

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES AND SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS: INSIGHTS FROM EXPLORATORY CASE STUDIES

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Purpose: This paper investigates the role of social economy organizations and social enterprises in promoting sustainable local food systems through short food supply chains (SFSCs).

Design/methodology/approach: Using an exploratory case study methodology, the paper analyzes seven European cases, relying on qualitative data from documents and interviews within the JustGreen project. This approach examines how social economy organizations and social enterprises integrate SFSCs into their operations, aligning social missions with economic activities.

Findings: Participation in SFSCs can bring numerous benefits for actors involved into supply chain. The research finds that social economy organizations and social enterprises in SFSCs can reduce environmental impacts, support local economies, and enhance social inclusion by providing employment to marginalized groups.

Research limitations/implications: The study is limited by its reliance on existing case studies rather than extensive primary data collection. Future research could broaden the scope with quantitative methods and additional SFSC models to validate the findings.

Practical implications: The study offers insights for policymakers and practitioners on how SFSCs can support local food systems, improve access to markets for small producers, and foster collaboration between producers and consumers.

Social implications: SFSCs strengthen community resilience, promote social inclusion, and support sustainable local economies. By shortening supply chains, social economy organizations and social enterprises can address food insecurity, empower vulnerable populations, and contribute to the green transition.

Originality/value: The paper highlights the innovative role of SFSCs in uniting social, economic, and environmental objectives, offering a model for sustainable community development.

Keywords: social economy organization, social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, supply chain, short food supply chain, resilience.

1. Introduction

The importance of developing sustainable and resilient food systems has garnered significant global attention, particularly in light of pressing challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, and economic inequality. The intersection between social enterprises and sustainable food systems represents a dynamic area of inquiry within social and economic policy, particularly given the increasing global emphasis on sustainable development and the transition to a greener economy. Social enterprises, as hybrid organizations that blend social missions with market-driven activities, are well-positioned to address complex challenges such as food insecurity, environmental degradation, and community resilience. Short food supply chains (SFSCs), which aim to reduce the distance between producers and consumers, offer a promising avenue for social enterprises to foster sustainability and local economic development. By prioritizing local production and direct consumer relationships, SFSCs can not only reduce the environmental impact of food production but also enhance the social inclusion of marginalized groups and strengthen local communities.

Despite the growing body of literature on social entrepreneurship (Borzaga, Bodini, 2012; Doherty et al., 2019) and SFSCs (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Galli, Brunori, 2013), limited research explores the intersection of these two fields. Existing studies highlight the environmental and social benefits of SFSCs, including reduced carbon footprints, strengthened local economies, and enhanced social inclusion (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2012; Twaróg, Wronka-Pośpiech, 2023). Meanwhile, the potential of social enterprises to drive community development and sustainability has been well-documented (Defourny, Nyssens, 2021; Saebi et al., 2019). However, the specific mechanisms through which social enterprises engage with SFSCs to achieve these outcomes remain underexplored. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for a deeper investigation into how social enterprises operationalize SFSCs to fulfill their social missions.

This paper explores the role of social enterprises in promoting SFSCs, focusing on innovative practices implemented by social economy organizations across Europe. Drawing on case studies from the international "Social Economy for a Just Green Transition" (JustGreen) project, the research highlights how social enterprises contribute to the development of resilient and sustainable food systems through their engagement in SFSCs. By examining the initiatives of these organizations, the study aims to provide new insights into the synergies between social entrepreneurship, local food systems, and sustainable development, while offering practical lessons for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working in these fields.

2. Theoretical assumptions

2.1. Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises

Social entrepreneurship (SE) is increasingly recognized as vital instruments in social and economic policy, particularly for tackling issues such as unemployment, social exclusion, and sustainable regional and local economic development (Borzaga, Bodini, 2012). The manifestation of social entrepreneurship is evident in the activities of organizations, projects, or ventures known as social enterprises (Mair, Martí, 2006). The term "social enterprise" encompasses a variety of organizations, including social economy organizations, that engage in trading activities with the primary objective of achieving a social mission (Haugh, 2007). According to Ebrahim et al. (2014), social enterprises combine elements of both charitable organizations and for-profit businesses, aiming to generate profits that are reinvested to meet multiple bottom lines, including social and environmental impacts alongside financial sustainability (Cieslik, 2016). Their primary objective is to achieve long-term social change and generate social impact, prioritizing these goals above profits for their owners or shareholders (Pacut, 2022). Thus, social enterprises strive to balance fulfilling a social and/or environmental mission with market-driven activities (Defourny, Nyssens, 2021; Bacq et al., 2016). This dual focus has led to their characterization as hybrid organizations—neither fully commercial entities nor traditional non-profits.

Social enterprises predominantly rely on commercial activities for revenue, scaling their operations through market mechanisms rather than depending solely on donations or grants (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Situated within the third sector of the economy, social enterprises emerge in response to gaps in social welfare provision by the market or government. They have gradually become significant contributors to social progress. The self-sustaining economic model employed by these organizations presents a promising alternative to state dependency for social welfare, demonstrating its efficacy in driving social change (Hillman et al., 2018). Social enterprises have the potential to revitalize communities by addressing local needs, promoting community independence, and building social capital among individuals and communities (Haugh, 2007). Consequently, community-level approaches and social enterprises enhance engagement with local stakeholders, enabling the tailoring of sustainability initiatives to meet the specific needs of each community (Laurisz, 2019).

Over the years, there has been a notable rise in the number of social enterprises, with their presence now spanning numerous economic sectors (Defourny, Nyssens, 2021; Defourny et al., 2021; Saebi et al., 2019; Doherty et al., 2019). Consequently, the range of their activities has progressively broadened to address emerging societal challenges such as climate change, pollution, financial and gender inclusion, and digitization. The realm of social entrepreneurship and the social economy has been rapidly advancing, propelled by new innovations and trends across key global sectors. Social enterprises are increasingly implementing creative solutions

in diverse fields such as professional activation, social and health services, and local development, as well as in renewable energy, socially engaged agriculture, environmental initiatives (including recycling), and cultural endeavors (EC, 2020). This growth is fueled by the adoption of broader social objectives that resonate with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a result, numerous social economy organizations and social enterprises are now focusing on "green policy", poverty alleviation, gender equality, and environmental sustainability (EC, 2020). Reflecting these goals, there has been an increasing interest in the circular economy (Costanza, 2023; Ćwiklicki, O'Riordan, 2022), decarbonization (Wronka-Pośpiech, 2023; Manjon et al., 2022), energy cooperatives (Sengupta et al., 2020; Alevizou et al., 2017), and various other initiatives that promise substantial social and environmental benefits. Among these areas, short food supply chains stand out for their potential impact.

