latvia and Georgia.

Design / Methodology / Approach. The body of the survey was constructed according to the World Economic Forum Insight Report "Unlocking the Social Economy" priorities and the developed questionnaire was distributed in Latvia and Georgia from February to March 2024. The respondents were social entrepreneurs from both countries. The pilot study aimed to test the internal consistency of the survey`s questions.

Findings underscore the role of social innovation in tackling contemporary development issues, and in fostering employment and economic growth. It delineates the modern social entrepreneur's profile in Latvia and Georgia, analyses their stance towards report priorities, solicits their views on actions vital for social economy growth.

Originality / Value / Practical implications. Social entrepreneurship is commonly recognized as an integral element of Catalyst 2030, a global movement of social entrepreneurs and social innovators looking to attain the SDGs by 2030. In particular, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) have been the most strongly impacted by sustainable entrepreneurship research. The research contributes to the process of unlocking the social economy towards an inclusive and resilient society more comprehensive for the social entrepreneurs and public bodies aiming to foster the development of the social economy. The main value of the research is revealing the need to update the relation of the public bodies of Georgia and Latvia to the interaction of social entrepreneurs.

Keywords: SDG, social economy, social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, public bodies.

JEL codes: L31, J08, I31.

Introduction

Background of the Research

In the contemporary world, the role of businesses in addressing social concerns has witnessed substantial growth, exemplified by the 'United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (United Nations, 2015). In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social entrepreneurship in addressing social challenges and promoting sustainable development (Presnyakova & Khryuchkina, 2020). Social enterprises aim to generate positive impacts in their communities while also ensuring the sustainability and scalability of their business models. Their work often aligns with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter SDGs), as they tackle issues such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and more. Social enterprises can contribute to the SDGs by demonstrating socially responsible practices, creating inclusive jobs, and promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns (Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

In Georgia and Latvia, social entrepreneurship has shown promising potential in addressing social well-being, unemployment, environmental protection, and cultural heritage preservation. Despite scarce resources, social enterprises have demonstrated resilience, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing their commitment to retaining employees and adapting operations to meet social needs (OECD, 2020).

The choice of Latvia and Georgia for this research is strategic. Both countries represent transitional economies with unique socio-political landscapes and emerging social entrepreneurship sectors. Latvia, with its progressive legislation and institutional support, stands as an example of how policy frameworks can nurture the social economy. On the other hand, Georgia's evolving social economy, influenced by historical context and informal sector dynamics, presents distinct challenges and opportunities. However, despite the progress made in the field of social entrepreneurship, there are still gaps and challenges that need to be addressed (Gigauri et al., 2022). By studying these contrasting contexts, this research seeks to identify key success factors and barriers to the sustainable development of the social economy in the countries where the economy is developing progressively. By analysing the attitudes, perceptions, and proposed actions by Social Entrepreneurs, this research contributes to enhancing collaboration between public bodies and the social economy representatives, ultimately advancing the pursuit of SDGs and fostering an inclusive and resilient society.

This study serves as the inaugural phase of an ongoing research endeavour. Subsequent phases will extend the investigation to encompass additional countries within the Baltic region, Poland, and select CIS nations. This expansion aims to ascertain the extent of relevance regarding congruences and impediments to social entrepreneurship development across diverse regions with varying degrees of socioeconomic advancement. By broadening the scope to include a more comprehensive array of geopolitical contexts, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing social entrepreneurship dynamics. This systematic approach enables the identification of commonalities and disparities, facilitating the formulation of targeted strategies to foster social entrepreneurship ecosystems. Through rigorous comparative analysis, the study endeavours to contribute empirically grounded insights to the scholarly discourse on social entrepreneurship and regional development.

Aim and Objectives

The study aims to investigate the internal consistency of survey questions related to the priorities outlined in the World Economic Forum Insight Report "Unlocking the Social Economy" within the context of Latvia and Georgia. Specifically, the research seeks to assess the structural characteristics of modern social entrepreneurs in these countries, analyse their attitudes towards the priorities identified in the report, and gauge their perceptions regarding actions necessary to foster social economy development. Additionally, the study aims to explore the impact of social entrepreneurship on achieving SDGs, particularly SDG 11, SDG 12, and SDG 8, and to provide insights into enhancing the collaboration between public bodies and social economy representatives in Georgia and Latvia.

