

EVALUATING THE EFFICIENCY AND BENEFICIARY SATISFACTION OF THE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE CERTIFICATION PROCESS IN CLUJ

**Anamaria SIM^{1,*}, Oana Bianca BERCEA¹, Geanina Maria DAVID^{1,2}
and Elena Simina LAKATOS^{1,2}**

1 Institute for Research in Circular Economy and Environment "Ernest Lupan", Cluj-Napoca 400609, Romania

2 Department of Management and Economical Engineering, Faculty of Industrial Engineering, Robotics and Production Management, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca 400641, Romania

** Correspondence: anamaria.sim@ircem.ro*

Abstract: European social economy is very important both in social and economic terms and it equals about 6.3% of the working population of the European Union (EU). Romanian social economy, likewise other's recent EU member states, measures less than 2% of the total employment. For a long time, the concepts of social economy and social enterprise were not defined in legal or policy terms leading to confusion among Romanian general population and making it difficult to be measured. Our research assessed the administrative process regarding the procurement of the social enterprise certificate with the aim to identify strengths and weaknesses of the process and formulate recommendations for improvement. The results show that most of respondents are satisfied with the administrative process of getting the social enterprise certificate, but they would prefer an online platform as a mean of communication both during the obtaining and monitoring phases. Furthermore, the sustainability of this sector, satisfaction regarding the administrative process of getting the social enterprise certificate depends on the duration of the administrative process. The findings provide empirical evidence and recommendations that could encourage the development of Romanian social economy.

Keywords: social economy, certification process, social enterprise, non-profit organizations.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Romania, until recently, there was a significant lack of clarity and formal recognition regarding the notions of social economy and social enterprises. This ambiguity resulted in limited public comprehension and appreciation of these concepts, placing social enterprises on

the same regulatory and fiscal footing as traditional businesses (European Commission, 2020). The social economy exists within a broader context that includes the non-profit sector, voluntary organizations, and social enterprises (CIRIEC, 2017; Bercea et al., 2019).

The social economy plays a crucial role in Europe, both socially and economically,

evidenced by (CIRIEC, 2017; European Commission, 2020):

- Providing employment to over 13.6 million people across Europe, which represents about 6.3% of the EU-28's workforce;
- Engaging a combined workforce of more than 19.1 million, encompassing both paid and volunteer workers;
- Mobilizing more than 82.8 million volunteers, equivalent to the effort of 5.5 million full-time employees;
- Comprising over 232 million members in various cooperative societies, mutual societies, associations, and similar organizations;
- Encompassing more than 2.8 million entities and enterprises;

Hosting an estimated 6,317 Social Enterprises (SEs) in Romania, with roughly 17,117 employees.

In countries like Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, the social economy constitutes between 9% and 10% of national employment. This contrasts with newer EU members such as Slovenia, Romania, Malta, Lithuania, Croatia, Cyprus, and Slovakia, where the social economy is still emerging and accounts for less than 2% of the workforce. Despite facing economic challenges, the social economy sector experienced only a slight decline from 6.5% to 6.3% of the total European paid workforce, dropping from 14.1 million to 13.6 million jobs—a change partly attributed to the quality of statistical data (Otel, 2006; CIRIEC, 2017).

Social enterprises are recognized for their immense potential for social innovation. Addressing society's complex challenges requires the growth of social economy structures, vital for the success of the Europe 2020 Strategy. They contribute to smart growth by meeting unaddressed social needs beyond governmental reach, ensure sustainable growth through environmental stewardship and long-term planning, and foster inclusive growth by

focusing on social cohesion and individual well-being (Barna, 2014; Lakatos et al., 2016).

Considering the significant role of the social economy in socio-economic advancement and its capacity for social innovation, focused research in this domain is essential. The social economy in Romania is in its nascent stages. Although non-profit organizations were permitted to conduct economic activities, they lacked formal recognition as social enterprises, and the principles of the social economy were not clearly defined. The enactment of the Social Economy Law (2015) and its accompanying Methodological Norms (2016) marked a turning point, enabling the certification of social entities as social enterprises. Our study investigates the certification process for social enterprises in Romania, evaluating the administrative steps involved to propose enhancements that support the social economy's growth in the country.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Originating in France around the 1930s, the social economy concept has evolved to encompass organizations that prioritize community or member benefits (Barna, 2014). Recognized for its role in addressing societal issues on both a European and global scale, the social economy includes well-known entities like cooperatives, associations, foundations, and mutual societies. These organizations are distinguished by their social missions, participatory governance, and a focus on addressing social needs rather than generating shareholder profit, aligning with a European Directive (2013) that views the social economy as a means to rejuvenate Europe's social model by creating jobs and fostering entrepreneurial initiatives that address diverse social challenges (Petrescu, 2013). The shift of the non-profit sector towards a market economy has spurred the growth of social enterprises, which integrate social and economic goals (Vaida et al., 2015; Bercea et al., 2016). Positioned within the social