2.2. Short food supply chain as a new avenue for social enterprises

A short food supply chain (SFSC) is one type or strategy within the broader concept of supply chains. SFSCs are among the recently reinvented food supply systems recognized as a notable sustainable approach (Kumar et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022; Twaróg, Wronka-Pośpiech, 2023). However, there is no common or unique definition of SFSCs within the scientific community (Kneafsey et al., 2013). SFSCs function similarly to local food systems but shorten traditional long food supply chains. It is important to emphasize that "short" refers not only to geographical proximity but also to direct social connections between producers and consumers (Aubry, Kebir, 2013). In this context, the distance between producers and consumers is not strictly defined, as it depends on the morphological and demographic characteristics of the territory, as well as the actors involved and their goals (Paciarotti, Torregiani, 2021). Therefore, two basic criteria that define SFSCs are physical/geographical and social proximity (Galli, Brunori, 2013). Nevertheless, geographical proximity remains significant, as "short" is primarily perceived as something comparatively close physically or produced within a specific region or locality (Galli, Brunori, 2013). The essence of SFSCs lies in building a special relationship between producers and consumers. Marsden et al. (2000) emphasize the importance of the relationship between producer and consumer in constructing value and meaning, rather than focusing solely on the product itself. Direct contact with the producer is a primary driver for consumers purchasing products from SFSCs (González-Azcárate, 2021). SFSCs encompass a wide range of initiatives, such as community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and farmer shops, often characterized by geographical and relational proximity, local food, and a commitment to cooperation (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2021). Typology of SFSC initiatives include various activities such as: direct selling (on farm sales, farmers' market, pick-your-own, producers' shop, etc.), box schemes, community supported agriculture, collective points of sale, consumer cooperatives, direct internet sales, supermarkets provisioning and e-commerce (Kebir, Torre, 2013). Participation in SFSCs can bring numerous benefits for producers, consumers, and society as a whole (Table 1).

Table 1.*Main expected benefits*

Expected benefits		
Producer	Consumer	Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prices increase at farm gate - Value added increase - Easier market access, especially for small producers - Better communication and information to consumers - Differentiation of marketing channels and higher resilience - More stable commercial relations - Opportunity to develop cooperation with other farmers - Opportunity to develop cooperation with consumers - Allow for a strategic re-orientation of the whole farm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More affordable prices for food - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Reconnect food to the farming and processing process - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction of transport - Reduction of pollution (fuel, plastic ...) - Reduction of plastic packaging - Less food waste - Improved diets: easier access to fresh food, more variety in diet, less preservatives - Preserving peri-urban agriculture - Preserving small farming/artisanal food processing - Preservation of traditional products - Preservation of products based on local agro-biodiversity - Strengthening social ties - Increasing awareness about food system problems - Working opportunities for women - Explore niches of innovation

Source: United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Short Food Supply Chains for Promoting Local Food on Local Markets; Department of Trade, Investment and Innovation (TII): Washington, DC, USA, 2020; Available online:

<https://tii.unido.org/sites/default/files/publications/SHORT%20FOOD%20SUPPLY%20CHAINS.pdf>

SFSCs have emerged as a promising avenue for social enterprises, offering a pathway to promote sustainability, local economic development, and social inclusion. SFSCs prioritize reducing the distance between producers and consumers, fostering transparency, and ensuring that more value is retained by local producers. This model is particularly attractive for social enterprises, as it aligns with their dual objectives of economic viability and positive social impact. Renting, Schermer, and Rossi (2012) highlight that SFSCs contribute to rural development by empowering small-scale farmers, creating local jobs, and enhancing community resilience. Social enterprises engaging in SFSCs can capitalize on these benefits while addressing food insecurity and providing vocational training to vulnerable populations. Marsden, Banks, and Bristow (2000) argue that by shortening the food supply chain, social enterprises can also contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing food miles and carbon footprints, which is increasingly important in the context of climate change. Moreover, SFSCs offer a platform for innovative business models that integrate fair trade practices and ethical consumption, resonating with consumers' growing interest in sustainable and socially responsible products (Galli, Brunori, 2013). Thus, SFSCs represent a synergistic opportunity for social enterprises to drive both economic and social outcomes.

Nowadays, supply chains require resilience to prepare for, respond to, and recover from unexpected disruptions while continuing their operations (Ivanov, 2022). During the pandemic, the severity of product shortages increased alongside the growing distances between processing units and retail stores (Mahajan, Tomar, 2020). Interruptions in international transportation and closed borders limited the availability of imported perishables (Siche, 2020), leaving consumers

facing supply shortages. Consequently, the supply side also experienced significant challenges. The European Commission acknowledged the increasing importance of SFSCs and local food systems, noting that demand for shorter food supply chains rose, particularly during the pandemic, as a means of strengthening the resilience of regional and local food systems. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the significance of SFSCs, as these chains acted as critical safeguards for food security and nutrition during periods of economic uncertainty (FAO, 2020).

3. Research methodology

Given the limited knowledge about short food supply chains as a new avenue for social enterprises, this paper aims to address these issues by exploring two research questions:

RQ1: What are the different approaches to SFSCs as reported by social enterprises?

RQ2: What are the key benefits of the participation of social enterprises in the structure of short food supply chains (SFSCs)?

In the research conducted, the ontology is relativistic. This means that knowledge is viewed as an intersubjective construct, rather than an objective one. In this article, a qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze data, as it is the most appropriate approach to achieve the purpose of the study. The paper employs an exploratory case study methodology, which is recognized as a powerful sensitizing tool due to its inherent flexibility and capacity to adapt to complex research settings. Its strength lies in its ability to explore underdeveloped or emerging theoretical frameworks, enabling researchers to refine or build new constructs when existing theories fall short (Yin, 2018). This adaptability is crucial for studying intricate social and organizational systems, where rigid variables may obscure critical insights. By fostering deep, context-specific understandings, exploratory case studies provide a rich qualitative lens through which researchers engage with participants' lived experiences (Stake, 1995), addressing how and why questions to uncover underlying mechanisms that might be missed through other methods (Yin, 2018). The iterative nature of this methodology allows for ongoing adjustments to the research focus as new themes and patterns emerge (Eisenhardt, 1989), making it indispensable for theory-building in complex environments (Eisenhardt, Graebner, 2007). The capacity to integrate various data sources, including interviews, documents, and observations, enhances the reliability of findings through triangulation, adding depth and multi-dimensionality to the analysis (Denzin, 2017), which further solidifies its value as a robust sensitizing device.

