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## From collective interest through 'solidarity perimeters' up to social economy and common welfare: which new or further research lines?

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser kurze Beitrag zielt darauf ab, zu untersuchen, wie sich das transdisziplinäre wissenschaftliche Denken rund um die Konzepte von Commons, Gemeinwohl und kollektiver Ökonomie in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten auf internationaler Ebene entwickelt hat. Es wird außerdem vorgeschlagen, einige Forschungsansätze zu Begriffen und gesellschaftlichen Konstrukten, die bis ins alte Ägypten zurückreichen, wieder aufzugreifen und/oder zu vertiefen.

Nach einigen Überlegungen zu den unterschiedlichen Auffassungen der Konzepte beginnt der Beitrag mit der Darstellung verschiedener Denkansätze zu diesen Begriffen, die insbesondere von einem internationalen wissenschaftlichen Netzwerk von Praktikern, Experten und Forschern, dem CIRIEC (Internationales Forschungs- und Informationszentrum für öffentliche Wirtschaft, Sozialwirtschaft und Genossenschaftswesen), entwickelt wurden. Die Kombination von wissenschaftlicher Forschung und praktischen Ansätzen bei der Untersuchung von Organisationen und Governance-Formen, die dem kollektiven Interesse dienen, ermöglicht es, weitere Erkenntnisse über Commons und öffentliche Güter zu gewinnen. Dieser Ansatz integriert auch modernisierte Inhalte von Commons wie Open Access, geteilte Ressourcen und Wissen.

Dieser Beitrag zeigt dann, wie kollektives Handeln von verschiedenen Interessengruppen, einschließlich Forschern, Veränderungen in der öffentlichen Politik bewirken kann, auch auf weltweiter Ebene, bis hin zu den Vereinten Nationen. Um solche politikorientierten Handlungen und Ergebnisse zu fördern, muss das volle Potenzial der Sozialwirtschaft, der öffentlichen Güter und der Gemeingüter besser verstanden und aufgezeigt werden.

Abschließend werden verschiedene unzureichend untersuchte Bereiche aufgeführt, um zu weiterer Forschung und Publikation zu motivieren. Dies ist insbesondere das Ziel dieser wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift.

**Stichworte:** Gemeingüter; Kollektives Interesse; Öffentliche Güter; Öffentliches Handeln; Solidarität; Sozialwirtschaft.

### Summary

This short paper looks how transdisciplinary scientific thinking around the concepts of commons, common interest and collective economy evolved over the last three decades at international level. It also suggests to revisit and/or deepen some research avenues around notions and societal constructs going back to as far as Ancient Egypt.

After some consideration about the various understandings of the concepts, the contribution first depicts various lines of thought around them, notably developed by an international scientific network of practitioners, experts and researchers, CIRIEC (International Centre of Information and Research on Public, Social and Cooperative Economy). Combining scientific research and practical approaches in studying organizations and forms of governance serving the collective interest allows gaining further insight on commons and public goods. This approach also integrates modernised content of commons such as open access or shared resources and knowledge.

This contribution then shows how collective action by various stakeholders, including researchers, can bring about changes in public policies, including at world level, reaching up to the United

Nations. To enhance such policy-oriented action and outcome, the full potential of the social economy, public goods and commons needs to be better understood and showcased.

Finally, various insufficiently investigated areas are listed, in order to motivate further research and publication. This is notably what this scientific journal aims at.

**Keywords:** Collective interest; Commons; Public goods; Public policies; Social economy; Solidarity.

## I. Introduction

Basing on work and research realised in partnerships or under the auspices of CIRIEC (International Centre of Information and Research on Public, Social and Cooperative Economy),<sup>1</sup> this paper points at some milestones and research outcomes achieved through and with this international network associating researchers and practitioners. It also bases on an historical overview made for the centenary of the scientific journal, the *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, because of which CIRIEC was created in 1947. In particular, Fecher and Lévesque (2008: 679) note that when the term 'social economy' was incorporated in the French title of the journal in 1974, "the social economy had not yet gained recognition in any country, not even in France".

Some of the findings stemming from the international discussion and publications overarching diverse cultural horizons can be of interest for further work in the rather young strand of socio-economic research line focusing on social (and solidarity) economy and collective interest.

