

Liège Roadmap for Social Economy in the European Union

Conference of European Ministers responsible for Social Economy
organised on 12 February 2024 in Liège
by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU

Preamble

By putting people at the heart of its approach and its way of doing business, the social economy proposes a model of economic development capable of offering high-performance, inclusive and sustainable economic activities that serve the collective interest. Today, as in the past, the social economy has demonstrated its resilience, its relevance and its ability to provide a range of solutions, often in the form of innovations, and has been able to adapt to crises of all kinds, including economic, health and climate crises. The way it is organised and governed contributes to the smooth running and strengthening of our democratic models, our economies and our societies, for the benefit of all our citizens, including the most vulnerable and those at risk of social exclusion.

The social economy offers added social value, through its social impact, acting in many sectors of activity, innovating in many areas, and filling market segments that are under-served because they are not perceived as profitable. The social economy is made up of many thousands of women and men, businesses and organisations, who share values (democracy, cooperation, solidarity) every day to build a more inclusive sustainable and common good-oriented society. Their common goal is to provide services to the community and meet socio-economic needs while respecting workers and their needs, their environment and acting upon a participatory governance system.

The social economy acts on a different approach to the allocation of profit, putting economic activity at the service, as a priority, of people as well as social or environmental purposes, working conditions, and limiting shareholder remuneration. All or most of the profits and surpluses are reinvested to further pursue their social and/or environmental purposes and carry out activities in the interest of their members/users ('collective interest') or society at large ('general interest'), while often incorporating other objectives related to social, territorial and environmental cohesion. In the social economy, entities can be managed democratically in a spirit of solidarity, without speculative shareholding, by developing



economic practices that are based on solidarity, inclusiveness and citizenship, which are the key to a fairer and more equitable world order that puts human beings at its centre and leaves no one behind.

The strength of the social economy comes from its democratic governance, which involves the participation of all players – workers, users, beneficiaries and other stakeholders – in the management of the business/organisation, and from its oftentimes close relationship with its local area, in line with the ever-changing needs of the population. This democratic influence enables citizens to exercise their rights, take part in collective action and contribute to providing solutions to social, economic and environmental challenges.

In the diversity of its sectors of activity, the social economy is a key economic factor and plays its part in the creation, production, distribution and consumption of goods and services needed for everyday life, but also in the provision of essential social services that meet people's needs throughout their lives, reconciling them with the general interest, territorial cohesion, sustainable and inclusive development and social innovation. In an era of economic, ecological, digital and social emergencies and transitions, the social economy has the power to expand and transform the traditional economy, serving people, businesses and public authorities alike. Indeed, to strengthen the social economy, public authorities must adopt strong public policies that reflect the local, entrepreneurial and civic initiatives they support.

The social economy is a model for the future that calls for the dissemination and full expression of its values and principles, all its assets and all its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of people in all areas of the economy. It gives voice, among others, to the concerns of younger generations, committed to the planet and for whom personal and professional fulfilment increasingly involves a social or environmental purpose. As an agent of structural change, it is present in all sectors of economic activity and in the European Union's 14 priority industrial ecosystems, one of which precisely is devoted to proximity and social economy. Focused on human needs and rooted in the realities of our territories, the social economy builds made-to-measure projects, often anticipating institutional and regulatory frameworks, in cooperation with local players and stakeholders. The social economy reduces and corrects disparities, collectively revitalises areas in decline and is a beacon of hope.

The social economy generates a social impact that is an important response to and driver in the face of the current challenges of transition, whether socially inclusive, environmental or digital. In today's world, more than ever before, we are looking for new points of reference, more focused on people and on the environmental issues that affect both the future of the planet and the future of humanity.



Meeting in Liège on 12 February 2024, the European Ministers responsible for Social Economy,

- A. Considering the European values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty, namely: "*The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail*", are all shared and supported by the social economy;
- B. Considering the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 8: "Decent work and economic growth" and Goal 17: "Partnerships for the goals", where the social economy can fully deploy its multi-actor, multi-scale approach;
- C. Considering the *European Pillar of Social Rights*, adopted at the Gothenburg Social Summit on 17 November 2017 as well as the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan* (which sets, inter alia, three key targets to be achieved by 2030 in terms of employment rates, skills and poverty reduction) adopted by the European Commission on 4 March 2021, and the *Porto Declaration* adopted by the European Council on 8 May 2021;
- D. Considering the *European Green Deal* launched on 11 December 2019 by the European Commission, aiming to make Europe the first climate neutral continent by 2050 and ensuring no person and no place left behind;
- E. Considering "*A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*", announced on 30 June 2021 as social innovations among other main drivers shaping the future of rural areas for 2040;
- F. Considering the *Social Economy Action Plan*, adopted on 9 December 2021 by the European Commission;
- G. Considering the *Transition Pathway for Proximity and Social Economy* launched on 14 November 2022 by the European Commission;
- H. Considering the commitments made by 23 Member States at the first Informal Conference of European Ministers for the Social Economy on 17 February 2022 in Paris and during the Strasbourg Conference "*Social Economy, the Future of Europe*" organised by the French Presidency of the Council of the EU on 5 and 6 May 2022;