Hypotheses Testing and Insights

Following an extensive exploration of the structural characteristics and attitudes of social entrepreneurs in Latvia and Georgia, this study sought to test two hypotheses regarding the perceptions and roles of social economy players. Hypothesis 1 posited that there would be a significant difference in how social economy players from both countries are perceived in leading social and environmental innovations, while Hypothesis 2 proposed a significant disparity in their contributions to green and digital transitions.

Literature Review

The literature on social entrepreneurship and the social economy has been growing rapidly in recent years, indicating global interest in understanding, and promoting sustainable solutions to societal challenges (Gigauri et al., 2022). According to Bansal et al. (2023), the concept of the social economy encompasses a diverse range of organizations and initiatives prioritizing social and environmental objectives alongside economic goals. For instance, in a study by Scuotto et al., the authors propose a conceptual framework enhancing the current understanding of the social dimensions of SEOs' business model (Scuotto et al., 2023). "Social entrepreneurship" in the "entrepreneurial ecosystem" aids social development, as these start-up companies generate strategies to contribute to societal welfare alongside organizational growth (Monir & Geberemeskel, 2023). Scholars argue that social entrepreneurship can contribute to achieving the SDGs by addressing social and environmental issues through innovative business models. It is evident from the literature review that social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in driving sustainable development by addressing social and environmental challenges through innovative business models (Neumann, 2020). Schumpeterian social entrepreneurship, as termed by Joseph Schumpeter, emphasizes the role of innovation and creative destruction in economic transformation (Rahdari et al., 2016). Schumpeter's ideas support the concept that social enterprises can disrupt traditional ways of doing business by integrating sustainability considerations into their core operations, thus contributing to the achievement of the SDGs.

Sauermann's empirical analysis demonstrates that effective social entrepreneurship initiatives require robust leadership, community engagement, funding accessibility, and adaptability to local challenges (Sauermann, 2023). These aspects underscore the multi-dimensional nature of sustainable development challenges that social entrepreneurs aim to address. In practical terms, social enterprises apply innovative business models and practices aimed at creating widespread social value while ensuring environmental stewardship and sustainable economic growth, aligning with the broader sustainable development agenda highlighted in seminal works such as "Our Common Future" (Rahdari et al., 2016). Moreover, Austin et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of social innovation in achieving SDGs, highlighting how social entrepreneurship can serve as a catalyst for transformative change in societies.

Rahdari et al. (2016) highlight the role of social entrepreneurship particularly regarding SDG 11, SDG 12, and SDG 8. SDG 11, "Sustainable Cities and Communities," focuses on making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Social entrepreneurs contribute to this goal by developing affordable housing solutions, improving urban infrastructure, and enhancing public spaces. SDG 12, "Responsible Consumption and Production," aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. Here, social entrepreneurial ventures excel in promoting circular economy practices, reducing waste, and creating sustainable products and services that minimize environmental impact. Literature examining the role of social entrepreneurship in furthering SDG 12 highlights the importance of innovation (Lubberink et al., 2019) and stakeholder engagement in creating systems that foster sustainable consumption behaviours. SDG 8, "Decent Work and Economic Growth," focuses on promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all. Social enterprises often create job opportunities for marginalized groups and support fair trade practices, thus contributing to economic inclusion.

In the World Economic Forum (WEF) report by the Schwab Foundation (2022), the fusion of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development is explored, emphasizing their interconnectedness. Social entrepreneurs operate within the circular and social economy models, promoting resilience, inclusion, and sustainability. The report stresses the importance of supportive ecosystems and coherent policies, advocating for regulatory frameworks, funding incentives, and inclusive procurement channels. It outlines a dual strategy: fostering a conducive environment for the social economy and utilizing its experiences to address structural challenges in profit-driven economies. Finally, it emphasizes the critical role of governments in supporting the social economy through regulatory frameworks and policy strategies.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are fundamental to pushing the boundaries of the social economy, leveraging the strengths of both sectors: the public sector's regulatory and policy-making capabilities and the private sector's innovation, efficiency, and capital (Shin, 2016). These collaborations often lead to the creation of more sustainable and effective solutions to social challenges. The success of PPPs in the social economy often hinges on robust policy frameworks that encourage and facilitate such collaborations. The establishment of clear legal definitions, supportive legislation, and incentive structures can create an environment conducive to social economy initiatives (Cheng, 2016). For instance, the Social Entrepreneurship Law in Latvia (Likumi.lv, 2018) is an example of a policy that helps define the parameters and provides a foundation for social enterprises. Despite the potential benefits, numerous challenges can impact the effectiveness of public-private collaboration. Limited availability of funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and difficulties in aligning the goals of public and private entities are commonly cited issues. Moreover, evaluating the social impact and sustainability of collaborative projects remains a complex task (Cheng, 2016).