This paper will not examine definition of concepts from a theoretical point of view<sup>2</sup> nor try delineating the social economy sector (or other related appellations)<sup>3</sup> through an institutional approach. The long and very well researched survey article by Fecher and Lévesque (2008) is of great interest to read in this respect, notably showing the diverse notions, appellations and definition attempts evolving over time and place. But, to set the scenery, one could refer to a commonly agreed definition at world level in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>4</sup> or to another one agreed upon by numerous stakeholders at European level.<sup>5</sup>

1 To get an insight in CIRIEC research, see: [www.ciriec.uliege.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CIRPr\\_November2020-EN.pdf](http://www.ciriec.uliege.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CIRPr_November2020-EN.pdf).

2 This is covered in another paper in the present issue.

3 Let us only mention here that CIRIEC understands social economy in a broad perspective, but also that social economy differs from the strict non-profit economy. See Fecher/Lévesque 2008; Marini/Thiry 2018.

4 <https://unsse.org/sse-and-the-sdgs/>.

5 Chaves/Monzón Campos (2017b: 6-7), the executive summary of the full report is available in all languages of the European Union: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/recent-evolutions-social-economy-european-union-executive-summary>.

The developments below rather envisage to show how complex but also how rich the interrelations are with the rest of the economy. They refer to numerous disciplinary approaches (touching also on philosophical questions related to relations between humanity and nature) that are worthwhile considering when grasping this phenomenon. As Schulz-Nieswandt (2020) points out, not only the enterprises/organisations, but also the sectors of activities, (public) goods and services provided, the way of '*doing business*', numerous aspects touch on paradigm issues related to justice, ethics, redistribution, etc. In short, one could say: social and general interest economy is about *values*. And the hard task is to analyse, treat, understand, measure, evaluate, confront this other or alternative 'economic' model to more so-called *orthodox* model approaches. Next to property rights and universal access, also the consequences on socio-economic settings on affordability, quality and other public service or general interest principles need to be considered.

## II. Forerunners and context

### 1. Initial development and origins

The origin of mutual benefit societies goes back to Antiquity (Poncelet et al., 2009: 81) with stonemasons uniting in Egypt in 1400 BC and contributing to a fund intended to provide them with assistance in case of accident. In Ancient Rome, mutual funeral insurance existed, but the real development of mutuals started in the Middle Ages through brotherhoods, guilds and societies of artisans providing reciprocal assistance and financial cover for illness, invalidity, old age, loss of work and fire (Bennet, 1981: 19; 27-28; 42; 67-68).

In Western Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, socio-vocational groups defined by membership of a company, a job, a sector of activities, a region, a national origin, etc. established the forerunners of mutual benefit societies (Poncelet et al., 2009: 81). One of the idea behind these groupings was collective action, equating for some to militant activism and sometimes even contesting the established order. In some cases, these organised solidarity-based initiatives showed up to take over the role of banned trade unions. Often they developed in parallel, and in many cases in synergy with cooperative or collective action.

Cooperatives and mutuals at that time appeared as an alternative form of organisation, next to the private economy and the nation State or public authorities' functions. In some cases, those alternative forms clearly opposed dominant political, social and/or economic forces, notably in the sectors of welfare – in order to guard against the uncertainties of life and combat poverty – and education – seeking to reduce gaps between social classes. Both are sectors which can be still today considered as public/merit goods. This autonomous collective action also sought gaining independence vis-à-vis private charities and philanthropic foundations (mostly of religious order) having their own goals and objectives in sight. This mutualist involvement (Poncelet et al., 2009: 82) mingled altruism and personal interest, reciproci-

ty and common interest, combining responsibility and action of the individual, freedom of involvement (i.e. volunteering), democracy and solidarity with a view to providing collective protection and welfare, ensuring economic and social effectiveness for the members, and more generally improving well-being. This preceded as such the development of publicly organised social security, when governments *re-engineered* themselves, not taking "upon themselves to service the general interest, but instead made sure that the services were provided, and that adapted methods were employed in doing so" (Fecher/Lévesque, 2008: 709).

