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HOW COULD BELGIUM STRENGTHEN ITS SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURIAL
ECOSYSTEM THROUGH COLLABORATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE ?

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurs are legitimate candidates to address societal root caused challenges and can be key allies for the implementation of a strategy to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Collaborative systems change is the methodology that can help social entrepreneurs to thrive through a consolidated ecosystem. This paper provides deep understanding of the mechanisms around the Belgian social entrepreneurial ecosystem. It will be compared with European standards to better calibrate recommendations that have the potential to strengthen Belgian social entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Keywords: *Systems change, Systems thinking, Systems transformation, Social entrepreneurship, SDGs, Collaboration, Smart network*

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1. Introduction

Current most pressing worldwide challenges require collaborative action across sectors. Those inter-related challenges have been shaped by the United Nations in 2015 under the name of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the intention of reaching them by 2030. The agenda encompasses targets such as “no poverty”, “gender equality” or “reduced inequalities”. The aim of this agenda is to deliver a common framework of global partnership to end poverty and protect the planet to ensure people can enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (United Nations 2015).

However, according to the 2020 Social Progress Index (SPI) projections, which captures outcomes related to all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, our society won't be able to achieve them until 2082. The Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent crisis might even delay this deadline to 2092 if no specific actions are taken.

This presumed delay, creates room for new strategies to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. Therefore, new business models with the capacity to bring innovative solution might emerge. Within this context, collaborative work among social entrepreneurs has promising features to answer the needs of current sustainability issues. Indeed, many social enterprises business models originate at the junction of market, state, and community sector logics, frequently mixing resources from all sectors and therefore have the capability to provide a more global perspective for public goods (Schaltegger, Beckmann and Hockerts 2018).

Moreover, systems change has the potential to accelerate progress towards greater efforts on SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). Built on the concept of systems thinking, it is the frame that tackles the foundations of interconnected problems for transformative and structural changes. Although few literatures have answered the “how” question, systems change aims at according greater attention to connections and interdependence while

addressing the root causes of a defined complex issue. Accordingly, the stake of systems change is to understand how efforts between actors are connected in order to detect potential synergies, redundancies, and opportunities (Gopal and Kania 2015).

Social entrepreneurs (SE) can be key allies in the process of collective actions aiming at bringing systems change. Consequently, systems social entrepreneurs might be the matching outcome of those two concepts. The rise of systems social entrepreneurs have raised the needs of a common structure for cross-sectoral collaboration. In this regard, governments are the best positioned to facilitate change. They can help social entrepreneurs develop the ecosystems they need to shift policies, practices, power dynamics, societal norms and mindsets away from the more traditional models (Ashoka and al. 2021).

Nonetheless, there are still barriers that slow down this journey towards progress. Within its report regarding “Theory of change” (2021), Catalyst 2030 has identified the three main challenges to surpass in order to catalyse collaboration and achieve global systems change. First, it is emphasized that many global, regional, and local institutions and governments lack the capacity to address the complexities of societal issues on a large scale. Second, there is a lack of coordination between social entrepreneurs and innovators, which lower their capacity to influence the system. A strong network around the ecosystem is vital to build their capacities. Third, the adoption of finance and funding strategies to support systems reform has not matched pace with demand. In short, three different levels of work are identified : governments, the ecosystem building and the ecosystem funding.

Therefore, it is legitimate to be wondering about the needed changes at the governments level but also in the legal framework to support systems social entrepreneurs. For this purpose, an evaluation of the current situation in Belgium will be provided. Ranked at the 5th place in the SDG index in 2021 (Cambridge University 2021), this dissertation will assess whether Belgium is a good model for systems change and will most importantly review the

ecosystems surrounding social entrepreneurs in Belgium. The recency of this emerging concept justify the need for studies to analyse social entrepreneurial ecosystem linked with systems change in most countries. Moreover, Catalyst 2030, who is leading the way in terms of systems change, has not opened yet any chapter in Belgium, letting a gap for this paper to bring valuable investigation about the Belgian social entrepreneurial ecosystem. This paper will also provide possible directions and recommendations for improving the ecosystem. The addressed research question is then the following : : *“How could Belgium strengthen its social entrepreneurial ecosystem through Collaborative Systems Change ?”*.

The dissertation will be separated into four main sections. The literature review presents aspects about systems change and its connection with social entrepreneurship, comprising insights about what a system is but also the tools that can help strengthening a social entrepreneurial ecosystem. After, the methodology covers the approach in which the data was collected and organized to construct the analysis. The third part encompasses the analysis and the discussion around the social entrepreneurs ecosystem in Belgium, with also the landscape mapping of the Belgian ecosystems. After, the results of the analysis will assess possible recommendations to improve the ecosystem.

