

„SOCIAL PROJECTIFICATION” – HOW TO DEVELOP SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP WITHOUT GRANTS?

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Purpose: The purpose of the paper is to present the results of research on the phenomenon of projectification of the social economy sector. The main reason for scientific inquiry is to try to understand the conditions needed for social entrepreneurship activity without the addictive role of projectification related to external financial support.

Design/methodology/approach: The cognitive assumption is to identify a strong correlation between the activity of social enterprises and their receiving external funding for the implementation of projects under the system of supporting the social economy. The research on this topic was built on qualitative methods based on in-depth interviews and participant observation. The theoretical dimension conceptualizes the phenomenon of social projectification in social economy sector and explores the rationale for moving away from the addictive role of external funding projects to implement pro-social activities.

Findings: The most important findings of the research concern the identification of structural prerequisites (conditions) that enable social enterprises to become independent of the institutional projectification system of activity in the social economy sector.

Practical implications: The practical implications of the research results obtained can serve as a guideline for designing a more sustainable and long-term system of support for the development of the social economy sector within central and local government institutions.

Social implications: Social implications are related to the possibility of applying the results of the research, that is, the identified factors decoupling from social projectification in the practice of social enterprises and the institutional system. They can also serve as recommendations for the implementation of more resilient, flexible and agile ways of operating in the social economy sector.

Originality/value: The originality and value of the article consists in discovering issues that belong to the research gap related to the development of the social economy sector beyond the traditional approach based on the projectification of social initiatives and institutional systems.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, projectification, social economy, qualitative research

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

In a sense, projects have become a fundamental element of human activity in the conditions of modern civilization. Projects organize the professional and private spheres, pro-social activities and civic activism (Jensen et al., 2016). The dominance of project-based thinking and action, which phenomenon is called projectification, is developing in the private, public and non-profit sectors. Among others, it is manifested in the increase in the number of projects underway, the evolution of business and social projects, and the scaling of economic and social efficiency through projects.

Projects are playing an increasingly important role because they are fostering goal achievement and strategy execution in many leading organizations (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2019, Kuura, 2011). Referring to the work of C. Midler in describing the phenomenon of projectification, it is worth noting not only project-oriented organizations but also the management of programs and project portfolios (Aubry, Lenfle, 2012). An integrated approach to project, program and portfolio management, is also of particular importance (Muller, 2009).

By combining core activities with project implementation, organizations develop inter-organizational and cross-sectoral relationships. Cooperation in a multi-project environment fosters the continuous improvement of mechanisms and structures for initiating and managing projects, thus encouraging the search for new dimensions and forms of socio-economic activity. It is also touching on social and civic issues, as well as entering the cultural and political realm (Chell et al., 2010).

The sphere of social entrepreneurship is also project-based, in fact. In Poland, this activity is mostly carried out through implementation of projects most often financed with grants, which aim to solve problems and create value for the community (Peredo, McLean, 2006; Weerawardena, Mort, 2006). Projects in the social enterprise environment are somehow treated as an ongoing and inevitable process. On the one hand, this translates into certainty and stability of funding. On the other hand, however, it generates many constraints and makes people dependent on external funding sources. As a result, restrictive project rules can hinder the flexible development of solutions to current social needs and problems. And, to some extent, the financing of activities mainly from public funds, may make it necessary to subordinate the scope of activities to the priorities and conditions of the support offered.

The context of social entrepreneurship functioning outside the system of projectification, i.e. the system of institutionalized financial support, becomes an interesting subject for analysis. Therefore, the issue of identifying the conditions that can create solutions involving the operation of social entrepreneurship initiatives outside the system of external grant funding, was identified as a research gap. The purpose of the article is to present the social economy sector in the context of the determinants of social entrepreneurship outside the system of projectification understood as the use of external grants for the core activities of the organization.

2. Literature review

The first studies of the essence of projectification cite the example of Renault where the classic functional organization saw a reorientation of the organization and management system toward project execution and the functioning of autonomous project teams (Midler, 1995). Projectification includes individual actions by individuals, social groups and communities, as well as initiatives by organizations and institutions. Projectification has entered virtually all spheres of socio-economic life and is increasingly operating in a networked environment (Barondeau, Hobbs, 2019). Not without reason, it is recognized that projectification is present almost everywhere, affects almost everything and involves almost everyone (Jensen et al., 2016), leading to a peculiar, purposeful philosophy of activity.