## 2. Solidarity perimeters

Defining general public or collective interest economy – sometimes also referred to as plural economy, when working collaboratively and acting in partnerships – is an enormous task that relates on different societal, historical and institutional constructs and interrelationships between social groups. Further, semantic and linguistic differences bring additional difficulties when tackling concepts and notions that were created and evolved in different historical and institutional settings. For instance, *service public* has a wider understanding than the pure delivery/provision of the service; while *Daseinsvorsorge*, *Gemeinwohl* or *Gemeinwirtschaft* are simply untranslatable into English or French, since the approaching terms in those languages do not cover the variety and wide-range of the covered notions and activities.<sup>6</sup>

As pointed by Monnier and Thiry (1997b: 317), the "values of solidarity and economic democracy, which are at the base of cooperative and mutualist movements and voluntary action, can be accepted only with difficulty into the 'utilitarian-monetary' vision of the individual. ... there is also room for a richer social relationship based on cooperative pairings of the 'me-we' type... Socialization is thus expressed by means of a set of 'solidarity perimeters' (Monnier, 1991)." In this sense, there is room for collective and common interest, in addition to altruism. A democratic society – as a bearer of a form of collective intelligence internalising all forms of interdependence – can ensure the representation of the values of solidarity and long-term policies (Monnier/Thiry, 1997b: 317 ff.).

According to Monnier and Thiry (1997b: 321-322 and ff.), a solidarity perimeter groups "individuals sharing approximately the same idea (or intuition) of the general interest". Such a perimeter can extend "from the family to the nation, passing through a company, trade union, mutual society, cooperative, association, etc." The associated general interest is then defined in objectives and functions in line with the respective solidarity perimeter, which therefore needs a decision-making and evaluation system. The general interest appears thus as a complex social structure – or even a socio-economic alchemy – which is gradually generated by more or less centralised or decentralised structures together with heterogeneous forms of logics

<sup>6</sup> Also, the translation or English name given to this new starting scientific Journal, *Journal of Social Economy and Common Welfare*, does not fully coincide with its German name.

and interrelationships. All this results in a diversity of possible assessment of the general interest objective itself.

This architecture of expression modes and methods for taking account of the general interest “puts to the fore the idea of a socio-economic combined system with microeconomic and macroeconomic components” (Fecher/Lévesque, 2008: 710). This system is based on the “coexistence of diverse organisations which, each in the own way, work towards the general interest, and with their respective solidarity perimeters juxtaposed” (Monnier/Thiry, 1997b: 326). This architecture and the related constructs have been widely studied within CIRIEC’s network since the 1990s.

Meanwhile, structural crises, globalisation and major technological transformations have led to significant paradigm shifts. In addition, the architecture of more and more entangled solidarity perimeters have profoundly evolved. Revisiting and pursuing those researches, basing on recent socio-economic and societal developments, could envisage new directions and notably check if relationships between the public sector and social economy are still partnering ones or rather competing each other (Thiry, 2017). This is even more interesting nowadays, since the common understanding of the notion of general interest has greatly evolved since last year and the COVID-19 crisis.

At international level, Monnier and Thiry noted back in 1997 that operational techniques within democratic states for taking into account of the *overall general interest* are lacking. This consequently prevents or makes it very difficult to reach decisions on major issues that are of common importance for a group of states. Monnier and Thiry (1997b: 327 ff.) mentioned peace, security, environment protection, etc. However, new features or elements so ‘natural’ to us that we had forgotten their importance now come anew to the fore.

### 3. The Commons

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the commons have resurfaced,<sup>7</sup> and numerous researchers and networks investigate the potential of related governance modes, such as collaborative or participatory economy. The social utility emerging from the production of shared and jointly managed goods and services arises from the reconciliation between use and preservation of the resource. New and additional considerations of co-ownership and co-governance emerge in the field of knowledge (guaranteeing public access to nature and human genome coding) and technology (digital commons, open access, free licensed software). New areas come under consideration in the post-COVID era to seek to preserve access to our planetary resources, but also to ensure better and greater access to essential goods and services that need to re-

<sup>7</sup> This term also resurfaced in some former Eastern European countries, where the legal terminology ‘commons’ never disappeared. See Vameşu/Barna/Opincaru (2018).

main in the public domain (e.g. open internet).<sup>8</sup> Also, social and solidarity commons arise, defined by Salustri (2021: 15) as “fair, co-operative, social, and collaborative interactions that contribute to the accumulation and regeneration of human and social (but also other types of) critical capital”, and enabling anchoring community practices to people’s basic and daily needs, while focussing on solidarity actions and continuity of service provision. Such communitarian responses from social economy actors and civil society banding together as a third force between market and state can lead to more social justice, and thus reaching public interest goals (Guttmann, 2021).