2. Literature review

2.1 Systems approach and Systems thinking

Before deep diving into the possible connections between systems change and social entrepreneurship, a concise explanation of what a system is and more precisely what is systems thinking should be provided.

“A system is any group of interacting, interrelated or interdependent part for a complex and unified whole that has a specific purpose. The key thing to remember is

that all the parts are inter-related and interdependent in some way. Without such interdependencies, we just have a collection of parts, not a system.” (Kim 1999)

Senge (1994), in his definition, has also emphasized the continuous affectation of the elements towards a common purpose. Meadows (2008) also supports the last part of the definition, adding that three main sections were key to describe a system : elements, interconnections and the prominence of a common purpose. Moreover, it is important to highlight the degree of complexity of a system. In this sense, first complex systems have been identified by Parsons (1991) and were social systems. Mitchell (2011), has further elaborate the notion of complexity within systems. Indeed, he has highlighted the importance of complex collective behaviour, advanced data processing and evolution-based adaptability that were emerging from large networks with no central control.

Consequently, a systems approach refers to the ways of investigating a problem where the analysis of environments should be viewed from many perspectives, including a transdisciplinary point of view (Ackoff 1971; Luenberger 1979). The methodology encompasses systemic processes to solve large-scale and complex problems among a systemic structure and has been the foundation of systems thinking for decision-making.

Senge (1994) has further described systems thinking as a *“conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed...to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively”*. His definition has been enhanced by Kim (1999) and later on by Meadows (2008) that have highlighted the connection between the cause of events that are the effects of deeper patterns and systemic structures. Later, Stroh (2015) has sharpened the definition of systems thinking with the notion of efficiency. He argued that systems thinking features support the achievement of better outcomes with fewer resources in a more sustainable and durable way.

Thus, systems thinking is a new language for systemic behaviour that wants to foster a more holistic mindset. It has the purpose of achieving social change and is therefore inherent to systems change. Foster-Fishman and Behrens (2007) have further demonstrate that a single focus on a specific system element (e.g. policy reform) is frequently insufficient for enabling system transformation. This is the reason why systems thinking helps clarifying why system level outcomes doesn't necessarily lead to systemic change.

2.2 Systems change

Systems change explicitly refers to the “change” in a “system”. As mentioned before, changing systems requires becoming aware of their complexity. Indeed, the problems addressed by this methodology are often “wicked” in nature, meaning that they lack a closed-form definition, causes and effects are often uncertain and the identified issue include a wide spectrum of stakeholders with differing opinions (Dentoni, Bitzer, and Pascucci 2015). It often consists of pressing challenges such as climate change, education, poverty, environment or health, which are all SDGs-related issues.

Henceforth, understanding why those social issues persist, as well as posing an effective challenge to our own role in addressing them, is at the heart of systems change (Abercrombie, Boswell, and Thomasoo 2018). Therefore, systems change brings a new perspective for addressing those issues and aims at understanding the contribution from a variety of players who are connected and interdependent (Gopal and Kania 2015). While Gopal and Kania (2015) have admitted that there were still a gap among philanthropists about what a systems change approach entails, they emphasized that potential connections should be found with the help of tools such as systems mapping and social network analysis.

Considering the lack of agreements and researches about systems change within the literature, Ashoka and al. (2021) definition will be used as a reference to define exactly the

concept of systems change. Indeed, the nature of their mission, being related to systemic change within an international scope, gives them a considerable advantage in terms of understanding and analysing this theory.

“Systems change captures the idea of addressing the causes, rather than the symptoms, of a societal issue by taking a holistic (or ‘systemic’) view. Systemic change is generally understood to require adjustments or transformations in the policies, practices, power dynamics, social norms or mindsets that underlie the societal issue at stake. It often involves the collaboration of a diverse set of players and can take place on a local, national or global level. The iceberg illustration below shows different levels at which systemic change can take place: ‘deeper’ changes tend to result in greater impact, but less-dramatic shifts can pave the way towards these deeper changes” (Ashoka and al. 2021)

The definition highlights the collaboration needed from a diverse set of actors in order to catalyse transformation across sectors on different levels. Those transformations have the purpose of addressing societal issues, for which most pressing ones are today defined by the SDGs. In the sense of system transformation, innovation policies are called to play a major role reaching a more societally desirable outcome, inducing that the state is preponderant in this process (Borras and Edler 2020).