Projects simplify structures, organize activities and deliver results (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). At the same time, attention is also very clearly drawn to the possibility of so-called “over-projectification” and the consequences associated with it (Kuura, 2020). The “ubiquity” of projects is accompanied by the development of a project society. At the core of description of the project society trend is a social organization focused on the widespread implementation of diverse projects (Lundin, 2016). However, it is important to note the emerging temporary society. In this sense, one identifies episodicity (as a consequence of abandoning fixed structures and formats) and openness (marked by less predictability and greater risk) while co-creating the formalized structures necessary to meet the needs of security and belonging (Packendorff, 2002). The focus on a single project is evolving to recognize an open, flexible and dynamic system of structural, process and social relationships in project-oriented environments (Bergman et al., 2013).

The conceptualization of the multidimensional phenomenon of projectification on the basis of an analysis of the state of existing research leads, on the one hand, to a distinction between project activity of individuals, communities, organizations and institutions. On the other hand, it leads to an evolutionary change towards a project person and society, a project organization and institution. Personal, social and organizational contexts determine the level of projectification. Personal projectification refers to the professional and/or private activities of individuals. It is expressed through the intensity and commitment to project work and its consequences. The social level encompasses a broader context, including, among others, the functioning of public institutions, implementation of policies, inclusion of and impact on societies. Organizational projectification involves reconfiguration of organizational and management systems (Jacobsson, Jalocho, 2021) for the development of project practices (Kuura, 2011). The personal, social and organizational levels are closely intertwined.

When describing the phenomenon of projectification, it is necessary to pay attention to the context of the formalization of the organizational environment of projects, programs and portfolios. Standardization undoubtedly simplifies and organizes procedures, mechanisms and

systems. However, it can be challenged whether excessive standardization actually promotes innovation and creativity in projects. Rather, it seems to be more limiting and artificially “locking” the project environment into a rigid organizational and functional framework. The trend of projectification studies points to the need to develop effective mechanisms for combining temporary and permanent structures. Undoubtedly, the lack of such mechanisms can result in a loss of flexibility and innovation in projects, as well as excessive fragmentation, which is particularly visible in the public sector (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). It is hard to disagree with the notion that public services are becoming more flexible as a result of projectification. However, the functioning project structures often provide short-term solutions to problems that are generally long-term in nature (Hodgson et al., 2019). Hence, coordination of activities in the scope of coexisting temporary and permanent structures remains crucial.

Social entrepreneurship operates in a social economy environment and is embedded between the private and public sectors. It takes a hybrid form in the functional spaces normally belonging to the private, non-profit and public sectors (Roper, Cheney, 2005). However, in the American model of the social economy, social entrepreneurship clearly operates in the space of the market economy (Hoogendoorn et al., 2010). Social entrepreneurship is often directly referred to as social business. However, the inclusion of an economic activity component alongside social activities remains important. And striking a balance between social mission and profitability is undoubtedly the foundation of social entrepreneurship (Smith et al., 2013).

In principle, social entrepreneurship is based on balancing the social and business contexts. The social context defines the mission, purpose and values. The business context, in turn, corresponds to the creation of competitive market value (Weerawardena, Mort, 2006). Social business is associated with the potential for change for the better. And, importantly, it is an integral part of the modern economic structure (Yunus, 2011). It is also an important link in the third sector, taking on the attributes of non-profit organizations and for-profit businesses (Dees, 1998).

Social entrepreneurship operates in a space of cross-sector cooperation. Both with institutional entities and with for-profit businesses (Huybrechts, Nicholls, 2013). The joint activities of entities from different sectors respond to contemporary social, economic, environmental and civilization issues (Gigauri et al., 2022), resulting in the creation of universally accepted values (Weaver, 2019). Because by effectively and efficiently solving social problems, social entrepreneurship helps public power, i.e. it is something more than just community-based entrepreneurship (Tan et al., 2005). It participates in the process of improving the quality of life and achieving social benefits using institutional support (Gigauri, Damenia, 2020).

