

SOCIAL ECONOMY STRATEGIES ACROSS EUROPE

Analysis of national strategies adopted by Member States

By **Marie Vernier**, General Delegate of the Labo de l'ESS,
member of the Commission Expert Group on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises (GECES)

Summary: In November 2023, the Council of the European Union issued a Recommendation calling on Member States to adopt a strategy dedicated to social economy by the end of 2025.

This « top-down » injunction meets with very diverse national frameworks - from both legal and strategic points of view. Its implementation, which is still uneven across the 27 countries, follows different approaches in terms of both content and form, based on a framework for dialogue and shared best practices defined by the European Commission.

At a time when France has just begun the process of co-developing its strategy, this paper takes stock of the strategies that have been adopted and are being defined, as well the challenges of implementing them in a changing context.

AN INITIATIVE DRIVEN BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

In 2021, the Social Economy Action Plan presented by the European Commission, following long-lasting advocacy efforts¹ by social economy actors², noted the different stages of development of social and solidarity economy ecosystems in the Member States, and announced several initiatives to remedy the situation.

These include a proposal for a Recommendation to the Council of the European Union, published in the end by the Council in November 2023³, that « aims to foster access to the labour market and social inclusion by guiding Member States on promoting enabling policy and regulatory frameworks for the Social Economy and measures that facilitates its development ». This legal act thus recommends Member States design and implement strategies that recognise and stimulate the social economy (SE).

While recognising the diversity of practices and the need for tools applicable to a variety of national contexts and to the different degrees of SE development observed, the Commission and the Council set the objective of **putting strategies in place - or adapting existing conditions - by November 2025**, with a report to be drawn up within 4 years on their effective implementation.

¹ See Catinat, M. (2022). Analysis of the European action plan for the social economy [Strategic note]. Le Labo de l'ESS. URL: Analyse du plan d'action européen pour l'économie sociale | Europe | Publications | Le Labo de l'économie sociale et solidaire

² These include Social Economy Europe, an organisation representing the social economy at European level. See the page dedicated to the proposal for a European public policy in favour of the social economy. URL: European Action Plan for the Social Economy - Social Economy Europe

³ Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions (C/2023/1344). Available at URL: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14113-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

This Recommendation in fact amounts to generalising a good practice already identified in certain countries. This explains why all the strategies have not been defined in the same timeframe, nor are they projected over the same period, the only timeframe set being to have submitted a copy by November 2025 at the latest.

From this point of view, some countries have only had to update or continue existing practices. [Spain](#), for example, had a social economy strategy for the 2017-2020 period, [Slovenia](#) a development strategy for 2021-2031, and the [Czech Republic](#) a support strategy for small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, which includes social enterprises between 2014 and 2020. [France](#) also has multi-annual SE strategies, notably those defined by the regions, and several SE ministers have published annual roadmaps including programmatic development elements.

In order to facilitate the implementation of the Council Recommendation, the Commission subsequently specified good practices for the construction of these strategic frameworks, in particular by suggesting that Member States deal with **5 « building blocks »**⁴:

- **Vision and objectives:** define the purpose, direction and potential impact of the SE on society and the economy as a whole, but also its importance in achieving policy objectives such as employment, social inclusion and sustainability. In this context, the objectives should translate the vision into concrete and achievable milestones;
- **Administrative and institutional structure:** list the stakeholders that make up said structure (specific units or coordinating bodies within and between ministries, such as labour, economic or social affairs), and facilitate effective stakeholder participation and resource allocation; at a national or sub-national level for countries with decentralised administrations;
- **Consultation mechanisms:** encouraging the active participation of all stakeholders (institutions, SE organisations, researchers) with a view to co-creating innovative public policies;
- **Visibility and recognition:** facilitating the promotion and demonstration of the value of SE by providing visibility in the media and through statistics;
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** relating to the targets and indicators defined above.



The 5 « building blocks »

Illustration taken from the European Commission website⁵

The Commission is therefore promoting **elements that are fairly consensual and broadly interpretable**. In the end, they differ little from the pillars of any public or even private strategy.