- I. Considering the *Council recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions*, adopted by the Council of the EU on 27 November 2023, which provides a political, legal and economic framework necessary for the social economy to fully develop its potential;
- J. Considering the *San Sebastián Manifesto*, signed on 14 November 2023 by 19 Member States, at the initiative of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, together with the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions and Social Economy Europe, and which notes in particular the importance for Member States to implement the *Council recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions* at their level, in particular by designing and implementing comprehensive strategies that recognise and stimulate the social economy, or by adapting their existing strategies;
- K. Considering the Opinion “*Strengthening non-profit social enterprises as an essential pillar of a socially equitable Europe*”, adopted on 18 September 2020 by the European Economic and Social Committee; considering the Opinion “*Advancing the EU’s just transition policy framework: what measures are necessary*” adopted on 14 December 2023 by the European Economic and Social Committee, which recognises, inter alia, the role of social economy enterprises and organisations as one of the preconditions for the functioning of a just transition policy framework; and considering also the Opinion “*Combating poverty and social exclusion: harnessing the power of the social economy and socio-economic innovations*”, adopted on 17 January 2024 by the European Economic and Social Committee;
- L. Considering that the reference texts¹ promoted by the European institutions and also by international organisations constitute a matrix which not only encourages the social economy to be taken into account in European, national and regional policies, but also encourages the implementation of support, assistance and development measures favourable to the social economy;

¹ The *Social Economy Action Plan*, adopted by the European Commission on 9 December 2021;
 The *Council Recommendation on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation*, adopted by the OECD on 10 June 2022;
 The *Resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy*, adopted by the ILO on 16 June 2022;
 The *Resolution “Promoting the Social Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development”*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 April 2023;
 The *Council recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions*, adopted by the Council of the EU on 27 November 2023.



- M.** Recalling that according to the definition formulated by the *Council recommendation developing social economy framework conditions*, adopted by the Council of the EU on 27 November 2023, the social economy consists of "a set of private law entities providing goods and services to their members or to society, encompassing organisational forms such as cooperatives, mutual societies, associations (including charities), foundations or social enterprises, as well as other legal forms, that operate in accordance with the following key principles and features:
- i. the primacy of people as well as social or environmental purpose over profit;
 - ii. the reinvestment of all or most of the profits and surpluses to further pursue their social or environmental purposes and carry out activities in the interest of their members/users ('collective interest') or society at large ('general interest'); and
 - iii. democratic or participatory governance";
- N.** Mindful that the social economy offers concrete and innovative solutions to current challenges and in particular to the issues of green, digital and just transitions; that it enables sustainable and inclusive economic development; that it creates and maintains quality jobs at local level; that it promotes the social inclusion in the labour market of disadvantaged groups who are excluded from the workplace; that it provides essential social services to the whole population; that it is strongly rooted in local communities, thereby promoting territorial cohesion; and that it enables the active participation of citizens in the implementation of solutions to societal, economic and environmental challenges;
- O.** Given the need to better understand and recognise the contributions of the social economy, in particular by improving data collection and statistics;
- P.** Acknowledging the important role played at intergovernmental level by the *Monitoring Committee of the Luxembourg Declaration* since its creation on 4 December 2015 in order to promote the social economy at European level, as well as to promote, support and monitor the policies pursued by the European institutions in the field of the social economy;
- Q.** Emphasising that it is essential to maintain and strengthen the current momentum in favour of the social economy, beyond the mandate of the current European Commission; underlining therefore the importance of maintaining an unwavering commitment to the social economy at the highest level of the agenda of the European institutions, in particular in the framework of the future *EU Strategic Agenda* for the period 2024–2029, and in the *Policy orientations for the next Commission*;



The European Ministers responsible for Social Economy invite the Council of the European Union and the European Commission to:

- 1) Include support for the development of the social economy among the *Policy orientations for the next European Commission 2024–2029* as well as in its future annual work programmes;
- 2) Appoint one of the European Commissioners with full responsibility (inter alia) for the social economy;
- 3) Continue and strengthen the Commission's implementation by 2030 of the *Social Economy Action Plan*, in part by proposing a timeline for the upcoming years;
- 4) Continue to monitor and support – via EMCO², SPC³ and GECES⁴ – the effective implementation of the *Council recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions*, adopted by the EU Council on 27 November 2023;
- 5) Ensure cross-recognition at EU level and between Member States of social economy entities and thus promote their internationalisation within the single market, in particular by swiftly adopting the *Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on European cross-border associations*;
- 6) Recognise the role of the *Monitoring Committee of the Luxembourg Declaration* and support its effective operation, in particular by asking the European Commission to host a website dedicated to the Committee;
- 7) Promote a gender approach in public policies relating to the social economy, among others by supporting women's entrepreneurship, taking into account Sustainable Development Goal 5 ("Gender equality");
- 8) Systematically integrate the social economy into European projects and into all the value chains of the traditional economy, including by promoting joint projects;
- 9) Promote public policy actions specifically involving the social economy as a third player in public-private partnerships;

² Employment Committee

³ Social Protection Committee

⁴ Commission Expert Group on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises



- 10)** Make it possible to fund and support the development of consortia of players, social economy business incubators, social innovation clusters and micro-projects, in order to facilitate support for the social economy (for example through the creation of local social economy business networks);
- 11)** Promote access to European funding for social economy entities and social economy federations – which strive to obtain the same conditions for the social economy as other entities / federations –, by providing adequate support for them to access existing European instruments and funds; public and private funding could thus be more directed towards social economy entities, in part by adapting the way in which the Commission's direct and indirect funding operates, as well as funding granted, amongst others, by the EIB⁵/EIF⁶, or, for example, and when appropriate, financing through the Next Generation EU and its Recovery and Resilience Facility;
- 12)** Ensure that taxation systems do not hinder the development of the social economy and assess whether tax systems sufficiently encourage its development;
- 13)** To facilitate access to public procurement for social economy entities, encourage making full use of the tools available under Union public procurement rules and consider:
- issuing and deploying more calls for projects and proposals, taking into account the social and green objectives pursued by social economy entities;
 - encouraging European, national, regional and local public authorities to incorporate more sustainability and inclusivity criteria in public procurement procedures;
 - and promoting also other forms of involvement of social economy entities in the design and delivery of services and goods;
- 14)** Carry out a detailed analysis of European legislation and State aid rules with regard to discrimination and potential difficulties encountered by all forms of social economy entities (including work integration social enterprises, that support the inclusion of people with disabilities and other disadvantaged or underrepresented groups), in order to be able to provide appropriate solutions to these difficulties;
- 15)** Examine how to adapt State aid regulations to take the social economy better into account, e.g. by including a specific exemption in the GBER⁷ so that the specific nature of

⁵ European Investment Bank

⁶ European Investment Fund

⁷ General block exemption regulation



the economic model of social economy enterprises and entities can be better recognised, with the aim of encouraging their creation and growth;

- 16)** Promote, through a White Paper and good legislative practice, the best use of the GBER for support to social economy entities, the use and qualification of "SGEI" for services of general economic interest and "SSGI" for social services of general interest provided by entities (enterprises and organisations) of the social economy;
- 17)** Strengthen the support role played by social economy entities in boosting social innovation by promoting a favourable ecosystem for social and place-based innovation by facilitating cooperation and partnership initiatives between social and circular economy entities, mainstream businesses, finance providers, local governments and other stakeholders;
- 18)** Increase awareness among social economy entities of the benefits of the digital and green transition and develop consultancy services to support social economy entities throughout their digitisation and greening processes;
- 19)** Encourage the deployment of regulatory frameworks and strategies in favour of the social economy at both national and regional level through the organisation of participative "peer-to-peer learning" processes involving, when appropriate, civil servants from all public authorities and, in this context, promote the creation of dedicated departments and civil servants trained in the social economy within public authorities;
- 20)** Support awareness-raising of the principles and values of social economy as well as social economy entrepreneurship in all levels of education and to the general public;
- 21)** Encourage the creation and development of educational curricula and skills centres dedicated to the social economy and social entrepreneurship, in order to offer training, skilling and reskilling in the social economy to the general public and youth; also encourage, where appropriate, the creation and development of masters, chairs and action research programmes in the social economy in universities and higher education;
- 22)** Stimulate the creation of statistical tools adapted to the social economy, at local, regional, national and European levels, in order to support the collection of statistics and studies specifically detailing the reality of the social economy and thus providing a more accurate picture of its ecosystem and their impact;



- 23)** Convey a study on social economy's economic and financial data among the European Union, with Eurostat and Member State agencies working together towards standardised and comparable data wherever possible, and including the collection of first-hand data, where necessary;
- 24)** As proposed by the *Council recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions*, support the establishment of national and regional social economy coordinators in public institutions, with clear mandates and responsibilities, and organise them as a network at EU level, to better ensure coherence in policy-making between authorities and with EU institutions;
- 25)** Follow up the effective implementation of this *Liège Roadmap for Social Economy in the EU*.

Liège, 12 February 2024