The research material and data for the analysis were collected as part of the international project "Social Economy for a Just Green Transition (JustGreen)" funded by the European Union under the COSME program (grant agreement number 101015873). A destination

comprising four municipalities, namely the Municipality of Vila Nova de Famalicão from Portugal, Comune di Mozzo from Italy, Gmina Świetochłowice from Poland, Budapest-Terézváros from Hungary and one European network – European Network of Social Integration Enterprises (ENSIE) was selected. The Just Green project aimed to promote the transition of social economy organizations and social enterprises to a greener and fairer economy and society, in line with the motto of the UN Sustainable Development Goals “leaving no one behind”. It explored three key topics, including supporting short food supply chains and agroecology. The cross-cutting goal was to support social entrepreneurship by targeting the vocational integration of vulnerable and unmet social needs groups, often the most vulnerable (i.e., the elderly, the disabled) (Project Proposal, 2020). Ensuring the effectiveness of the objectives, the project consortium brought together five highly diverse partners with demonstrated good practices, along with a broad spectrum of social economy stakeholders, which allowed, among other things, to strengthen the dynamics of social economy organizations in local and interregional ecosystems, stimulating learning, collaboration and building to a transnational Social Economy community.

Throughout the one-year period from February 2020 to January 2021, the project facilitated the engagement of a diverse group of participants, including 24 social economy organizations and social enterprises with varying levels of experience in European projects and green transition topics. This initiative fostered an enriching process of knowledge sharing, mutual learning, and the development of connections and networks. Additionally, the project sought to promote collaboration among various stakeholders from different countries and regions, while empowering participants to contribute to a fair and sustainable green transition. As part of the project, study visits were conducted, allowing the use of observation and interview methods.

4. Research results and remarks

This section outlines the seven good practices gathered during the project period. These practices, submitted by the partner organizations, were analyzed and assessed based on the project's established criteria (refer to the radar charts for each good practice below), which include – see table 2.

Table 2.
Project's established criteria

Criteria	Description of criterion
Collaboration 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The practice involves no collaboration between social economy organizations and municipalities 2) There is occasional collaboration between social economy organizations and municipalities 3) There is regular collaboration between social economy organizations and municipalities
Collaboration 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The practice does not network with other social economy organizations 2) The practice is part of an informal network of social economy actors and collaborates occasionally with them 3) The practice is part of a formal network of social economy actors and cooperates constantly with them
Environmental value	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The practice involves no or little concern for short food supply chains 2) The practice aims to promote short food supply chains 3) Promotion of short food supply chains confirmed by quantitative or qualitative evidence
Social value	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The practice involves no or little concern for inclusion or employment (job creation, access to goods and services, participation or learning opportunities - for vulnerable groups) 2) The practice aims to promote inclusion or employment (job creation, access to goods and services, participation or learning opportunities - for vulnerable groups) 3) Positive effect on inclusion or employment confirmed by quantitative or qualitative evidence
Maturity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The practice is less than 4 years old 2) The practice is between 4 and 9 years old 3) The practice is 10 years old or more
Transparency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The responsible organizations communicate poorly about the practice; few information is available 2) Some information about the practice (activities, beneficiaries, outcomes, funding, finances, and governance) is made publicly available and information requests are answered 3) Information on activities, beneficiaries, outcomes, funding, finances, and governance is made publicly available on a regular basis

Source: Project materials.

4.1. Good practice 1: Banyaerdő social enterprise, Hungary

The social enterprise Banyaerdő is located in Baranya County. Its mission is to build a sustainable model that produces and sells marketable products while providing fair wages and forming partnerships based on local resources. Banyaerdő processes and sells mushrooms and other forest plants, collecting raw materials from the nearby forests and fields and applying zero-waste solutions during packaging and sales. By focusing on short food supply chains, Banyaerdő ensures that their products reach local markets quickly and efficiently, reducing the carbon footprint and supporting local economies. This product category was chosen due to its scarcity in farmers' markets, the ease of collection and processing, and the existing cooperation with the local forest management company, the municipality, and other authorities.

The workers, mostly socially disadvantaged Roma women, are central to the enterprise. The basic idea was to develop a model that leverages the strengths of the target group, the local natural and social environment, and existing skills. This model ensures decent wages, builds partnerships, and harnesses local knowledge, combined with urban trends. As a family-friendly workplace, Banyardó offers flexible policies regarding absences due to childcare, and employees can work alongside their children (3rd project newsletter).

Banyardó aims to create long-term jobs and integrate inactive individuals, primarily women, into the workforce, fostering their independence and self-sufficiency. This is accomplished by supporting the community and offering alternative solutions, such as flexible work hours, incorporating the target group's ideas, involving them in product development, and organizing community programs. In addition to production, the social enterprise is gradually expanding its services, including joint mushroom foraging tours with training and community cooking sessions.

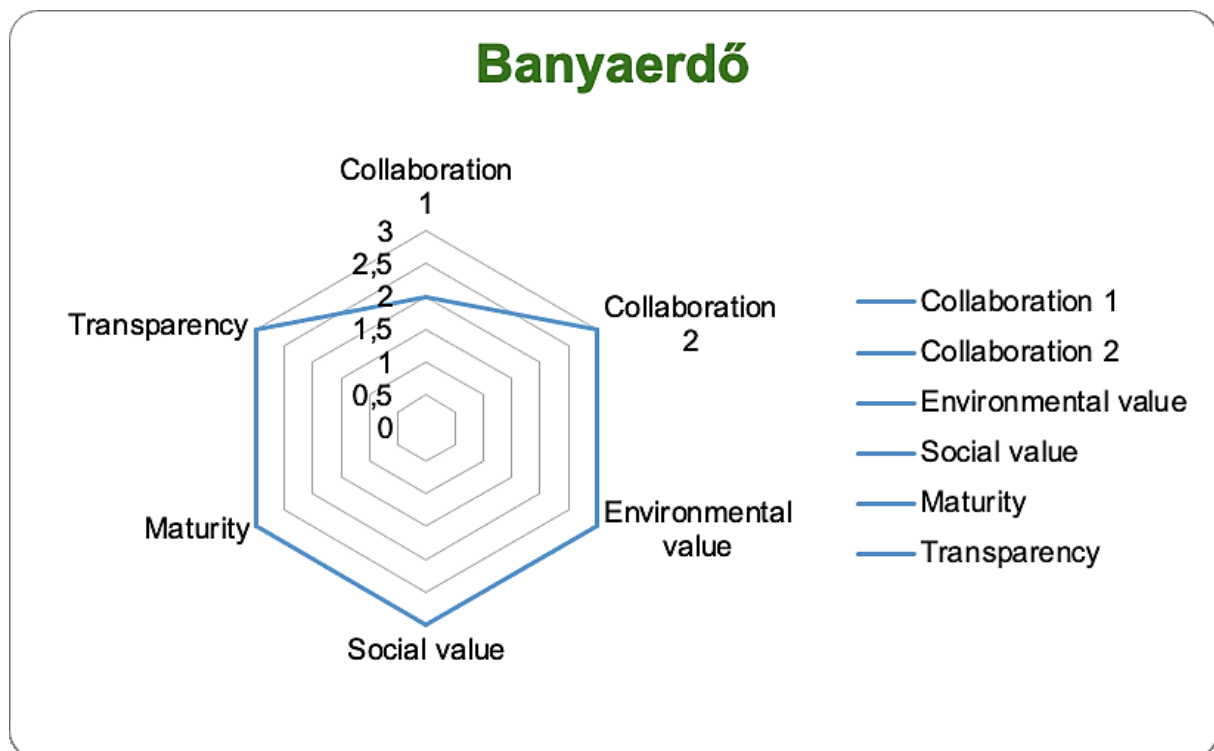


Figure 1. Radar chart for good practice 1.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