economy, social enterprises prioritize social impact over shareholder profit, delivering goods and services with a business mindset. Their earnings are predominantly reinvested to fulfill social aims, and they operate transparently, actively involving employees, consumers, and stakeholders affected by their activities (European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2018). Adopting a market-driven, non-profit model, social enterprises aim to tackle societal problems, varying in structure based on specific national needs and frameworks (Kerlin, 2013). The importance placed on social missions varies among social enterprises, with some organizations focusing primarily on social goals and others on profit generation. This diversity of perspectives has led to debate among scholars about the benefits of merging social and

economic objectives, with opinions divided between those who see value in this integration and those who advocate for a primary focus on social value creation (Emerson & Twersky, 1996; Seelos & Mair, 2005; Alter, 2006; Certo & Miller, 2008; Dees, 2017). Social enterprises contribute to local economic development by offering services and goods not provided by the private or public sectors, enhancing skills and job creation, and fostering civil society engagement (Smallbone et al., 2001). Spear and Bidet (2005) outlined criteria defining the economic and social dimensions of social enterprises, including their entrepreneurial activities, autonomy, economic risks, wage policies, civic initiative, participatory governance, profit distribution limitations, and a commitment to the collective interest.

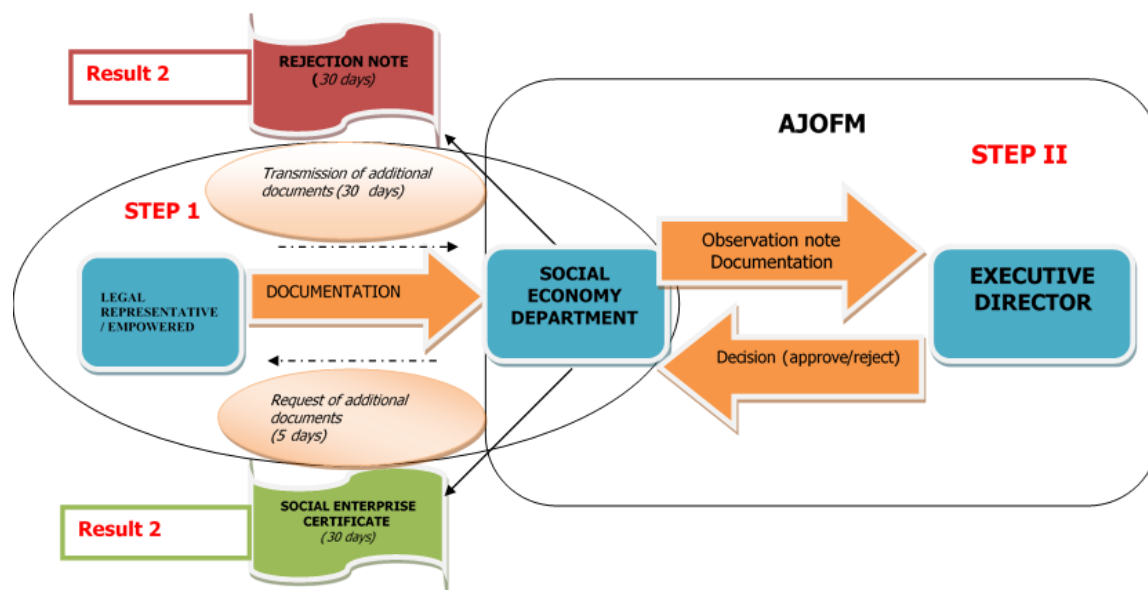


Figure 1. Administrative process of obtaining the social enterprise certificate

Social enterprises stand apart from other entities in their primary focus on social value creation, provision of services to underserved groups, business-oriented approaches to social value generation, diverse funding sources, innovative use of human capital, and reinvestment of profits into social goals (Bontis,

1998; Talbot et al., 2002; Lettieri et al., 2004; Dobrai & Farkas, 2008; Cardoso et al., 2012; Luke & Chu, 2013; Dees, 2017). Renshaw and Krishnaswamy (2009) highlight the critical role of sustainable social enterprises in national socioeconomic advancement.