Delving into private-public partnerships supporting the development of the social economy in Latvia and Georgia reveals distinct contexts. In Georgia, social entrepreneurship is an emerging field, and collaboration between public bodies and social economy representatives is gaining momentum. However, the regulatory framework lacks specificity regarding social enterprises, posing challenges in obtaining funding and support. Partnerships between public bodies and social economy actors are crucial to developing a more conducive environment for social businesses to thrive and contribute to the SDGs. In contrast, Latvia presents a more evolved example of collaboration between public bodies and social economy representatives. The country's Social Entrepreneurship Law, active since April 1, 2018, signifies a step forward in creating a legal identity for social enterprises and aligning them with economic goals. The government provides various support measures, including tax benefits and grants, to bolster the social economy. Moreover, Latvian public institutions engage in dialogue with social entrepreneurs through platforms like the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, facilitating an exchange of ideas and best practices. Yet, challenges persist in terms of ensuring adequate support and visibility for social businesses, which stakeholders believe to be essential for sustainable development and the attainment of the SDGs.

Balancing support for the social economy while maintaining a fair and competitive economic landscape is essential (Ávila & Bono, 2020). Critics argue that specific incentives for the social economy may create unfair advantages, distort the wider economy, discourage innovation, and lead to dependency on government support (Abramson & Billings, 2019). The social economy has emerged as a vital conduit for socio-economic development and innovation in transitional economies. In exploring the development of the social economy in Latvia and Georgia, it is crucial to consider scholarly perspectives and documented experiences to understand the challenges and achievements within these contexts.

In Latvia, the social economy's evolution is marked by significant legislative milestones and burgeoning scholarly interest. Latvia has recognized social enterprises through specific legislation, addressing issues of legal structure and societal impact. Pre-2018, the landscape was dominated by non-profit approaches, but post-legislation changes permitted the establishment of profit-making social enterprises, defining the operational and financial framework within which social enterprises in Latvia function (Millere et al., 2023). Despite these advancements, scholars have identified various challenges including the inadequacy of experienced personnel, difficulty in fostering institutional partnerships, and intricate funding mechanisms. Improved business education, streamlined support, and an elevated public profile for social enterprises are needed (Millere et al., 2023).

The literature review emphasizes that social entrepreneurship in Latvia and Georgia is still in its early stages, with no established models or coherent strategies. However, organizations and initiatives in both countries have successfully implemented social entrepreneurship approaches with positive impacts on local communities (Gigauri et al., 2022). In Latvia, social entrepreneurship has facilitated the development of local communities that were previously at the subsistence level. Common challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in both Latvia and Georgia include the lack of a legal framework, complex business models, limited public awareness, difficulty in accessing funding and investment markets, and the need for more qualified employees and institutional cooperation (Millere et al., 2023). The literature also highlights the importance of legislation and formalization in the field of social entrepreneurship in both Latvia and Georgia. Additionally, the role of trust in social enterprises and the need to balance competencies and ethics are emphasized. In summary, the literature review suggests that social entrepreneurship has the potential to contribute to economic growth and positive social impact in both

Latvia and Georgia, but further research is needed to fully understand the context and dynamics of social entrepreneurship in these countries.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of the research, a survey was created, while for pilot testing of the survey, 55 respondents answered questions. The authors' intention in this specific study is to test the questionnaire on its internal consistency using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient, as well as to provide data on descriptive statistics based on the results and test two hypotheses:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between evaluations of social economy players as leading social and environmental innovations and collaborating, which is later adopted by mainstream economy within the respondents from Latvia and Georgia;
H2: There is a statistically significant difference between evaluations of the statement that social entrepreneurs can contribute to the green and digital transitions within the respondents from Latvia and Georgia.

For the testing of the hypothesis, the authors used Mann-Whitney non-parametric tests.