The most proactive Member States will also be able to draw on the 9 more specific pillars provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its own Recommendation of June 2022⁶: 1) social economy culture, 2) institutional frameworks, 3) legal and regulatory frameworks, 4) access to finance, 5) access to markets, 6) skills and business development support, 7) impact management, measurement and reporting, 8) data, and 9) social innovation.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Source: Social economy strategies - European Commission

⁶ Recommendation of the Council on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation. URL: OECD Legal Instruments

A very large number of countries have already adopted at least one law related to the specific legal forms of social economy entities, such as associations, cooperatives, foundations, mutual benefit societies and social enterprises. Although the meanings given to the social economy do not always cover the same strict definition across the Member States - which the Commission has helped to address by providing its own definition, again in the 2021 Social Economy Action Plan - at least 8 countries already have dedicated legal frameworks, the first of which appeared in the 2010s (France in 2014, Greece in 2011 and 2016, Italy in 2016 and by decree in 2017, Luxembourg in 2016, Poland in 2022, Portugal in 2013, Romania in 2015, Spain in 2011).⁷

Meanwhile, **some Member States already had this practice of strategic planning** applied to the social economy, sometimes even without a framework law, but based on specific laws relating to SE entities, such as Slovenia, which has a 10-year development plan for the social economy, adopted in 2021. There are also many sub-national legal and/or strategic frameworks (including the French regional SE strategies, which are mostly multi-annual and cross-cutting, as in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Centre-Val de Loire, Normandie, Occitanie, Île-de-France, etc.).

In order to support the Member States in their operational response to the Council Recommendation, the Commission's departments have put in place **a wide-ranging support program and many tools** : in particular, between March and June 2024, a series of mutual learning workshops attended by 23 Member States - present or represented - testifying both to the broad majority's desire to act, and to the need for dialogue, exchanges on the subject, and even assistance with implementation.

On 31st March 2025, the Commission also approved a project to include the Recommendation among the applications for **Technical Support Instruments (TSI)**, for which Croatia, France, Portugal, Belgium (Wallonia) and Greece have applied. These countries will therefore shortly benefit from technical assistance.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO CONTENT AND FORM

Given these different frameworks and histories, which were well anticipated in the Recommendation, different approaches are emerging among the Member States to implement it.

The reports available from peer-to-peer learning workshops organised in 2024 between Member States reveal a shared desire to consider **3 main public policy objectives** to be achieved by the strategies⁸:

- Improving access to the labour market;
- Promoting social inclusion;
- Promoting social innovation.

These workshops were also the occasion for an informal survey among those present to distinguish between countries that already had a national SE strategy (in green in the image opposite), in particular Belgium, Germany, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Finland and Poland, and those that were in the process of planning or updating (in blue), in particular Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Other censuses include up to 14 procedures that have been completed or initiated, sometimes considered to need updating.⁹



Member States status regarding SE strategies
Source: Social Economy Gateway. Ibid

⁷ OECD. (2024). Policy Guide on Legal Frameworks for the Social and Solidarity Economy, Local Economic Development and Employment Creation (LEED), OECD Publishing, Paris, Policy Guide on Legal Frameworks for the Social and Solidarity Economy | OECD

⁸ Source: https://social-economy-gateway.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2dcc08dd-7a42-4633-964f-8d9b1835514d_en?filename=MLS_SE_Thematic_paper_WS1_Building_blocks_of_a_SE_strategy%20%281%29_0.pdf&prefLang=fr

⁹ Varga, E. (2024). The building blocks of a social economy strategy. Thematic discussion paper. European Commission. URL: 32060be6-dad9-4c89-9d2a-62b07191de57_en

All the countries involved have set up a form of consultation, sometimes going as far as co-construction

In application of the 5 components of the strategy suggested by the Commission's services, the actions engaged show a wide range of stakeholders' involvement in their construction. Even though the social economy portfolio is mainly held by the Ministry of Labour within the Member States, the work is most often carried out on an interministerial basis, involving the representatives of the SE branches and, in some cases, setting up a quantitative or qualitative citizen consultation component.

For example, [Germany](#)¹⁰ - which has focused its strategy on « strengthening the prosperity, equity and resilience of society through support centred on social enterprises and the strengthening of social innovation » - began by carrying out consultations with key stakeholders from across the economic tissue. The aim was to identify the needs and the levers to be activated. Given the focus on regional policies, 7 dedicated workshops were organised with the aim of debating sub-national strategies and ensuring consistency in approaches and definitions. The result was then reviewed by the 16 federal departments, some of which added elements. The strategy was finally endorsed jointly by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Protection and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, in parallel with a public consultation that attracted 210 contributions, resulting in a high level of acceptance of the approach and the final document.

As a driving force on these issues in South-East Europe, alongside [Greece](#), [Slovenia](#) has also sought to involve a wide range of people through a body created for the occasion and designated as the pilot by the government: the Social Economy Council. The Council brings together 21 representatives from ministries, SE entities, civil society players, social partners and professional organisations in the field of the social economy. The Council even appointed a dedicated working group to work on an operational definition of the social economy and its principles. The group also proposed 4 priority areas for the future strategy, which is currently being drafted for public consultation.