Additional areas for commons are also investigated such as the development of a public research infrastructure to overcome the pharmaceutical oligopoly, and foster open research along the CERN (European Organisation for Nuclear Research) model. Florio (2020) proposes a structural intervention to create an international, interconnected, transparent, science-informed, and publicly-funded research infrastructure for pharmaceutical and biomedical research, that would also be pro-active in developing and producing vaccines.

### **III. Suggestions for further research lines**

#### **1. Evaluation, impact measurement and legitimacy**

Already in 2000, a reference schedule to measure and assess performance of services of general interest in a wide sense and through a pluralistic approach had been proposed jointly by CEEP<sup>9</sup> and CIRIEC.<sup>10</sup> The complexity of social economy and commons is even wider. The social economy cannot, indeed, be seen as a separate ‘sector’ of the economy, as the European Commission sometimes sees it, when “recognising the strategic potential of social economy entrepreneurship for the reindustrialisation of Europe, by identifying the social economy as one of the fourteen industrial ecosystems for the recovery”.<sup>11</sup>

Social economy rather needs to be viewed and understood as a transversal approach, active in all activity sectors of the economy (also in finance, retail, wholesale, steel industry, telecommunication, even in the aircraft engine production sector). It features another way of doing business and intervening in society. It collectively engages with diverse stakeholders to achieve strategic objectives that can be specific to a group of persons, a community or region, and/or wide ranging, up to inclusive growth and sustainable development for all.

8 See, e.g. Bance/Schoenmaeckers (2021).

9 CEEP (European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services), known today as SGI Europe.

10 CEEP/CIRIEC (2000: 33; 143-209).

11 See: <https://www.socialeconomy.eu.org/2020/07/15/a-moment-of-truth-for-europe/>.

Measuring (quantitatively and qualitatively) and assessing the impact of the social economy through various perspectives and for diverse purposes, showing its social and – even more important – its societal relevance, is of utter importance to show the weight<sup>12</sup> and worth<sup>13</sup> of the Social Economy. This surely is one of the most crucial current research challenge.

Two CIRIEC publications have laid first steps to do so, and show avenues for policy designers to support a third way or third sector in the economy. The main trade-off lies between legibility and legitimacy when choosing indicators to measure and assessing impact of the social economy. Definition and methodology “are closely related, whereby a broad and open definition leads to a plurality of methodologies,<sup>14</sup> and standardised methodologies to a clear definition” as points Bouchard/Rousselière/CIRIEC (2015: 14 and ff.). Further, one on hand “since the social economy often participates in new or underdeveloped sectors of activity, its contribution may even fall ‘under the radar’ of observation”. On another hand, “applying standard statistical tools does not easily account for the identity and operating mode of this sector of the economy, which is multiform, permeable with other sectors (with emerging hybrid forms of organisations) and complex (combining social missions with economic activities)”.

Bouchard/Rousselière/CIRIEC (2015: 18) add: “The weight of the social economy extends far beyond its contribution to job creation, GNP and economic added value. In addition to the many spillovers and externalities it generates, a large part of what it produces does not yet have quantifiable and agreed-upon measures”.

What to measure and how to evaluate raises numerous questions such as: what it means to evaluate; for whom (internally or externally) the evaluation is intended; what practices are taking place in different national contexts; what methods<sup>15</sup> and evaluation criteria are used, and if it is possible to perform a comparative approach; what changes evaluation produces in outcomes (e.g. unintended consequences) because the enterprise/organisation and its workers/employees have to respond/comply with evaluation expectations, etc. Moreover, performance measurement indicators and evaluation criteria can be very varied, and sometimes contradictory depending on the objective or commissioner of the evaluation exercise.

Evaluation is also strongly linked to governance modes, and reaches up to social/societal utility. Indicators used can be discretionary, negotiated or compulsory.

12 Bouchard/Rousselière/CIRIEC (2015).

13 Bouchard/CIRIEC (2009).

14 notably to encompass specific national/regional realities, various components, naming, notations, entities or types of social economy enterprises/organisations.