4.2. Good practice 2: Kockacsoki social enterprise, Hungary

Kockacsoki is a social enterprise and chocolate manufactory that produces gourmet products while guaranteeing work opportunities for vulnerable individuals. Their mission is to improve the living conditions of youths with autism. The primary aim of Kockacsoki is to assist people with autism spectrum disorders, one of the most disadvantaged groups in the labor market. Among all people with disabilities, those with autism face the greatest challenges due to their lack of social and communication skills and inflexible routines. However, with the right

support, they can perform valuable work, even in mainstream workplaces. Kockacsoki's intention is to enhance the quality of life and employment opportunities for people with autism through a comprehensive employment program. This program includes coaching courses to help individuals become more self-sufficient in their daily lives, opportunities to gain work experience through trainee programs, and provision of permanent employment (3rd project newsletter).

Kockacsoki also emphasizes the importance of short food supply chains by sourcing ingredients locally and ensuring their products reach customers quickly and efficiently. This approach supports local farmers and reduces the environmental impact of transportation. Their café, KockaPont, offers guests premium coffees in an autism-friendly and accessible space, where they can also purchase Kockacsoki's premium chocolate products. Additionally, the café hosts community programs, events, and concerts, fostering a sense of community and inclusivity.

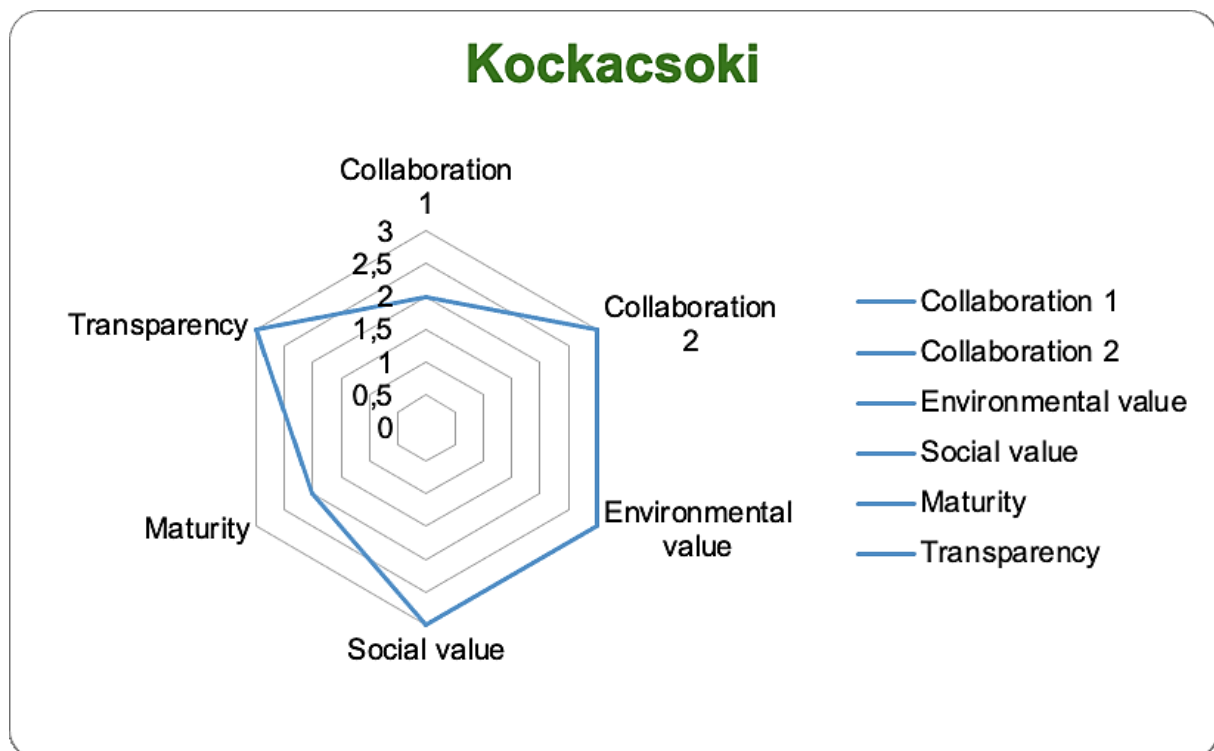


Figure 2. Radar chart for good practice 2.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

4.3. Good practice 3: Centro Social e Cultural de São Pedro de Bairro (CSCSPB), Portugal

Centro Social e Cultural de São Pedro de Bairro is a private institution of social solidarity, recognized as a public utility and non-profit organization. Founded as an association in 1983, it has gradually expanded its services to meet the needs of the community. Its regional scope focuses on the Municipality of Vila Nova de Famalicão. The organization's goal is to foster

development, social and cultural promotion, and create solutions to address the deficiencies of the local and municipal community.

Centro Social de Bairro is actively involved in several projects with a primary focus on social care, personal development, and sustainability, such as "To sow values, to harvest smiles!" The aim is to transform lives through value-driven activities, including:

- Sustainable agricultural production: Feeding children and the elderly with produce from greenhouses equipped with modern irrigation systems. The waste produced is utilized to feed farm animals, ensuring a closed-loop system.
- Reuse of wood residues: Producing pellets and briquettes from wood residues, employing young disabled people in the process.
- Growing medicinal and aromatic plants: Drying these plants using a solar heater and selling them within the community, emphasizing local production and consumption.
- Education and training programs to enhance community skills and knowledge (3rd project newsletter).

By incorporating short food supply chains, Centro Social de Bairro ensures that locally produced food and products are quickly and efficiently distributed within the community. This approach supports local agriculture, reduces environmental impact, and strengthens community ties. Through these initiatives, the organization not only promotes sustainability but also fosters a sense of community and self-sufficiency, turning life into value for all involved.