When it comes to the actual phasing of operations, the first step often consists in **drawing up an inventory of the existing situation**, in the SWOT format : strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats. However, not all the initiatives undertaken have resulted in the publication of these analyses, with the notable exception of [Spain](#)¹¹ for its current 2023-2027 strategy, which reveals areas for improvement relating to visibility of the SE, both for citizens and institutions, or the weakness of training in higher education; but also strengths such as the resilience of social economy enterprises in the face of unfavourable economic situations, or their driving role in the economic and social cohesion of rural areas.

From regulatory facilitation to multi-year strategies based on concrete operations

As we have seen, not all Member States have the same legal or regulatory framework, pre-existing practices, or the same political support to enable these strategies to be deployed. This naturally results in different interpretations of the Council Recommendation.

To date, some countries have clearly not got off the ground. [Sweden](#), for example, seems not to have begun a dialogue with its ecosystem, while [Greece](#), although a driving force in its geographical area along with [Slovenia](#), has proposed an « Social economy and social innovation action plan » which has been under consideration since mid-2023. Others may be waiting for impetus from the Technical Support Instrument (TSI). [Italy](#) and [Poland](#) are said to be opening up their own dialogues. In [France](#), Véronique Louwagie, Minister Delegate for Trade, Craft Trades, SMEs and the Social and Solidarity Economy, indicated at the beginning of 2025 that she wanted to work « in a collaborative dynamic » and appointed Gilles Mirieu de Labarre, a qualified individual in charge of actively participating in the development of this national strategy. He has already consulted a large number of stakeholders and indicated that he wants to work with the national SE High Council (CSESS) on a national and regional approach, including a citizen consultation component.

¹⁰ Source: *ibid.*

¹¹ Source : BOE-A-2023-13033 Resolución de 17 de mayo de 2023, de la Secretaría de Estado de Empleo y Economía Social, por la que se publica el Acuerdo del Consejo de Ministros de 11 de abril de 2023, por el que se aprueba la Estrategia Española de Economía Social 2023-2027.

The elements already adopted and published by the Member States that can be the subject of a comparative analysis come under either **legal and regulatory facilitation** or **multi-annual programme strategy**, variable projection horizons (between 4 and 10 years).

In the first group, the [German](#) copy, published in September 2023, has the stated aim of removing obstacles and improving the framework conditions for social enterprises. Structured in 10 main areas, the strategy aims to « strengthen a culture of socially innovative and socially oriented start-ups and their support structures », « use the leverage of public procurement », develop financial instruments, and develop research into social innovations and social enterprises¹². With the exception of research and statistical data, the guidelines adopted appear to be largely instrumental and financial. In terms of form, the document affirms a series of major principles before listing a series of measures in response to identified problems, following the format: observation > solution > measures, spread over thirty pages. It concludes by stating the need to introduce « clear indicators », without providing them or indicating a timeframe for evaluation or revision. The ambition is therefore mainly to simplify the law and regulations, in a rather technocratic way.

[Finland](#), for its part, has a large number of strategies relating directly or indirectly to SE, such as the Strategy for National Public Procurement (2020), which aims to promote social and inclusion criteria in public procurement, or the strategy for promoting the Social Impact Bonds (SIB) model piloted by the innovation fund Sitra, which has contributed to the development of social enterprises in [Finland](#). The largest strategy was launched in 2019 at the initiative of the government, and approved by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in April 2021. Based on an analysis of the pre-existing situation, its objectives are centered on the development of social enterprises alone, with the stated aim of creating jobs, including integration, while at the same time seeking to simplify the definition of a social enterprise. Here too, the development of research is targeted, with the systematic collection of data and statistics and, more broadly, the desire to increase qualitative research activities.

While [Ireland](#) has some past multi-year strategic experience with its national policy for social enterprises led by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) between 2019 and 2022, this first exercise focused on enterprise growth, recognition and the creation of a national network. It did, however, gather more data on these businesses and the DRCD was, by April 2024, in the process of building its new policy for the period 2024-2027. Like Finland, Ireland has other strategies relating to SE, rural development, local communities and volunteering.

