

Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU social economy
Improving the socio-economic knowledge of the proximity and social economy ecosystem

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The EURICSE, CIRIEC and Spatial Foresight report promoted by the European Commission in the framework of the European Action Plan for the Social Economy puts the number of people employed in the Social Economy in the 27 EU countries at 11.5 million

4.3 million enterprises and organisations, 11.5 million paid employees and more than 912 billion euros in turnover are the main figures of the social economy in the European Union, according to the report "Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU social economy", which has just been published by the European Commission in the framework of Axis 5 "Enhancing the recognition of the social economy and its potential" of its European Action Plan for the Social Economy adopted in December 2021.

The study has been carried out jointly by EURICSE, CIRIEC and Spatial Foresight, following a public call for tender launched by the Executive Agency for the European Innovation Council and SMEs (EISMEA). Around 50 experts from the 27 EU Member States participated in the research project, coordinated by a core team of experts from EURICSE and CIRIEC. For EURICSE, Giulia Galera, Chiara Carini, Barbara Franchini and Giulia Tallarini, for CIRIEC Rafael Chaves Ávila, Barbara Sak, and Jérôme Schoenmaeckers. Silke Haarich and other experts from Spatial Foresight also contributed to the study.

The study, published in English under the original title "*Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU Social Economy: Improving the socio-economic knowledge of the proximity and social economy ecosystem*", has two central objectives, on the one hand to provide up-to-date quantitative data on the social economy in the 27 EU countries and on the other hand to provide qualitative data documenting the importance of the social economy both in six key ecosystems of the European industrial strategy, such as agri-food, renewable energies, health, cultural and creative industries, tourism and retail; and the resilience of the social economy in the face of the Covid-19 crisis. It aims to help government policy makers to implement evidence-based policies for the social economy and to help Member States' statistical offices to produce statistics and indicators to measure the social and economic impact of the social economy.

The report analyses the social economy made up of cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises.

According to the data extracted from the report, within the 11.5 million people employed in the European social economy, the leading countries in terms of employment in the social economy are Germany with 3.4 million, and France with almost 2.6 million, top the ranking. They are followed by Italy (more than 1.5 million employed in the social economy) and Spain (almost 1.4 million). Belgium (592,000 jobs in the social economy), Poland (250,000) and Portugal (245,000) are some distance behind. It should be noted that this report, unlike previous ones, no longer considers the case of the United Kingdom, following Brexit.

The study also specifies that, by sector, 3.3 million people are employed in the health and social care sector, 702,000 in education and 622,000 in arts, culture and leisure, these being the sectors in which the social economy generates most employment.

4.3 million companies and organisations

The document states that there are over 4.3 million social economy entities in the Member States. 97.7% belong to one of the four families that traditionally constitute the social economy (cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations). In contrast, only 246,000 are social enterprises, of which less than 43,000 are 'ex lege' social enterprises and more than 203,000 are de facto social enterprises.

In addition, there are other legal forms recognised as part of the social economy, including Labour Societies, Fishermen's Guilds, Agricultural Transformation Societies, Singular Entities, Agricultural Common Goods, Holy Houses of Mercy and Legal Entities constituted by the Churches, among others.

In terms of turnover, the EU social economy generated more than 912.9 billion euros turnover, according to data from 19 Member States. In terms of cooperatives, France, Italy, Spain and Finland have the highest turnover, predominantly driven by agri-food, consumer and worker cooperatives. In the field of associations, foundations and mutuals, France and Germany register the highest turnover.

One of the most curious facts revealed by the report concerns gender. While there is little, if any, inconclusive data, it is revealing. According to the report, the social economy is a source of female employment, as a large proportion of social economy organisations are in the health, consumer and social care and welfare sectors, where there is usually a high presence of women. Associations and foundations also have a strong presence of women, while in cooperatives the figure varies from one country to another. In Portugal, for example, 54% of workers in cooperatives are women, while the proportion for associations is 70%.

A report to understand the Social Economy in Europe

This report summarises the findings of the project "Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU social economy", carried out by EURICSE, CIRIEC International and Spatial Foresight, on behalf of the European Commission.

The main objective of this initiative has been to assess the socio-economic importance of the social economy and its contribution to the creation of a sustainable, innovative and resilient environment. The study collects data on the socio-economic weight of the social economy in the 27 EU Member States.

In addition, the report provides an analysis of the positive contribution of the social economy in other industrial ecosystems, as well as the contribution to mitigating the effects of the Covid-19 crisis.

The European Commission, a promoter of the Social Economy

On 9 December 2021, the European Commission adopted the Action Plan for the Social Economy. This plan outlines concrete measures to help maximise the potential of social economy actors for more sustainable growth and social cohesion.

Furthermore, the EU Council Recommendation, published in 2023, on the development of framework conditions for the social economy calls on Member States to set up comprehensive strategies to foster a favourable environment for the social economy.

Achieving the objectives of the Action Plan and the Council Recommendation requires high quality and comparable statistical data and analysis to inform decision-making. Policy makers need relevant, timely and accurate statistics to guide policy orientations and set ambitious but realistic courses of action. The EURICSE, CIRIEC and Spatial Foresight report contributes with thousands of data to understand and report on the main magnitudes and contributions of the European social economy.

The report concludes that the social economy is present in all EU Member States. What varies considerably in the different countries is the extent to which social economy entities are recognised by policy makers, the general public and grassroots organisations (and whether they recognise themselves) as part of the social economy.

Factors explaining the limited visibility and underestimation of the contribution of the social economy include an insufficient understanding of the roles and functions these entities perform, as well as a lack of comparable, high-quality statistical data and analysis. Currently, only six European countries (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and Spain) have national statistics specifically measuring the social economy.