Social entrepreneurship integrates the spheres of social and business activity. It implements an innovative approach to achieving social goals and social change as a result of doing business (Dees, 1998). The perception of business activity then goes beyond the classic business dimension. Economic goals are not a priority but, importantly, interact with social goals. The profit

generated is subject to distribution for the development of individuals, social groups and communities and the implementation of social activities. Innovation is reflected in non-standard ways of meeting social needs, as well as in designing new solutions to problems in the face of the need to create social value. The result is social innovation (Peredo, McLean, 2006; Bacq, Janssen, 2011).

3. Methods

The research problem concerned the depiction of the social economy sector in the context of the determinants of social entrepreneurship outside the institutionalized projectification system. Projects in this case are seen as using external grants for the organization's core activities. The research procedure used a qualitative approach that responds to the challenges of empirical verification of social entrepreneurship by relying on a multi-faceted analysis (Dacin et al., 2011; Murphy, Coombes, 2009; Spear, 2006). The empirical research was concerned with exploration of the phenomenon of projectification of social economy, especially of social entrepreneurship, on the basis of specific activities of institutions and organizations at the local level.

The main area of empirical research covered organizations following the model of the financing system for development of the social economy, particularly social entrepreneurship initiatives in accordance with the framework of the National Programme for the Development of the Social Economy until 2030 and the Social Economy Act of 5 August 2022. The study covered the functioning of the Social Economy Support Center (Ośrodek Wsparcia Ekonomii Społecznej (OWES)) in Częstochowa and social economy entities, including social enterprises operating in the area of the neighboring municipalities. The survey included management and staff of OWES, representatives of associations, foundations and social cooperatives (Table 1).

Table 1.
Interview structure

Scope of research	Local institution area	The area of social enterprises
Number of interviews	IDI1; IDI2; IDI3	IDI4; IDI5; IDI6; IDI7; IDI8; IDI9; IDI10; IDI11; IDI12; IDI13; IDI14; IDI15
Period	2020-2022	2021-2023

Note: IDI 1 ... 15 - in-depth interview no. 1 ... 15.

Source: own research (in-depth interview questionnaire).

The research was conducted in 2020-2023. A structured in-depth interview (IDI) was used as the main research method. The content of the questions addressed to survey participants was prepared in two subject areas. The first one was about illustrating the importance of projectification in the activities of a support institution and social enterprises. The second one focused

on obtaining information on the potential for development of social enterprises operating outside the institutionalized system of external funding.

The interviews were conducted at the headquarters of each organization and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews yielded a primary data set, which was then subjected to qualitative content analysis. An important addition to the research procedure was participatory action research. The observation consisted of the author's participation in the development of concepts of project in the scope of social entrepreneurship and practical interaction, with social economy entities, in their implementation. It concerned 7 social enterprises and was conducted in 2021-2023. It was based on social activism aimed at helping to develop local initiatives. Although associated with certain limitations, the use of qualitative research techniques seems to have made it possible to present scientifically valuable results.

4. Results

The empirical research allowed us to gather a set of information on the phenomenon of projectification in the field of social entrepreneurship. The content of the questions and sets of answers were divided into two subject areas. The first one concerned the functioning of projectification in social entrepreneurship. All the respondents participating in the survey, both those representing a social economy support organization and social enterprises, unanimously stressed that the grant system leads to concentration of activities on project-based fundraising and not necessarily on the long-term operations or sustainability of the organization. The statements included: “yes, the most important thing is to get funding for the project” (IDI7), “we never know if we will definitely get support, and only then will it become clear whether we can operate” (IDI5).

The respondents very often emphasized uncertainty and instability. Attention was paid to the temporary nature of the activities, because projects are always time-limited. For example, they made the following statements: “it's always a bit unknown whether our project will be suitable and our goals will be met” (IDI4), “we would like to have more stability, because now you never know what will happen, either we will get the project or not” (IDI12). Also, OWES representatives stressed that social entrepreneurship is basically based on project implementation. At the same time, interestingly enough, OWES not only becomes the user of funds for implementation of social projects, but at the same time, in order to carry out its mission, it has to become a beneficiary of the project competition itself. They made the following statements: “we cooperate with social enterprises but we also have to implement a project ourselves, which makes it possible to distribute funds to projects” (IDI1), “it's kind of like a pyramid - we get a project so that others can implement theirs” (IDI2).