For its part, [Spain](#) had already pursued a multi-annual strategy between 2017 and 2020, with the aim of promoting social enterprises, ensuring the necessary conditions for their emergence and development. In the end, this first step was quite similar to the copies produced by several countries in the first group detailed above. Given this earlier stage, this first version was analysed, leading to a new, more cross-cutting strategy for the 2023-2027 period, published in May 2023¹³, just between the Commission's proposal for a Recommendation and its adoption by the Council.

Divided into 5 parts, the document includes a presentation which gives a definition of the SE: « The social economy encompasses all economic and commercial activities which, in the private sphere, are carried out by entities which pursue either the collective interest of their members, or the general economic or social interest, or both, in accordance with the principles of the social economy, the primary principle of which is the primacy of people and social purpose over capital ». It then details a SWOT analysis, and publishes the main results of a public consultation carried out on this analysis with ministries, the Spanish Confederation of SE Enterprises (CEPES), mayors and qualified individuals (46 respondents to an online questionnaire).

¹² Source: Nationale Strategie für Soziale Innovation und Gemeinwohlorientierte Unternehmen

¹³ Full text: BOE-A-2023-13033 Resolución de 17 de mayo de 2023, de la Secretaría de Estado de Empleo y Economía Social, por la que se publica el Acuerdo del Consejo de Ministros de 11 de abril de 2023, por el que se aprueba la Estrategia Española de Economía Social 2023-2027.

The conclusions of the analysis and the feedback received are fairly similar to those shared by a number of Member States, and the strategy seeks to respond directly to the limitations identified in 4 areas:

- Improve the visibility of the SE (institutional visibility, statistics, etc.),
- Increase the competitiveness of the social economy (increase the internationalisation of its products and services through digitalisation, increase cooperation with the economy as a whole, etc.),
- Strengthen social entrepreneurship in emerging SE sectors (particularly technological innovation),
- Promote social and territorial sustainability in the SSE (training, labelling, etc.).

These priorities are then broken down into no fewer than 17 action lines and 146 measures, in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations. The measures will be monitored and evaluated on an annual basis.

Following the Social Economy Action Plan, in June 2022 the Spanish government announced an investment plan (PERTE Social) worth 800 million euros¹⁴, mainly from Next Generation EU funds, and covering 13 ministries. This was already a very strong and proactive signal, while affirming the place of the SE as a dynamic enabling recovery and resilience in the face of multiple crises. This dimension of proactive investment in the SE as a solution is reflected in the strategy which, even though it was published subsequently, has substantial resources to be pursued and made effective.

DEALING WITH HEADWINDS

Latest milestone in a process of co-construction designed to meet the long-standing expectations of a social economy ecosystem seeking greater « unity in diversity » - the lack of a global approach in social economy policies being detrimental to the consolidation of a European movement aware of a community of values, visions and takes, beyond the multiplicity of its forms and practices - **the impetus given is undoubtedly a positive step forward for the Social Economy**. This because the process of drafting these strategies provides a space for players and national networks to push forward and converge their ambitions, in the service of a strong and transformative social economy.

There are, however, **inherent limits** to such an exercise which, depending on political will and national contexts, can in some cases be reduced to an exercise of style. Furthermore, the adoption of a strategy does not automatically answer the question of the resources allocated to its success, nor does it guarantee that it transcends electoral deadlines and partisan positions within member countries.

And yet, such strategies should encourage ambition and projection into the medium and even the long term, and nothing is less obvious in the times we are living through.

And therein lies the paradox : **how can we develop and implement these strategies at a time when national economies and policies are faced with burning issues in the short term and unprecedented backtracking at European level**, with services and personalities saturated by budgetary and defense issues ?

There is every reason to believe that the forthcoming Danish Presidency of the EU from 1st July 2025 will focus on these issues. **Let us not forget that innovation, social cohesion and economic resilience, to which the SE undeniably contributes, are also factors of stability and peace within European borders.**

¹⁴ See A decisive moment for the Social Economy - Social Economy Europe

Many thanks to Melis Aslan of the OECD and Sarah de Heusch of Social Economy Europe for the discussions we held, which helped to clarify several points in this paper.

This paper is also available in French: <https://bit.ly/4moW7D6>. This document was translated with the help of AI (DeepL). See DeepL.com for more information.

Le Labo de l'ESS
5, rue Las Cases - 75007 Paris
01 80 05 82 00
contact@lelabo-ess.org

FOLLOW US !



lelabo-ess.org



[@lelabo-ess.bsky.social](https://lelabo-ess.bsky.social)



[lelaboess](https://www.facebook.com/lelaboess)



[Le Labo de l'ESS](https://www.linkedin.com/company/lelabo-ess)