15 The CIRIEC works presented in Bouchard/CIRIEC (2009) revealed three major trends: corporate social responsibility (CSR), third party evaluation, participatory evaluation. This outcome would be interesting to analyse anew, considering the numerous exercises and evaluation endeavours tested in more recent years.

Bouchard/Richez-Battesti (2009: 251 ff.) distinguish the hierarchic public governance mode (verify if expectations are met), the competitive governance (through market results and clients'/consumers' choices), and participatory decentralised governance (generating long-term partnerships and focusing on citizens' wellbeing).

Evaluation is never neutral. It may be seen as a social construction, and it reflects the role social economy is expected to play in the transformative societal development model (Bouchard/CIRIEC, 2009: 13). However, a tension may appear depending on the scale considered: between the values and governance exercised at organisation level and the possible scaling-up and broader societal role (Bouchard/Richez-Battesti, 2009: 258).

Very recent research endeavours<sup>16</sup> are pursuing this work under the umbrella of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTSSE).<sup>17</sup> This world-level recognition is highlighting the role of the not-for-profit economy associating a large range of stakeholders and actors providing answers to unmet or badly met needs, and shaping public spaces to debate and co-construct policy planning.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, this high-level support can surely help to improve the social and solidarity economy's accountability and legitimacy.

It remains that numerous statistical comparative work and practice-oriented exercises are still needed. Several internationally recognised methods exist: notably the ILO-led work on cooperative statistics<sup>19</sup> and its endorsement by the 20<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2019. Other statistical tested avenues (among others satellite accounts for the third sector and social economy) were presented and discussed at OECD-level during an important technical seminar in October 2017.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Legal oriented investigations on social economy

Legal frameworks are important in the sense that they provide visibility and recognition. In the last decade, numerous new developments such as framework laws or specific legislation regarding social economy were enacted. An open access database ([socioeco.org](http://socioeco.org)) monitored and powered by RIPESS (Intercontinental network for

16 The research initiative of the SSE Knowledge Hub for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is implemented by UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) as the implementing organization of the UNTSSE Knowledge Hub (<https://knowledgehub.unsse.org/project-opportunities-and-challenges-of-statistics-on-sse/>).

17 <https://unsse.org/>.

18 Bouchard/Richez-Battesti (2009 : 245).

19 See ILO (2020), [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS\\_760710/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS_760710/lang--en/index.htm).

20 The full documentation and technical reports can be found at: <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/working-seminar-on-satellite-accounts.htm>.

the promotion of social solidarity economy) offers a very interesting *Resource website of social and solidarity economy*. More particularly, its legislation database<sup>21</sup> could be of great interest to researchers from law schools/faculties, seeking to compare laws and social economy principles translated into legal terms, but also looking at public policies favouring the emergence of social and solidarity economy and inspiring new legislation. This rich and rather unknown database enables to sort by geographical criteria (not only continent and countries, but also applicable at municipal, regional, national or international level), by types of organisations, by types of laws. Analyses and comments on laws or guides for future laws and policies are also featured. Moreover, next to their original version the legislations possibly have a translation in one of the five languages<sup>22</sup> of the site.

On a more specific type of organisation, namely cooperatives, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and its regional sub-associations<sup>23</sup> did develop another very useful endeavour. Using a common methodology developed in collaboration with the European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises (EURIICSE), an open access website<sup>24</sup> presents cooperative legislation by country, as well as the implementation of cooperative policies worldwide. Next to key figures, generally two reports are available per country: a legal framework analytical report, and key highlights and recommendations for improving legislation.<sup>25</sup> Here again: on one hand, additional work is needed to complete the geographical range of countries studied; while on the other hand, data and information only awaits to be exploited and further analysed by scientists to better grasp the role and potential action range of cooperatives, the most well-known type of organisation in the social economy family.

### 3. Some other thematic domains of research fields

Next to statistical and legal mappings, RIPESS has set up *thematic mappings* related to social and solidarity economy. These bring about numerous information and description of inspiring initiatives that can be used as so many case studies to build research upon. The topical areas,<sup>26</sup> all related to commons and collective interests, are: public policies for sustainable development, solutions to socio-economic challenges, media sharing an alternative view of the economy and a democratic and cooperative way of working, as well as pedagogical tools and curricula.

21 [http://socioeco.org/page544\\_en.html](http://socioeco.org/page544_en.html).