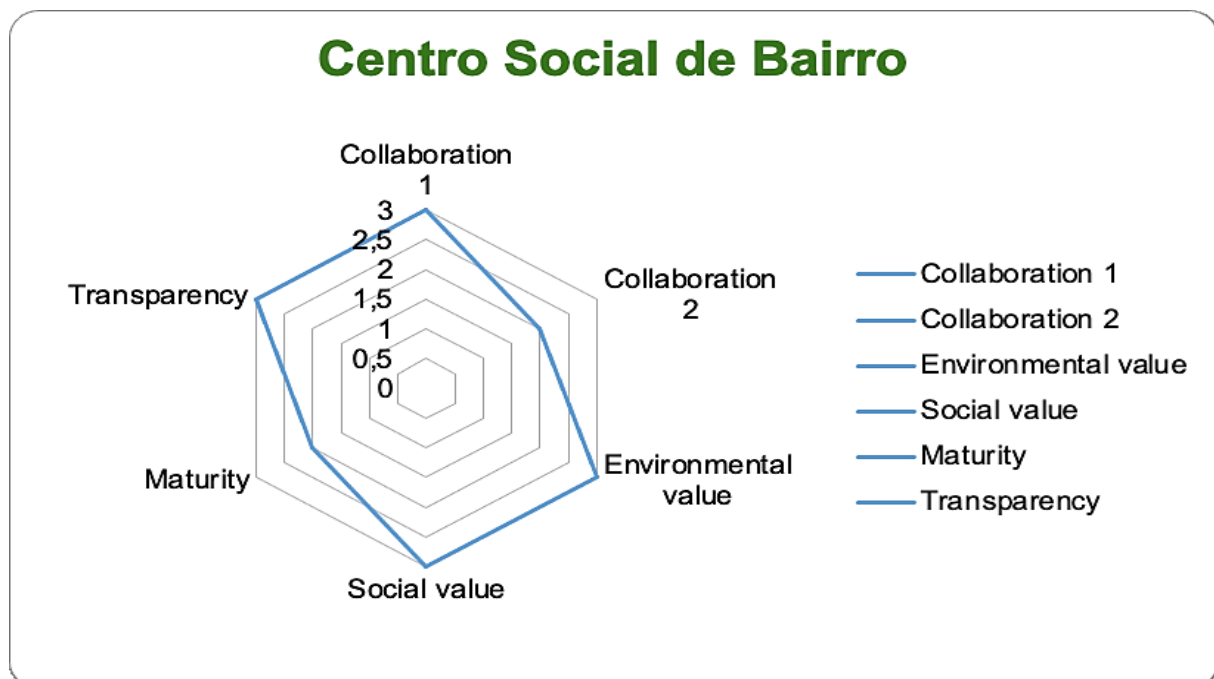


Figure 3. Radar chart for good practice 3.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

4.4. Good practice 4: Il Sole e la Terra, Italy

Il Sole e la Terra is a non-profit consumer cooperative founded in 1979, dedicated to food, agriculture, sustainability, and conscious consumption. The cooperative offers members quality products at fair prices, promoting healthy food access, sustainable production methods, environmental care, social relationships, and community engagement. Currently, the cooperative has about 13,000 members, with more than half actively making purchases. Il Sole e la Terra is a crucial reference point for local organic producers, serving as the main market outlet for many. The cooperative supports a robust food supply chain characterized by minimal steps from producer to consumer, emphasizing local production. This approach helps maintain viable companies in the area and encourages the growth of new productive enterprises. Many suppliers operate in the social economy field. These organizations employ people with disabilities, produce organic vegetables, and offer educational and work opportunities (3rd project newsletter).

Il Sole e la Terra supports individuals in difficulty through targeted projects, work grants, and internships in collaboration with various partners. The cooperative emphasizes environmental sustainability by reducing packaging, using recycled and compostable bags, and collecting plastic and stoppers for reuse.

By prioritizing short food supply chains, Il Sole e la Terra ensures local organic products are efficiently delivered to consumers, supporting local farmers and reducing the environmental impact of long-distance transportation. This approach bolsters the local economy and fosters a sense of community and sustainable consumption practices.

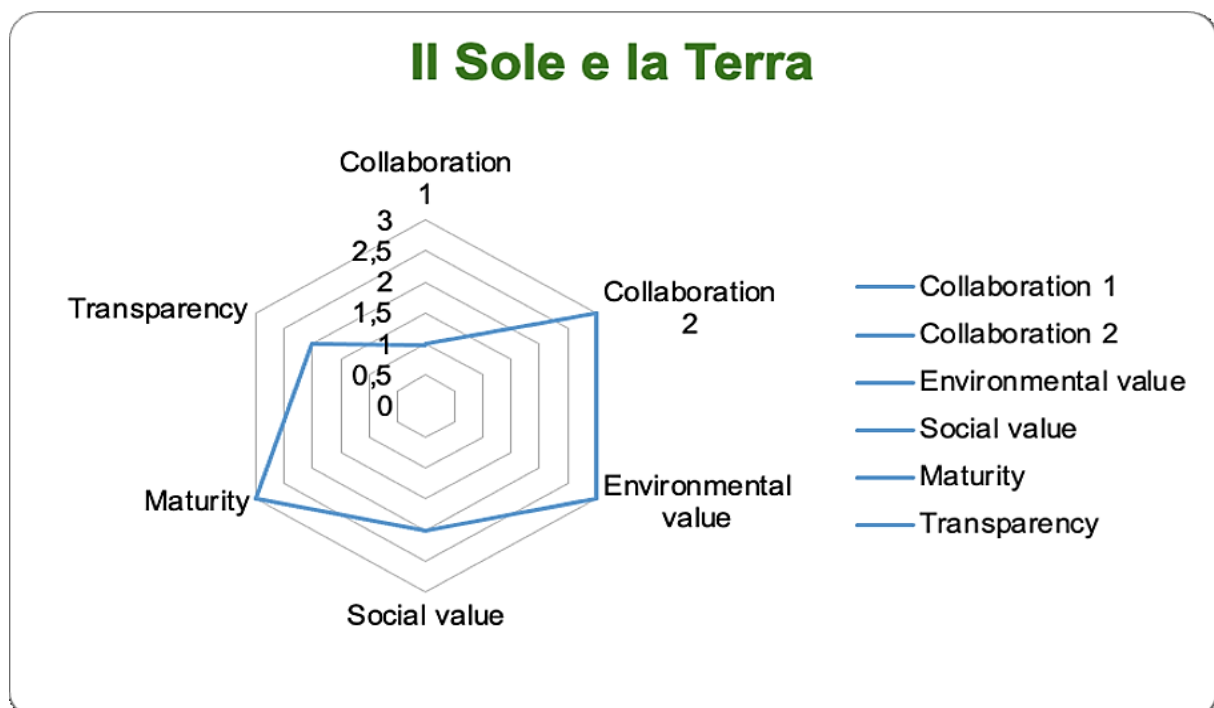


Figure 4. Radar chart for good practice 4.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

4.5. Good practice: La Porta del Parco, Italy

La Porta del Parco is a community project aimed at enhancing the value of an agricultural area and promoting sustainable practices that engage citizens. It is the result of a collaboration between the Oikos and Alchimia social cooperatives, which received the land through a public tender. The project comprises the following elements:

- A vineyard: Gradually converted to organic cultivation and managed by the Oikos cooperative, which includes vulnerable individuals in its operations.
- Social and collective vegetable gardens: Managed by families to encourage local food production and community engagement.
- A didactic orchard: Provides educational opportunities about sustainable agriculture.
- A restaurant: Utilizes produce from the project, showcasing the benefits of short food supply chains.
- A children's play area: Enhances the community's recreational and family-friendly environment.