In recent years, numerous EU countries, including Spain (2011), Greece (2011 and 2016), Portugal (2013), France (2014), and Romania (2015), have focused their legislative efforts on the social economy sector. This led to Romania's adoption of Law 219/15 regarding the Social Economy in July 2015, with its implementation guidelines outlined in Government Decision no. 585 in August 2016. Social enterprises or social integration enterprises in Romania can adopt various legal structures, such as cooperatives, mutual societies, foundations, and other entities adhering to social economy principles (Social Enterprise, 2024). Entities eligible for a social enterprise certificate must align their foundational and operational documents with the social economy's principles and criteria as specified in the social economy legislation (MN, 2017; Social Enterprise, 2024). Law 219/15 delineates several key principles of the social economy, including prioritizing social goals over profit, fostering solidarity and mutual responsibility, aligning member and community interests, ensuring democratic member control, promoting voluntary association, maintaining autonomy and independence from government, and reinvesting profits for social or community benefits (Social Enterprise, 2024).

The certification process for social enterprises involves submitting the required documentation to the Social Economy Department of the County Employment Agency. This department reviews the submission, and if further information is needed, it requests additional documents within five days. Applicants have 30 days to respond. Following a comprehensive review, the executive director decides on certification. The entire process, usually concluded within 30 days (extendable by 15 days in special cases), results in either the issuance of a social enterprise certificate or a notice of rejection if the principles of the social economy are not sufficiently demonstrated. The necessary steps are presented in figure 1.

The National Employment Agency (ANOFM) maintains the Unique Registry for Social Enterprise Evidence, facilitating the recognition of social and integration enterprises. To qualify as a social integration enterprise, at least 30% of employees must belong to vulnerable groups, with their work hours constituting a similar percentage of total employee hours, aiming to address exclusion, discrimination, and unemployment through the socio-professional integration of disadvantaged individuals. The social mark, signifying this status, can be acquired concurrently with the social enterprise certificate or separately, via a comparable process.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate the administrative procedures for acquiring social enterprise certification. It specifically sought to: (1) ascertain the elements affecting applicant contentment with the certification acquisition process; (2) determine the preferred communication channels during the certification and oversight of social enterprises; (3) pinpoint challenges faced by applicants during certification; (4) highlight the advantages of obtaining certification. A survey method was adopted for this investigation, utilizing quantitative techniques to either support or challenge prevailing theories through the deployment of questionnaires. The target demographic for this study comprised individuals affiliated with Romanian social enterprises that had been certified. Invitations to participate were disseminated via email to contacts listed in the National Employment Agency's (ANOFM) Single Registry of Social Enterprise, which is updated monthly. The investigated population is made up of 179 social enterprises that were registered in Cluj County, on July 31, 2023, from which 32 responses were received, equating to a response rate of 17.87%, presented in figure 2.

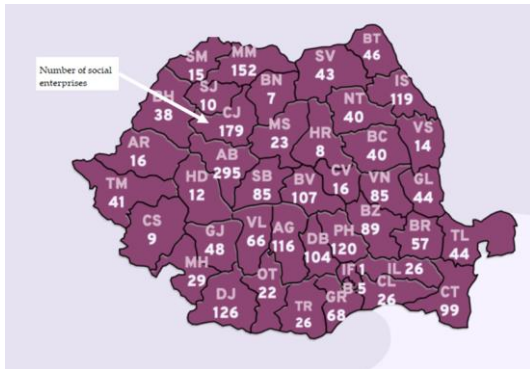


Figure 2. Number of certified social enterprises, by location- July 2023

The graphic representation below details the geographical spread of these enterprises. The distribution shows a concentration of certified social enterprises in Alba, Cluj, and Iasi regions. The sample investigated by us is only that of social enterprises from Cluj County in August 2023. Based on the literature reviewed in the preceding section, we hypothesized that:

- H1: The satisfaction levels of social enterprise representatives with the certification process are influenced by the behavior of public officials.
- H2: The satisfaction levels are contingent upon the complexities involved in compiling the necessary documents for certification.
- H3: Satisfaction is affected by the duration it takes to receive the certification.
- H4: Satisfaction levels are influenced by the expenses associated with the certification process.

4 RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The study revealed that a significant majority of social enterprises operate as NGOs, with 60% being associations, 6.67% foundations, 6.67% cooperatives, and 3.33% mutual aids. 23.33% were structured as limited liability companies.

In the figure 3, the domains in which these enterprises operate vary, with 30% in social

services, followed by crafting (13.33%), education and training (13.33%), environmental protection (10%), and banking and insurance (3.33%). The remainder (30%) are engaged in diverse sectors.