22 The currently available languages are: English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish. Any help to co-work with RIPESS, and possibly add translations and languages is of course welcome in an open access and participatory collective effort.

23 Cooperatives of the Americas, Cooperatives Europe, ICA Africa, and ICA Asia-Pacific.

24 <https://coops4dev.coop/en/world>.

25 See, e.g. the page for Germany : <https://coops4dev.coop/en/4deveurope/germany#general>.

26 [http://socioeco.org/cartos\\_en.html](http://socioeco.org/cartos_en.html).

In addition, the numerous economic activity sectors in which the social economy acts and operates are of interest for further research. As are also the cooperation modes between actors and stakeholders, and the type of partnerships established to set up the social economy action, notably together with public authorities. To mention only a few illustrations of research objects: occupational integration and social inclusion through various training and employment support measures; solidarity-based financing; fair trade; circular economy and short circuits; North-South, South-South, or triangular relationships and transnational partnerships between social and solidarity entities; education and pedagogical tools to foster knowledge about social economy, its components but especially its principles, values and governance modes and features.

Other avenues for further research concern the role and implication of *trade unions*. In several countries, it is thanks to worker organisations and trade unions that well-being advancements were reached through the fight for decent jobs and fair salaries, and/or collective rights obtained for the entire population. Nowadays, these organisations still have a very important role regarding collective action and public interest, and their values are similar to those of the social economy sector. However, in the social economy sector, tricky questions and issues appear.<sup>27</sup> Be it self-managed firms or mutuals, relational ambiguity occurs. Economic democracy, participatory governance mechanisms do challenge the traditional role of unions representing and defending workers against employers. What is the place and role of a trade union in a social economy enterprise? What are/should be the relationships between trade unions and workers managing their own company? Little research has been done on this topic, and numerous possibly conflicting issues at stake are still to be studied in this respect, be it through a sociological, political science, economic, human resources, labour science or management approach.

#### **IV. Research needed to foster collective action and public policy**

While in the late nineties and early 2000s, research was hindered due to insufficient data and nascent knowledge developments, research efforts, scientific discussion and public debate arose all around the globe in the thematic field of commons and social economy. Spurred by several international networks advocating the role of social economy organisations/enterprises and their important action in addressing socio-economic challenges at local level with other tools than pure classical or neo-liberal economy tools, a few important world agencies have taken action. Either by

27 Some of them are well illustrated through eight country studies in the MESMER (Mapping European Social Market Economy: review of Social Dialogue, Labour Market and Employment) project (2014): [https://www.pourlasolidarite.eu/fr/publication\\_MESMER](https://www.pourlasolidarite.eu/fr/publication_MESMER). See also interesting considerations developed for Belgium in Wathelet (2017), or for Québec in Poirier (2011).

setting up data repositories, watchdog tools and/or directories,<sup>28</sup> by providing space for public debate and training, or by bringing the topic high on the agenda.

Especially at European level, numerous data collection efforts led to impressive results during the last decade. At present, this data and material awaits researchers to exploit it, and better understand the ability and crucial role of collective interest and social economy organisations/enterprises in addressing nowadays-pressing challenges. Their values (putting people first), their governance modes (participatory management and not seeking profit, but reinvesting surpluses in the activity), their permanently adapting production processes and flexible behavioural attitudes in close link to the local and territorial context in which they operate are key to grasp their contribution to social innovation. Be it municipalities through the continuous delivery of local public services, permanent and long-term intervention to the benefit of communities by social and collective economy enterprises/organisations, their resilience and action to manage major transitions and make a way through crises (as the COVID-19 one),<sup>29</sup> all are essential, especially at local level.

The current difficult sanitary situation also depicts the positive outcome from a lasting enhanced cooperation between the social economy and the public sector; whereas temporary or one-off moves by for-profit enterprises and/or punctual citizens' initiatives are insufficient to address the collective needs. Sometimes, social economy is criticised because its action does not scale up sufficiently. Such a move brings about possible drawbacks, including banalisation or behavioural standardisation, or even worse, instrumentalisation to the benefit of others, thereby losing the social economy's specificities and assets. Also to consider is the risk of transforming social economy into 'social business', following the often changing notions and terminology of the European grant programs and calls for projects.<sup>30</sup>

Basing on additional fact-checking and practice-based research will enable stakeholders as well as collective interest and social economy actors to take an active part in

28 To give only two examples: CIRIEC's interactive tool, AGORA of the general interest and the social economy (<http://www.ciriec.uliege.be/en/documentation/agora/>) and the UNTFSSE Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Knowledge Hub for the SDGs (<https://knowledgehub.unsse.org/>).