La Porta del Parco is a meeting place where numerous cultural events take place and where every Saturday there is a farmers' market featuring small local producers. This farmers' market is a key element, promoting short food supply chains by connecting consumers directly with local farmers (3rd project newsletter).

The project highlights the importance of sustainable, local food systems. The vineyard's organic cultivation and the vegetable gardens managed by families emphasize low-impact farming techniques and self-sufficiency. The didactic orchard educates visitors about sustainable agriculture, further strengthening community engagement with local food production. By incorporating these elements, La Porta del Parco demonstrates a commitment to creating a resilient and sustainable local food system. The restaurant utilizes produce from the project, showcasing the benefits of short food supply chains by offering fresh, locally sourced meals. By integrating these elements, La Porta del Parco demonstrates its commitment to building a resilient and sustainable local food system.

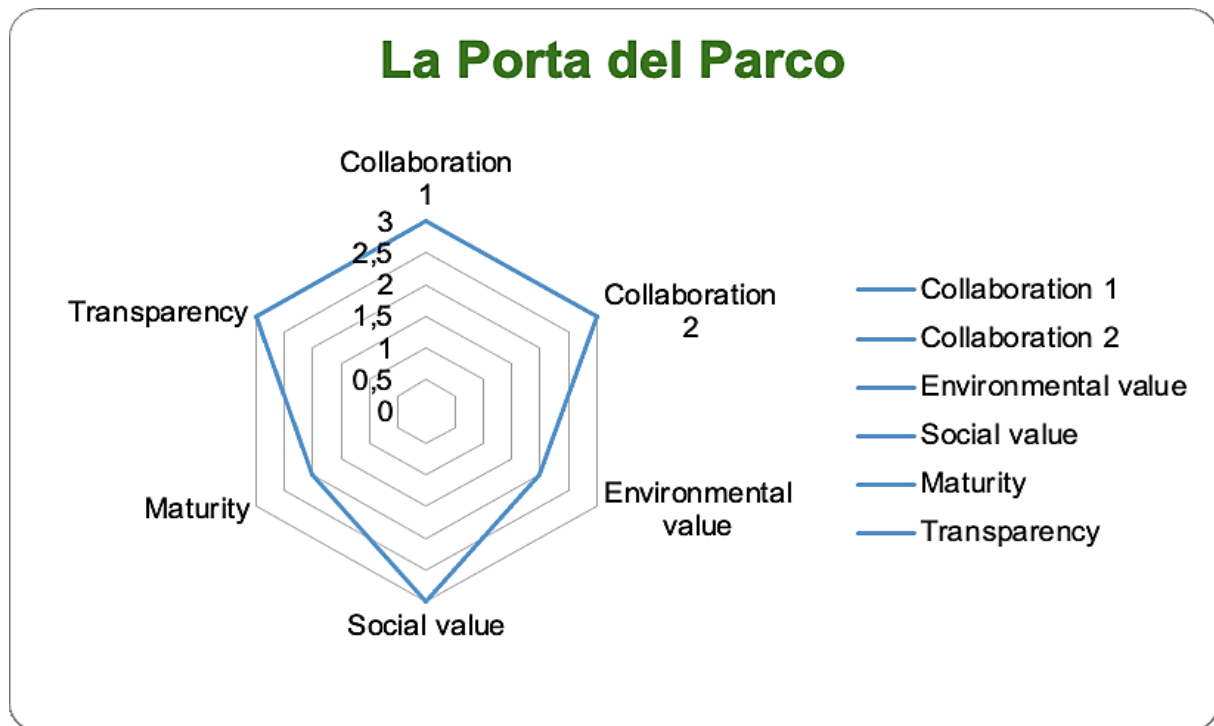


Figure 5. Radar chart for good practice 5.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

4.6. Good practice 6: I Raïs Community Cooperative, Italy

I Raïs Community Cooperative was established by a group of young people with the goal of revitalizing and fostering development in a challenging mountainous region. Their primary objectives are to provide additional services to residents, making mountain living more convenient, and to attract non-residents to appreciate the region by visiting, thereby creating a tourist economy beneficial to the entire community. These objectives are achieved through the production of goods and services that significantly enhance the quality of social and economic life (3rd project newsletter).

In addition to supporting residents and promoting sustainable tourism, I Raïs operates ‘Trattoria Alpina,’ which offers traditional dishes made with local products. The cooperative also produces the flagship cheese, ‘Ol Minadùr,’ made by five local farms since 2016 and aged for three months in restored local mines. The constant temperature and humidity of the mines impart a special intense and nuanced taste to the cheese (Twaróg, Wronka-Pośpiech, 2023).

By focusing on short food supply chains, I Raïs ensures that the products used in Trattoria Alpina and the production of ‘Ol Minadùr’ are locally sourced. This approach reduces the environmental impact associated with long-distance transportation, supports local farmers, and ensures the freshness and quality of the food. It also strengthens the local economy by keeping the production and consumption of goods within the community, fostering a sustainable and self-sufficient food system.