The interviews clearly indicate the existence of a system of activity projectification, which involves multiple hierarchical levels, from the macro level of the conditions of the European Union (EU) policies, through national, regional and local policies. The following answer is noteworthy: “you can say that everything is based on projects - in the system, projects come kind of from the top” (IDI3). It occurs that social enterprises are aware that they are in a kind of unstable funding system based on projectification. Examples of statements made by survey participants include: “Well, sometimes it was the case that we had to wait with our activities and people for the opportunity to apply for funding because we were running out of some funds” (ID 11), “we know that our activities are so phased, kind of cyclical, that is, either there will be money or there won’t” (IDI15). At the same time, the social economy projectification system is highly bureaucratic. As respondents indicate: “we know that we get these funds and we are happy but all the time we have to handle some bureaucracy” (IDI8), “our activities in supporting the social economy are also based on a project so it's obvious that we have to follow the provisions of the project and meet lots of indicators, quantitative results and account for our activities all the time...” (IDI2).

The content from the interviews provides a good glimpse into the picture of a kind of institutional projectification, i.e. a phenomenon involving projects of varying scope and size, interrelated, built on the principle of an institutionalized pyramid from the EU system down to very local activities of small scope and budget. The statements included, for example: “and so we heard that this project of ours that we are implementing is all money from the EU” (IDI 9), “we basically operate and think in terms of projects all the time, part of our activity is a project activity and depends on the status of competitions for funds from the EU” (IDI1). The research shows, on the one hand, the emerging picture of projectification of the social economy sector as a mosaic of many complementary projects and valuable results and committed people. On the other hand, it constitutes very unstable structure of bureaucratic programs and projects, and ad-hoc measures with little potential.

The second set of questions on the conditions that develop the potential for social entrepreneurship activities without reference to external funding, yielded an interesting set of data. In general, the respondents representing social enterprises questioned how easy it is to create conditions that allow social needs to be met without raising external funding in the formula of a systemic project. For example, the survey participants commented as follows: “I think it will be very difficult because everyone is used to this kind of activity although I know it is not good for the continuity of work but otherwise it will be difficult” (IDI14), “I don't know how this could work without specific funding for activities” (IDI13).

The respondents displayed a rather conservative and skeptical attitude towards the challenge of operating outside the projectification system. Concerns were primarily financial, i.e. operating based on market principles. Among the statements were the following: “I don't know if we would be able to cope with the current competition” (IDI13), “for our business to survive we would have to compete more intensively” (IDI11).

Interviews conducted among representatives of social enterprises confirm that the time limitation of projects influences the perception of the implemented projects as single and episodic - most often without continuation. The respondents pointed out that such project-based thinking is a significant impediment to planning activities outside the projectification system. One survey participant stated that “most often, we do some project that is socially useful, the project ends, and we can then try to get another project” (IDI9). Another person emphasized that “on the whole, our life goes from project to project (IDI10).

At the same time, representatives of social enterprises expressed concerns about whether they have sufficient competence to operate in a competitive market environment. For example, they commented as follows: “it seems to me that in order to operate without projects, you probably need to know more about business” (IDI7), “maybe some courses or business training would be useful - I think that could help if we needed to operate without projects” (ID8). In turn, representatives of OWES agreed that the operation of social enterprises outside the projectification system must involve strengthening and better preparing these organizations for the rules of competition. They stated that “it is possible for such companies to operate outside the funding system but this would require investment in strengthening business competencies and also in management and economic knowledge in general” (IDI1). One OWES representative stated: “I can imagine some kind of training system or specific workshops on how to run a business outside of the external funding system, but I don't think all the social enterprises would be suitable to do that” (IDI3).