The body of the survey was constructed according to the WEF report "Unlocking the Social Economy" (Schwab Foundation, 2022) priorities and the developed questionnaire was distributed in Latvia and Georgia from February to March 2024. The respondents were social entrepreneurs from both countries. The questionnaire consists of two parts:

- Part A – respondent profile
- B part – questions related to social entrepreneurship

Table 1. represents the structure of the survey:

Table 1. Structure of the Survey (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Part	Question	Type of the question; responses
A	Respondent profile	Country, gender, education, age, relation to the social enterprise
B	Attitudes towards social entrepreneurship	10 statements. Evaluation scale: level of agreement (1 – absolutely disagree; 5 – absolutely agree)

For the B part of the questionnaire, the authors created labels, which are represented In Table 2. This part of the questionnaire was dedicated to the attitudes towards different aspects of social entrepreneurship. B part of the questionnaire included 10 statements, which were based on the Likert scale with evaluation from 1 to 5, where 1 was absolutely disagree and 5 – was absolutely agree. The statements of the B part of the questionnaire. The statements of the B part of the questionnaire with labels are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. B-part Statements with Labels (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Nr.	Statements	Labels
1.	The social economy must be recognized and supported by the regulatory framework.	Regulatory framework
2.	Governments should grow the social economy via public investment, favourable taxation; encouraging private investment in the sector.	Growth of social economy
3.	Social economy in secondary and higher education institutions increase its visibility	Education institutions
4.	The public sector should choose to buy goods and services from enterprises that deliver social and environmental value, or that are led by women, minority groups or those with disabilities.	Choice of public sector
5.	To increase the visibility of social entrepreneurship, governments are encouraged to systematically measure and report statistics on the social economy.	Statistics on the social economy

6.	Social economy players are known for leading social and environmental innovations and collaborating on solutions later adopted by the mainstream economy.	Social and environmental innovations
7.	Social entrepreneurs can bring contributions to the green and digital transitions.	Green and digital transitions
8.	Governments should improve accountability and use clear classification systems related to social entrepreneurship.	Classification systems
9.	Government should support innovation and inclusive business models.	Innovation and inclusive business models
10.	The social economy should contribute to the structural transformation of the existing economic model and its continuous challenges.	Structural transformation

The questionnaire was generated using Google Forms and distributed via emails to the owners of social enterprises/employees of social enterprises in Latvia and Georgia.

Results

During the pilot testing of the survey, in total, 55 respondents answered questions, 21 respondents from Latvia and 34 respondents from Georgia. Thirty-eight respondents were females, while 17 – males. Table 3 represents information about the respondents, such as data about their education, age, and relation to the social enterprise of respondents.

Table 3. Education, Age, Gender and Relation to Social Enterprise of Respondents (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Area	Specific answer	% from the total share
Education	Higher education	78%
	Secondary or professional education	4%
Age	18-24	4%
	25-44	53%
	45-64	35%
	65+	9%
Relation to social enterprise	Owner	53%
	Employee	33%
	Other	15%
Gender	Male	31%
	Female	69%

As is presented in Table 3, the largest share of the respondents has higher education – 78% of the total share, while secondary or professional education owners represent only 4% of the total share. The largest share of the respondents were 22-44 years old – 53%, followed by 44-64 years old respondents with 35% of the total share. Other age groups were represented by less than 10% of the total share. More than half (53% of the total share of the respondents) were the owners of social enterprises, while 33% were employees and 15% noted the answer to this question as "other". The largest % of the share were female respondents – 69%, while male respondents were 31% of the share.

To respond to the questions of the B part of the questionnaire, respondents were offered to use a five-point scale (1 – absolutely disagree; 5 – absolutely agree). Table 7 and Table 8 summarize the responses. The authors analysed only the answers "4" (agree) and "5" (absolutely agree) in order to rank the statements on the scales.

Table 4. Percentage of Respondents Who Selected "Agree" or "Absolutely Agree" to Evaluate the Statements of B Scale (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Labels	% of the respondents
Regulatory framework	91%
Growth of social economy	91%
Education institutions	80%
Choice of public sector	76%
Statistics on the social economy	78%
Social and environmental innovations	69%
Green and digital transitions	85%
Classification systems	89%
Innovation and inclusive business models	82%
Structural transformation	93%