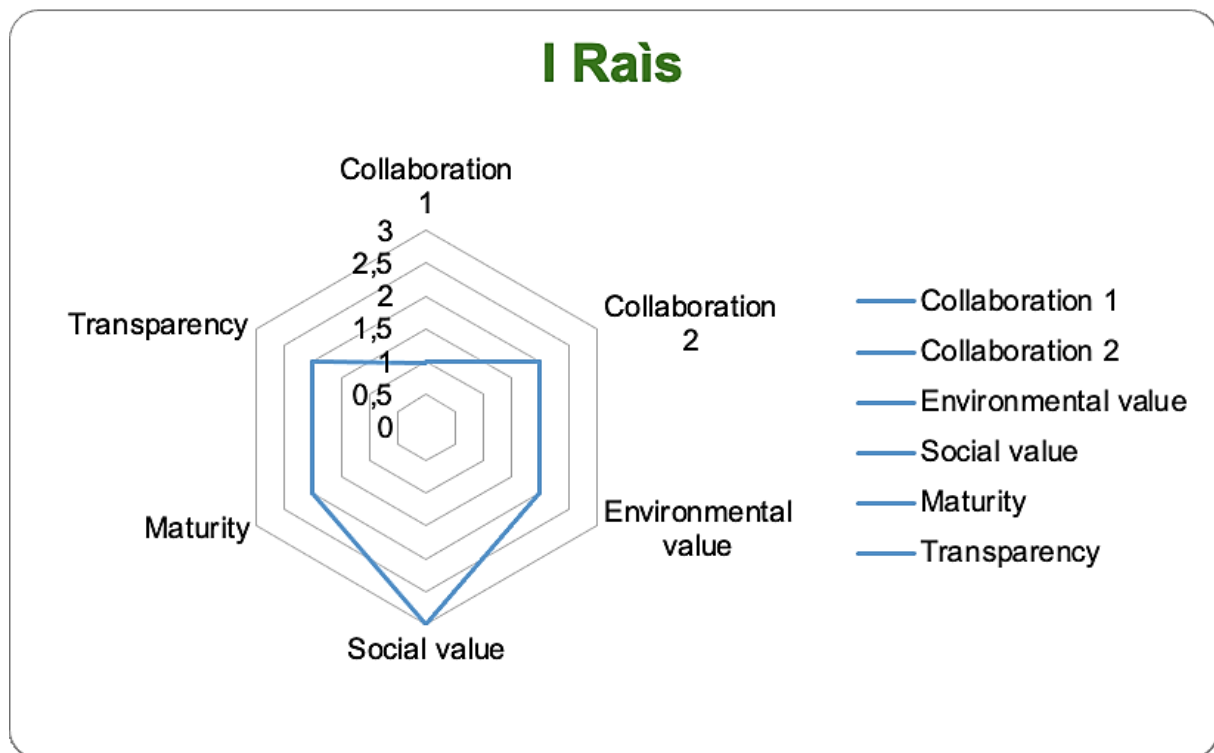


Figure 6. Radar chart for good practice 6.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

4.7. Good practice 7: Delivery of meals in Świętochłowice Municipality, Poland

The main goal of the meal delivery program in Świętochłowice Municipality is to provide support to seniors (people over 60 years of age who are professionally inactive) by offering access to social integration activities. These activities include health integration, physical activity, kinesiotherapy, as well as educational, cultural, and leisure integration.

The program, commissioned under the Multiannual Program for 2021-2025 "Senior+", includes several components:

- The Social Integration Centre (CIS) provides one meal a day to its 80 participants, who take part in workshops for marginalized groups. It also provides Christmas packages for the participants and children from poor families in Świętochłowice.
- Occupational therapy workshops and the Support Centre for Victims of Family Violence also provide one meal a day.
- The Social Welfare Centre in Świętochłowice donates food to 57 seniors, with 40 seniors enjoying meals on-site and 17 meals provided by caregivers.
- The Old People's Home "Senior" serves 50 individuals over 60 years of age, offering free dietary meals (breakfast and lunch) prepared by the Nursing Home "Gold Autumn" from Monday to Friday.

By focusing on short food supply chains, this program ensures that meals are balanced and adapted to the needs of the elderly. Seniors can articulate their nutritional preferences and needs, and meals are prepared using locally sourced ingredients. This not only supports local producers

and reduces the environmental impact associated with long-distance food transportation but also enhances the freshness and nutritional value of the meals provided. Overall, the program strengthens community ties by integrating social care with sustainable food practices, promoting a healthier and more connected community.

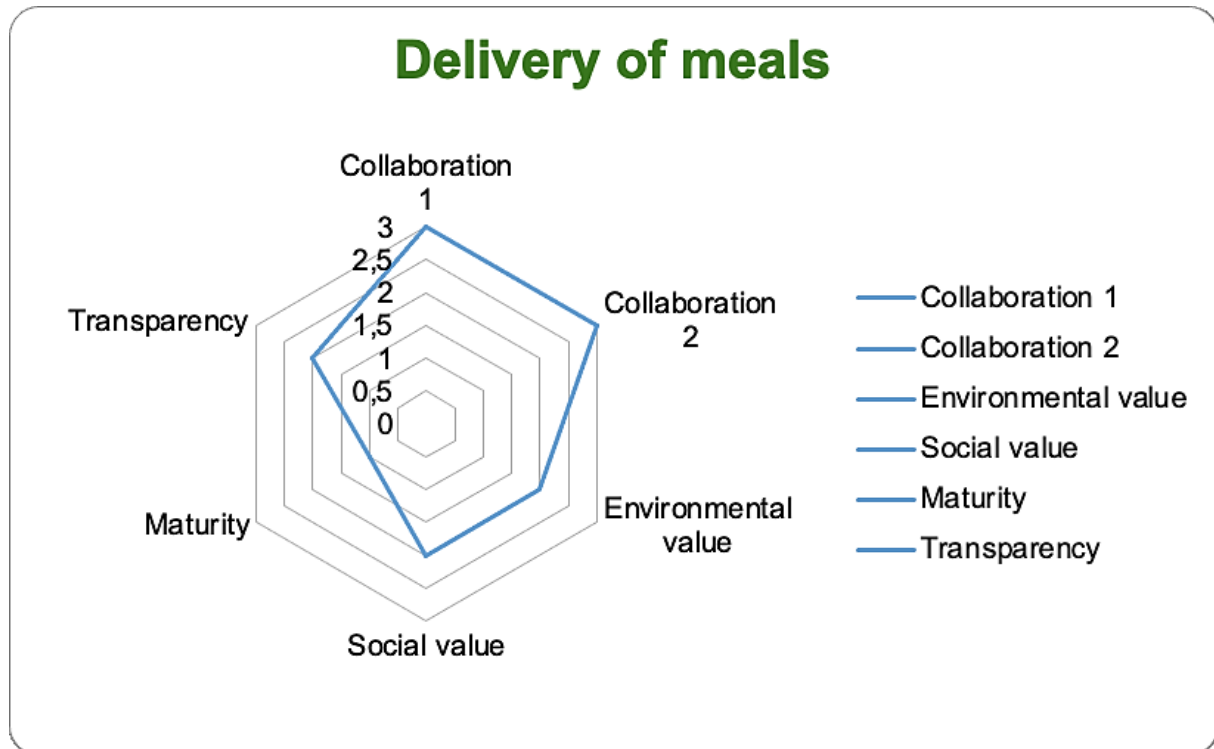


Figure 7. Radar chart for good practice 7.

Source: own elaboration based on project materials.

5. Summary

It is increasingly important to acknowledge the vital educational contribution that the social economy and social enterprises can make in motivating and empowering individuals in short food supply chains. By highlighting new areas of involvement for these entities, this study expands the understanding of strategies they employ to amplify their positive impact in the transition towards a more sustainable economy and society. A key benefit of this research is offering insights into other countries with varying levels of social entrepreneurship development. Furthermore, the examples of case studies illustrate how new social economy initiatives can emerge or be strengthened, such as by addressing social needs.

The following table presents a summary of case studies and remarks subsequently summarized in a table to provide a comprehensive synthesis – see table 3.