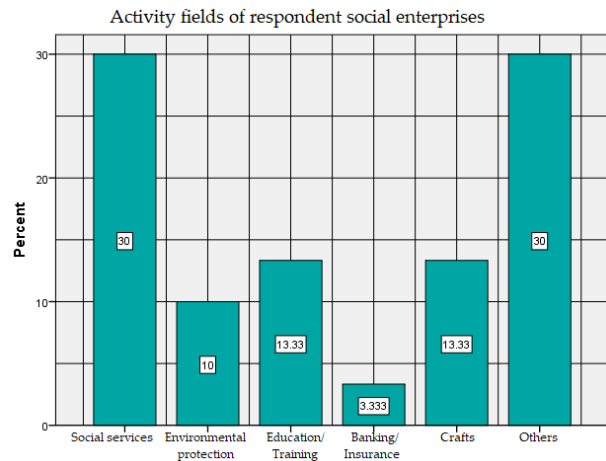


Figure 3. Activity fields of social enterprises

Related to the interaction quality of social economy department staff (Table 1) more than 62.07% form respondents considered highly courteous the staff. The inquiry focused on evaluating the process of obtaining social enterprise certification highlighted a substantial satisfaction among participants, gauged on a spectrum from minimal (1) to maximal satisfaction (5). A notable 21.88% of participants felt significantly satisfied, while 37.5% expressed very high satisfaction levels (Table 2). The assessment of the Social Economy Department's personnel across various communication methods underscored a predominance of positive interactions.

Participants predominantly praised the polite demeanor of the staff, especially in face-to-face interactions. Regarding the ease of preparing the necessary certification documents and providing clarifications, most found these tasks straightforward. Only in 37% of instances was there no need for additional documentation.

Table 1. Interaction quality of social economy department staff

Interaction Method	Perceived as Arrogant	Seen as Detached	Regarded as Courteous	Considered Highly Courteous
Telephone	3.22%	9.67%	32.27%	54.84%
In-person	3.45%	3.45%	31.03%	62.07%
Email	4.35%	13.05%	52.17%	30.43%

Table 2. Documentation preparation complexity

Evaluation Criteria	Documentation Preparation	Additional Clarifications
Very Challenging	3.12%	6.3%
Challenging	15.62%	9.4%
Moderate	21.88%	15.6%
Simple	43.75%	21.9%
Very Simple	15.63%	9.4%
Not Applicable	-	37.5%

A majority, 87.5%, personally submitted their applications, while the rest utilized mail services. Over half indicated a preference for an online submission platform. The administrative costs were viewed as minimal or very minimal by most respondents.

The primary recognized benefit of certification was access to grant financing, with other potential advantages not being as strongly felt, as can be seen in table 3. This research employed stepwise linear multiple regression to explore hypotheses relating to satisfaction levels influenced by various factors, including public servants' conduct, documentation preparation complexity, certification waiting time, and associated costs. Among the notable findings was that the shorter the waiting time for certification, the higher the satisfaction levels, explaining 49.3% of the variance in satisfaction.

Table 3. Certification benefits perception

Certification Benefit	Average Rating
Access to grant financing	3.19
Enhanced reputation	2.41
Increased visibility	2.22
Public authority benefits	2.16
Financial stability	1.94

These tables showcase the significant impact of the waiting period on satisfaction levels, emphasizing the need for efficiency in the certification process. A notable outcome was the preference for an online document submission platform, indicating a demand for more streamlined and accessible certification procedures. This preference aligns with the increasing digitization trends, suggesting avenues for administrative improvement and enhanced user satisfaction in the certification process of social enterprises. Presently, stakeholders of accredited social enterprises within this study have highlighted minimal tangible benefits stemming from the certification process, with the notable exception of accessing grant funding from European or national sources. Beyond the foundational legal framework for social enterprise certification and specific advantages for social insertion enterprises through public procurement legislation, substantive governmental support for these entities appears limited. Financial assistance is primarily available through European programs tailored for social enterprises, such as the SOLIDAR initiative under the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU).

To evaluate the initial four hypotheses, this research employed stepwise linear multiple regression analysis, integrating both forward and backward selection methods. These hypotheses suggest that satisfaction levels among social enterprise representatives with the certification process hinge on several

factors: (1) the behavior of government officials, (2) the complexity of compiling necessary certification documents, (3) the duration until the certification is granted, and (4) the financial outlay required for certification. Corresponding survey questions were designated for each of these factors:

- Satisfaction levels of social enterprise representatives were quantified with the question, "How satisfied are you with the social enterprise certification process on a scale from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (very satisfied)?"
- Perceptions of government officials' behavior were evaluated with the question, "How would you rate the conduct of public servants within the Department of Social Economy?" offering options from "arrogant" and "dismissive" to "polite" and "very polite."
- The ease of preparing certification documentation was gauged with, "How easy do you find the process of preparing certification documents for your social enterprise?" with responses ranging from "very difficult" to "very easy."
- The timeframe for receiving the certification was examined through, "What is your opinion on the waiting period to receive the social enterprise certificate?" with options spanning from "very long (over 80 days)" to "very short (under 33 days)."
- The cost of acquiring the certification was assessed by asking about expenses related to preparing and submitting documentation, with choices from "very low" to "very high."