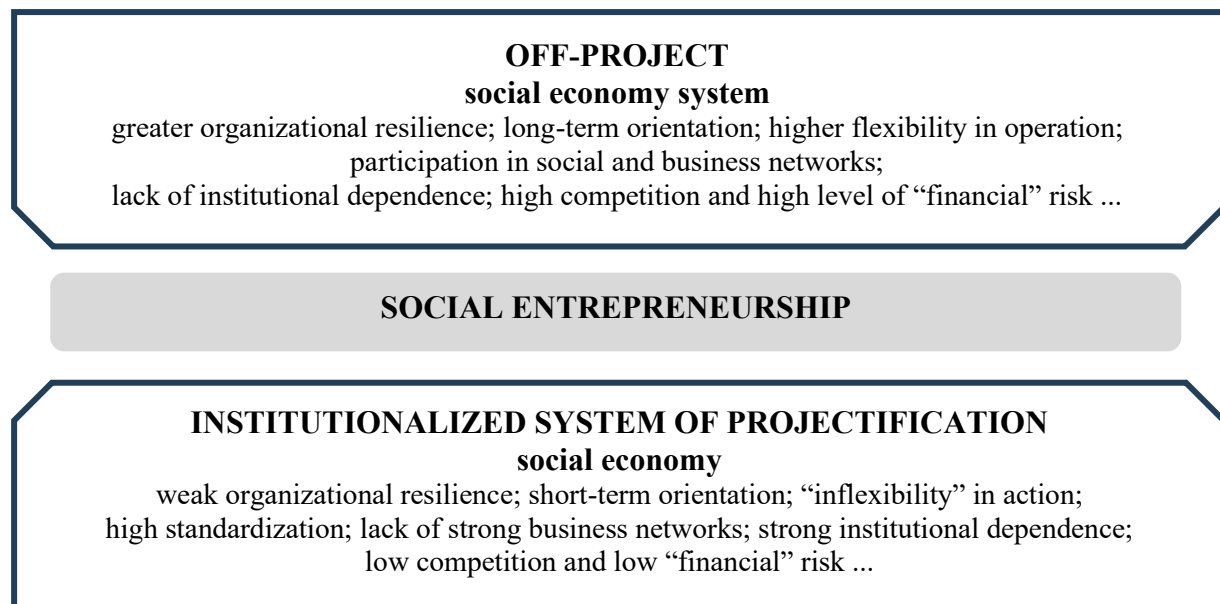


Figure 1. Dimensions of social entrepreneurship.

Source: own study on empirical research.

The respondents representing social enterprises also expressed concerns about their social competence manifested in broad business relationships. They commented: “we don't have many partners and when we do a project we rather manage on our own” (IDI12), “we don't have many

companies we cooperate with - these are rather ad hoc contacts” (IDI10). At the same time, social enterprises, just like OWES, expressed the belief that business contacts and social networks are crucial when operating outside the projectification system. The statements included: “in our activity, business and social contacts are the basis of operations” (IDI2), “when operating without projects, strong contacts with other businesses are what’s most important” (IDI15), “good contacts provide more stability and you can always reach an understanding with someone” (IDI13).

The interviews depict some aspects of how social entrepreneurship operates within the projectification system and outside external systemic funding (Figure 1). Underlying characteristics include organizational resilience, functioning in social and business networks, or institutional dependence. The phenomenon of projectification requires standardization of operational procedures and structures, periodicity of activities (i.e., from project to project), accountability for the purpose and outcome of the project. In turn, in a system not based on projects, greater flexibility of activities and freedom of decision-making are allowed, which promotes the development of solutions that are more responsive to current social needs and problems.

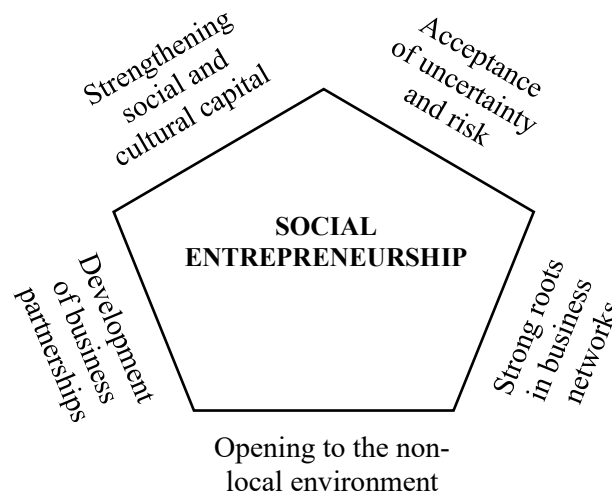


Figure 2. Conditions for the social entrepreneurship outside the projectification system.