The table illustrates the participation of social enterprises in short food supply chains across several European countries. In Hungary, Banyardó and Kockacsoki have engaged in direct selling and community-supported agriculture, promoting increased value for producers and improved consumer access to local, traceable food. Similarly, the Centro Social e Cultural de São Pedro de Bairro in Portugal integrates social enterprises in SFSCs, emphasizing benefits such as more affordable food, reduced pollution, and heightened consumer awareness of food system issues. Italy's Il Sole e la Terra and I Rais contribute to peri-urban agriculture preservation, offering healthier food options, preserving biodiversity, and supporting local economies. In Poland, the Municipality of Świętochłowice's initiative further reduces food waste and improves diet variety. These initiatives reflect a consistent focus on building resilient, localized food systems that foster collaboration between producers and consumers while promoting sustainable agricultural practices and societal well-being.

Regarding the key benefits of social enterprises participating in SFSCs, the involvement of these organizations enhances value for both producers and consumers, providing easier market access for small-scale producers and fostering cooperation among stakeholders. Social enterprises also facilitate better communication and information sharing, allowing consumers to make informed choices about food traceability and origin. This participation supports local economies and strengthens social ties by offering healthier, locally-sourced, and more affordable food options. Additionally, these initiatives contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing food waste, minimizing pollution, and preserving biodiversity. The social economy's engagement in SFSCs promotes ethical objectives, such as supporting artisanal food production and offering employment opportunities, particularly for women.

The primary limitations of this study arise from its qualitative methodology, which focused on interviews and document analysis rather than incorporating quantitative metrics such as cost savings or emissions reductions. While this approach provides valuable context-specific insights into the mechanisms and impacts of SFSCs, it lacks the quantitative validation that could substantiate claims related to environmental and economic benefits. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, this study lays important groundwork for future research that combines qualitative and quantitative methods and offers practical insights for local governments, logistics managers, and coordinators working to enhance sustainable food systems.

The study offers insights for policymakers and practitioners on how SFSCs can support local food systems, improve access to markets for small producers, and foster collaboration between producers and consumers. SFSCs also help social economy organizations and social enterprises achieve greater environmental and social impact. Furthermore, the study discusses practical implications but can go further by detailing more actionable recommendations. Policymakers could incentivize social enterprises to engage in SFSCs through targeted policies such as tax breaks, grants, or training programs aimed at building capacity and fostering innovation. Additionally, the study could highlight potential barriers that need addressing,

including logistical challenges, regulatory constraints, or limited awareness among consumers and producers about the benefits of SFSCs. By tackling these issues, SFSCs can more effectively strengthen community resilience, promote social inclusion, and support sustainable local economies. Shortening supply chains enables social economy organizations and social enterprises to address food insecurity, empower vulnerable populations, and contribute to the green transition.

Acknowledgements

The dissemination of findings received funding from the Subsidy for Statutory Activities 2024, University of Economics in Katowice.

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Appendix

Table 3.

Participation of social enterprises in short food supply chains

Country	Year	Type of organisation	Type of a good practice is it?	Types of SFSC initiatives	Benefits for ...		
					...Consumer	...Producers	...Society
Banyaerdő							
Hungary	2011	Social Enterprise	Initiative of SEO	direct selling, community supported agriculture, collective points of sale, supermarkets provisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Easier market access, especially for small producers - Opportunity to develop cooperation with consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Reconnect food to the farming and processing process - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction of plastic packaging - Less food waste - Improved diets: easier access to fresh food, more variety in diet, less preservatives, ... - Preserving small farming/ artisanal food processing - Preservation of products based on local agro-biodiversity - Working opportunities for women
Kockacsoki							
Hungary	2015	Social Enterprise	Initiative of SEO	direct selling, supermarkets provisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Better communication and information to consumers - Opportunity to develop cooperation with consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preserving small farming/ artisanal food processing - Strengthening social ties - Working opportunities for women

Cont. table 2.

Centro Social e Cultural de São Pedro de Bairro							
Portugal	2016	Social Centre	Initiative of local/regional authorities involving SEO	direct selling, community supported agriculture, collective points of sale, supermarkets provisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Better communication and information to consumers - Opportunity to develop cooperation with consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More affordable prices for food - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Reconnect food to the farming and processing process - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction of pollution (fuel, plastic ...) - Less food waste - Improved diets: easier access to fresh food, more variety in diet, less preservatives, ... - Preserving peri-urban agriculture - Preservation of products based on local agro-biodiversity - Increasing awareness about food system problems
Il Sole e la Terra							
Italy	1979	Non-profit consumer cooperative	Initiative of SEO	community supported agriculture, collective points of sale, consumer cooperatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Easier market access, especially for small producers - Better communication and information to consumers - Differentiation of marketing channels and higher resilience - Opportunity to develop cooperation with other farmers - Opportunity to develop cooperation with consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More affordable prices for food - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Reconnect food to the farming and processing process - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction of transport - Reduction of pollution (fuel, plastic ...) - Reduction of plastic packaging - Less food waste - Improved diets: easier access to fresh food, more variety in diet, less preservatives, ... - Preserving peri-urban agriculture - Preserving small farming/artisanal food processing - Preservation of traditional products - Preservation of products based on local agro-biodiversity - Increasing awareness about food system problems - Working opportunities for women

Cont. table 2.

Municipality of Mozzo / Alchimia social cooperative / Oikos social cooperative							
Italy	2013	Municipality and two social cooperatives	Initiative of local/regional authorities involving SEO	community supported agriculture, collective points of sale, supermarkets provisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Easier market access, especially for small producers - Better communication and information to consumers - Differentiation of marketing channels and higher resilience - Opportunity to develop cooperation with other farmers - Opportunity to develop cooperation with consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Reconnect food to the farming and processing process - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preserving peri-urban agriculture - Preserving small farming / artisanal food processing - Preservation of traditional products - Preservation of products based on local agro-biodiversity - Strengthening social ties - Increasing awareness about food system problems
I Raïs							
Italy	2016	Community cooperative	Initiative of SEO	direct selling, community supported agriculture, collective points of sale, supermarkets provisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Better communication and information to consumers - Differentiation of marketing channels and higher resilience - More stable commercial relations - Opportunity to develop cooperation with other farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easier access to quality products: fresh, local, “authentic”, origin food - Buy products traceable from a known producer - Reconnect food to the farming and processing process - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives - Support local economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less food waste - Improved diets: easier access to fresh food, more variety in diet, less preservatives, ... - Preserving peri-urban agriculture - Preserving small farming / artisanal food processing - Preservation of traditional products - Preservation of products based on local agro-biodiversity - Strengthening social ties - Explore niches of innovation

Cont. table 2.

Municipality of Świętochłowice							
Poland	2021	Municipality	Initiative of local/ regional authorities involving SEO	collective points of sale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value added increase - Better communication and information to consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More affordable prices for food - Easier access to healthier food options - Pursue of social and ethical objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction of transport - Reduction of pollution (fuel, plastic ...) - Less food waste - Improved diets: easier access to fresh food, more variety in diet, less preservatives, ...