The model commenced without any predefined variables, and as the process unfolded, variables were sequentially introduced or excluded based on a backward elimination strategy to ensure only those that significantly contributed to model optimization were retained (Table 4).

The information in Table 5 reveals an R Square value of 0.468, indicating that nearly

half (49.3%) of the variability in the dependent variable can be accounted for by changes in the independent variables. Consequently, the degree of satisfaction among respondents with the certification process for social enterprises is significantly influenced by the duration it takes to receive the social enterprise certificate, to the extent of 49.3%. A shorter waiting period for the certificate correlates with higher levels of satisfaction among the respondents.

Table 4. Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	6. How do you appreciate the waiting time for obtaining the social enterprise certificate?	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).

- a. Dependent Variable: 1. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "to a very small extent" and 5 means "to a very large extent", to what extent are you satisfied with the process of obtaining the social enterprise certificate?

Table 5. Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.702 ^a	.493	.468	1.025

- a. Predictors: (Constant), 6. How do you appreciate the waiting time for obtaining the social enterprise certificate?

An ANOVA significance level under 0.05 denotes a statistically significant regression model (Table 6).

Table 6: ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	20.452	1	20.452	19.475	.000 ^b
Residual	21.003	20	1.050		
Total	41.455	21			

a. Dependent Variable: 1. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "to a very small extent" and 5 means "to a very large extent", to what extent are you satisfied with the process of obtaining the social enterprise certificate?

b. Predictors: (Constant), 6. How do you appreciate the waiting time for obtaining the social enterprise certificate?

Table 7: Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.492	.706		.696	.494
6. How do you appreciate the waiting time for obtaining the social enterprise certificate?	.795	.180	.702	4.413	.000

a. Dependent Variable: 1. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "to a very small extent" and 5 means "to a very large extent", to what extent are you satisfied with the process of obtaining the social enterprise certificate?

After conducting the stepwise regression analysis, only the "waiting time for the social enterprise certificate" factor remained significant among the four independent variables considered in the model. The relationship between this variable and the dependent variable, which is the satisfaction of the beneficiaries with the certification process, is underscored by the high standard Beta coefficients. This suggests a robust

link, given that the coefficient's value approaches 1 more closely than 0. Consequently, it's inferred that reducing the waiting period enhances satisfaction levels concerning the certificate acquisition process. Additionally, the analysis revealed a preference among the majority for modernizing the documentation process; 53.13% of participants showed a favor towards utilizing an online platform for submitting their documentation during both the certification and ongoing monitoring stages of social enterprises. This finding supports the hypothesis that an interactive, digital submission method would be welcomed by the majority (Table 7).

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Historically, Romania's social economy and social enterprises operated without formal legal recognition, blending into the broader non-profit or third sector. The landscape began to change in 2015 with the enactment of the Social Economy Law (Law no 219/2015), followed by its implementing Methodological Norms over a year later. Our study delved into the beneficiaries' experience of securing the social enterprise certification, revealing the following insights:

- A majority (59.4%) expressed satisfaction with the certification's administrative process.
- The behavior of staff at the Department of Social Economy was rated as polite or very polite by a large number of survey participants.
- The documentation preparation for both certification (59.4%) and clarification (50%) phases was deemed easy by most respondents.
- While many personally submitted their documents, there was a strong preference for an online platform for document submission during both certification/clarification and monitoring phases.

- The associated costs for document preparation and submission were viewed as low by the majority.
- Access to non-refundable financing emerged as the most significant benefit of certification, according to 48.39% of respondents.
- The overall satisfaction with the certification process was linked to the waiting period for receiving the certificate.

Based on these findings, we advocate for the introduction of an online platform to streamline document exchanges between social enterprises and Social Economy Department officials, covering both certification/clarification and monitoring stages. Furthermore, to ensure reduced waiting times for certificates, a continuous evaluation of the process is essential. Adequate staffing, proper training, and effective organization are key to handling workload efficiently.

Lastly, establishing a legal framework, while necessary, is insufficient by itself to nurture the social economy's growth. Robust public policies are crucial to fostering a conducive environment for the sustainable development of social enterprises.

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