Analysis of the answers of the respondents shows that all statements were rated with the two highest possible evaluations by at least 69% of the respondents. 93% of the respondents rated the statement "The social economy should contribute to the structural transformation of the existing economy" with two highest possible evaluations – "4" and "5". Two statements that were rated by the second largest group of respondents - "Regulatory framework" and "Growth of social economy" – 91% of the total share of the respondents evaluated their statements with "4" or "5". The statement that was rated by the two highest evaluations by the largest group of respondents is "Structural transformation", it was rated with "4" or "5" by 93% of respondents from the total share. Two statements that were rated by the second largest group of respondents - "The social economy must be recognized and supported by the regulatory framework" and "Governments should grow the social economy through public investment, favourable taxation, and encouraging private investment in the sector." – 91% of the total share of the respondents evaluated their statements with "4" or "5". Statements "Social economy in secondary and higher education institutions increase its visibility", "Social entrepreneurs can bring contributions to the green and digital transitions", "Governments should improve accountability and use clear classification systems related to social" and "Government should support innovation and inclusive business models" were evaluated by 80%, 85%, 89%, and 82% of the respondents, respectively. Statements "The public sector should choose to buy goods and services from enterprises that deliver social and environmental value, or that are led by women, minority groups or those with disabilities" and "To increase the visibility of social entrepreneurship, governments are encouraged to systematically measure and present statistics on the social economy" were rated by 76% and 78% of the respondents by "4" and "5". The statement, which was rated by the two highest evaluations by the smallest group of respondents was "Social economy players are known for leading social and environmental innovations and collaborating on solutions later adopted by the mainstream economy" – it was rated by 69% of the respondents.

For internal consistency of the Part B questionnaire was checked using calculations of Cronbach's alpha coefficient and is represented in Table 5.

Table 5. Internal Consistency of Measurement Scales of Part B of the Questionnaire (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Labels	Scale if item deleted
Regulatory framework	.922
Growth of social economy	.920
Education institutions	.916
Choice of public sector	.920
Statistics on the social economy	.919
Social and environmental innovations	.929
Green and digital transitions	.918
Classification systems	.916
Innovation and inclusive business models	.917
Structural transformation	.917

Results showed .927 Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which shows excellent questionnaire consistency. The analysis of the measure "alpha if item deleted" pointed to adequate relevance of all statements.

Based on the analysis of the literature, respondent profile, and descriptive statistics, the authors of the research developed two main hypotheses, which were tested by the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between evaluations of social economy players as leading social and environmental innovations and collaborating, which is later adopted by mainstream economy within the respondents from Latvia and Georgia.

Respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement on the statement: "Social economy players are known for leading social and environmental innovations and collaborating on solutions later adopted by the mainstream economy" based on the Likert scale, where 1 state for totally disagree, while 5 states for fully agree. Mann -Whitney non-parametric test showed that there is no statistically significant difference between evaluations of the statement, Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed) was .870, (as the standard alpha level is 0.05). Based on the results of the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test hypothesis is rejected.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference between evaluations of the statement that social entrepreneurs can contribute to the green and digital transitions within the respondents from Latvia and Georgia.

Respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement on the statement: "Social entrepreneurs can bring contributions to the green and digital transitions" based on the Likert scale, where 1 state totally disagrees, while 5 states fully agree. Mann -Whitney non-parametric test showed that there is no statistically significant difference between evaluations of the statement, Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed) was .761, (as the standard alpha level is 0.05). Based on the results of the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test hypothesis is rejected.

Conclusions

Modern business plays a pivotal role in addressing social concerns, resonating with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Social entrepreneurship emerges as a powerful force in the contemporary landscape, aiming to create positive impacts while ensuring business sustainability. In Latvia and Georgia, social enterprises have demonstrated resilience, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, underlining their commitment to social needs. The choice of these countries for research is strategic, considering their transitional economies and unique socio-political dynamics. Latvia serves as a great progressive policy example of social economy nurture, while Georgia presents evolving dynamics influenced by historical contexts. Still, the literature review identifies persisting challenges, calling to the discussion. The research aimed to test hypotheses regarding perceptions and roles of social economy players in Latvia and Georgia. Several limitations should be acknowledged: firstly, the sample size may not fully represent the diverse landscape of social entrepreneurship in both countries. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data and the use of a Likert scale for measurement may introduce response bias and limit the depth of analysis. The study's cross-sectional design restricts the assessment of long-term trends and causality. Findings indicate no significant difference in how players from both countries are perceived in leading social and environmental innovations or in their contributions to green and digital transitions. The survey results show high consensus among respondents on the importance of various actions to foster social economy. The research serves as a basis for a discussion of how the collaboration between public bodies and social entrepreneurs could serve as a crucial tool for advancing SDGs and building inclusive and resilient societies. The robustness of the survey, reflected in a high Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, underscores its reliability in assessing internal consistency. Overall, the study offers insights into the complexities and potentials of social entrepreneurship in transitional economies, laying the groundwork for future endeavours in this field.

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