29 See, e.g., OECD (2020: 5-6), [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135\\_135367-031kjiq7v4&title=Social-economy-and-the-COVID-19-crisis-current-and-future-roles](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135367-031kjiq7v4&title=Social-economy-and-the-COVID-19-crisis-current-and-future-roles).

30 This brings financial support for various actions, and de facto is a source of financing for social economy organisations/enterprises, especially their umbrella federations, but it alters the intrinsic characteristics of social economy.

shaping new policies<sup>31</sup> and co-design public action.<sup>32</sup> This is best done at a larger framework level, in order to then have public support measures and financial resources to spill over and create the eco-system facilitating collective interest action. The European Economic and Social Committee surely is a key driver in this respect, showing the way with various types of best practices in soft and hard public policies regarding the social economy.<sup>33</sup> On its side, the OECD is currently (2020-21) managing a 'Global Action on Promoting Social and Solidarity Economy Ecosystems'<sup>34</sup> covering over 30 countries. The objective is notably to mainstream policies and lines of action regarding conceptual and legal framework, social impact measurement, stakeholder involvement, internationalisation of social and solidarity economy, as well as the role of social and solidarity economy in post-COVID19 recovery strategies, including its contribution to the realisation of the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs).

## V. Conclusion

In a rapid overview, this paper intends to depict the wide-ranging still to explore topics in the field of commons, general/collective interest and social economy. It also underlines the importance of crossing cultural and disciplinary horizons to contribute to a better mutual understanding and knowledge integration. Cross-disciplinary work takes time, and needs active and prolonged discussion spaces to get to understand the other one's scheme of reasoning and conceptual tools. Within the CIRIEC network, the experience was made, and it is only after several days of in-depth discussion seminars spread over some years, that scientists from different languages and disciplinary origins can truly understand each other and co-work together to tackle the complexity of issues at the crossroads of so numerous disciplines. Leaving one comfort's zone and getting out of the furrows and off the beaten track is necessary to build new knowledge allowing the advancement of international scientific research. It proves worthwhile, and also quite enriching through building in-

31 See, for instance, the European Social Economy Scientific Conference under the auspices of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC-EU) organised in November 2020 for the *Rethinking of our socio-economic spaces*: <https://social-economy-science.eu/> (publication expected in 2021). Or also, the guidelines for local Governments to foster robust social and solidarity economy ecosystems, captured through a case-study-based research in seven cities throughout the world promoted by UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development): [https://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BB128/\(httpProjects\)/6D84BAF50632AB5DC125842E00348D92/OpenDocument](https://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BB128/(httpProjects)/6D84BAF50632AB5DC125842E00348D92/OpenDocument).

32 Numerous examples can be found, and to cite only the most recent one (5 March 2021, *An economy for the people and the planet*), see: <https://www.socialeconomy.eu.org/european-action-plan-for-the-social-economy/>.

33 Chaves/Monzón Campos 2018.

34 <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/fpi-action.htm>. Several calls for projects and proposals will be launched in 2021.

terconnections, and then developing shared crossed viewpoints on new societal constructs.

Advancement of scientific knowledge can only benefit from a wider radius considering all the *possible*. It is with this open eyes knowledge building that new ideas can percolate and bring about new approaches, which in turn may lead to social innovation that can be tested at small scale and on a quite flexible basis, before co-constructing locally tailored tools and solutions for and with social economy actors.

This contribution also shows how collective action by various stakeholders, including researchers, can bring about changes in public policies, including at world level, reaching up to the United Nations. In order to support this action, further in-depth analysis is needed to better and fully exploit the opportunities and features of the social and collective economy. This will also bring back to the fore the importance of general public interest features and missions, including public financing mechanisms to support agreed upon *solidarity perimeters* that are necessary to ensure, also from a public finance point of view, a lasting sustainable development and implementation of local responses.

Lastly, it aims at motivating further research and publication in this relaunched scientific journal on social economy and common welfare, also aiming to reach and interest practitioners in charge of implementing common welfare and public or collective interest.

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