Source: own study on empirical research.

The above interview procedure was supplemented by participant observation conducted during the period of 2020-2023. The observation consisted in the author's cooperation, with seven social enterprises, in the process of co-creating elements of business models and conducting workshops on entrepreneurial activity. Observation and informal conversations with company representatives allowed to gather an additional set of information. The main conclusion of this stage of the research confirms the strong dependence of social enterprises on the social economy projectification system. However, this does not exclude the possibility of transforming social entrepreneurship embedded in projectification into operating outside of external systemic funding. Undoubtedly, at the core of such a transformation is, on the one

hand, the preparation of social entrepreneurship to adopt a market-based orientation. On the other hand, recognition of the conditions that enable social business to be remodeled for increased market attractiveness and competitiveness (Figure 2). It is worth noting that creating conditions for activity outside the institutionalized system of funding projects in the area of social entrepreneurship requires a significant reinforcement of the business profile of social enterprises, as well as a comprehensive system of training and consulting on organizational resilience. What is also significant is openness to appearing in non-local environments and the development of social and cultural capital for successful functioning in business networks.

5. Discussion

Projectification is considered one of the most important trends in development of the public sector. It is a multifaceted and multilevel phenomenon. One of the most significant contemporary challenges for social entrepreneurship is becoming the search for self-funding opportunities. Solving economic problems without support from public resources is part of the essence of entrepreneurship and innovation (Gigauri et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be believed that by increasing economic efficiency from business activities, it becomes possible to expand the scope and scale of social activities. Social entrepreneurship requires external funding, as it is most often unable to finance the implementation of its social projects from commercial activities. Bugg-Levine et al. (2012) refer to this phenomenon as the “financial-social return gap.” At the same time, they note that the issue of funding through external grants is the most important challenge for social entrepreneurship. Chong and Kleemann (2011) note that there is a kind of tension between the return on investment (commercial activities) and philanthropic activities in social entrepreneurship, a kind of paradox that is difficult to overcome.

Social entrepreneurship can play a significant role in creating a more equitable society with a focus on active and effective socio-professional integration and the prevention of exclusion (Dacin et al., 2010). The ability to respond flexibly to current social needs and problems is becoming crucial. As is openness to new challenges and adaptation to the changing socio-economic environment. Since success requires the integration of three dimensions: economic, social and environmental (Elkington, 1998), it seems reasonable to look for opportunities to scale the effectiveness of social entrepreneurship operations. It is becoming desirable to achieve social and economic goals outside the typical project cycle.

Social enterprises often face various barriers that keep them from achieving scale and expansion. These constraints can include limited institutional recognition, lack of access to markets and finance, and poor measurement of real social impact. Policymakers can therefore play a key role in helping social enterprises overcome these problems and barriers by shaping favorable legal ecosystems that foster greater synergy and coherence. Another crucial aspect

is the synergy of cooperation in policy-making at various local, national or even international (EU) levels (OECD/EU 2019). Moving away from classic cyclicity in favor of continuity of priorities and activities and adopting a long-term perception of social business operation seems to be an important direction for development of social entrepreneurship.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted confirms that social entrepreneurship is strongly rooted in the institutional system of social economy projectification. Projects are considered sustainable, and representatives of social enterprises often find it difficult to imagine functioning without financial support. Which is not to say, however, that public funds must be the primary source of funding for the activities of social enterprises. By strengthening development capacity, creating business relationships, and opening up to partnerships and cooperation, it seems possible to move away from the typical pattern of doing social business based on obtaining grants. Projects undoubtedly unite the community around a common goal. Which, from the point of view of integration and activation of people at risk of social and work exclusion, promotes the creation and maintenance of new, publicly-funded jobs. However, to some extent, social entrepreneurship depends on the funding institutions, project conditions and criteria. Own funds provide greater institutional independence and guarantee decision-making freedom. It seems that the research presented in the following paper is one more contribution to the recognition of the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship, but it should be noted that there is a need for further research. In particular, as it can be assumed that trends related to the need for increased social activity associated with the development of civil society will be increasingly necessary in the face of growing risks.

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