Furthermore, when it comes to the iceberg illustration (Appendix 1 – The iceberg), it is crucial to realise that the deeper the changes take place, the more likely they are to have a great impact and be transformational. It is therefore at this level of the structure that systems change is aiming at bringing something to the table by working on shifting the mindsets. The second level of the iceberg regards structural change that is considered as less deep than the transformational ones. It often involves sectoral reallocations. The first level of the iceberg

refers to incremental change, which is considered as discontinuous and marginal (Wollin 1999).

Thus, the spread of transformational change has leverage the need for reconfiguring mindsets and ways of operating in order to effectively manage current societal challenges. Those ever-changing interconnected systems necessitate the support of leaders and an increasing number of players acting systematically (Rockefeller 2018). It also requires multi-stakeholder approaches, with an emphasis on collaboration across systems. It is therefore the role of governments to release the potential of social entrepreneurs by co-creating a supportive ecosystem in order to reach more resilient, lasting and better results.

2.3 Systems social entrepreneurs

Social entrepreneurship is becoming an increasingly important component of our current business environment. However, because an increasing number of projects claim to enter the case of social entrepreneurship, it is crucial to recall what a social entrepreneur is and how it does distinct itself from an entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurship has often been characterized by the reaction to the recognition of business opportunities, but also, as introduced by Schumpeter (1939) as a “process of creative destruction”. This also applies for social entrepreneurs, who are considered as another category in the entrepreneurial sector. However, in their case, the central criterion is mission-related while wealth creation is regarded as a means and not as a method to measure value creation (Dees 1998). Therefore, the main distinction between the two resides in the value proposition. In what may concern entrepreneurs, the value proposition is set and organised to serve markets that have the means to afford the offered product or service (Martin and Osberg 2007). The creation of profit is therefore inherent to the proposition. When it comes to social

entrepreneurs, they seek value for a major portion of society, generating large-scale and transformational benefits (Martin and Osberg 2007).

Furthermore, social entrepreneurship is considered as a legitimate and innovative solution to address societal complex issues (Hervieux and Voltan 2016). In this sense, the purpose of this theory resonate with the definition provided about systems change. This paper will base its research on Catalyst 2030 definition for social entrepreneurs.

“Practitioners with innovative solutions to society’s most pressing social, cultural, and environmental challenges. They are ambitious and persistent — tackling major issues and offering new ideas for systems-level change. They are driven not by profit but by making a positive impact on the world.” (Catalyst 2030 2021)

Moreover, the definition already emphasised the systems approach that is required to foster positive impact. Milligan (2017) argues that it is systemic impact rather than organizational impact that needs to be scaled in order to promote change. The real difference between social entrepreneurs and systems social entrepreneurs resides behind the approach. While social entrepreneurs aim at creating positive impact targeting specific market externalities, systems entrepreneurs operate in a holistic way with a systems perspective (Balfour 2016).

2.4 Social entrepreneurial ecosystem

There are multiple ways for assessing, reviewing and strengthening the social entrepreneurs ecosystem. Among its “Theory of change” document, Catalyst 2030 has elaborate a strategy that wants to foster long-term systemic change through the deployment of social entrepreneurs, partners and resources (Catalyst 2030 2021). Their strategy is essentially based on the challenges (mentioned above) that are stalling progress (Governments, Ecosystem and Fundings’ levels) and have the ambition to help achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Henceforth, their strategy is established on three pillars that are all built on the development of social change pioneers but also by the culture shifts towards equity. The first pillar relies on the development of an supporting environment for social enterprises to thrive. This implies the understanding of social enterprises' role within the ecosystem but also a scalable and effective funding system (Catalyst 2030 2021).

Furthermore, the second pillar aims at catalysing collaborative action. Collaborative action has to be widespread, principally among two types of actors. The first type of actors that needs to enhance their collaboration are social entrepreneurs. After, collaboration with other stakeholders seeking systems transformations, such as public institutions but also investors and players from the private sector, must also be supported (Catalyst 2030 2021).

Besides, the third pillar, aiming at mobilizing not only social entrepreneurs but also partners and resources, comprises the facilitation of a systems change learning ecosystem. Acknowledging that systems change issue necessitates new mental models, cultures, tools, processes, and organizational methods, remains crucial to foster the continuous growth of the ecosystem for social innovators, allowing them to evolve based on learning and evidences (Catalyst 2030 2021). This pillar targets the support of peer-to-peer learning, especially through co-creation in order to cultivate knowledge theory for systemic change.

Additionally, Ashoka and al. (2021) have highlighted the power of governments to support a growing ecosystem where systems social entrepreneurs can succeed. Accordingly, they have set up a framework with three inputs and two enablers, although it should be regarded holistically (Appendix 2 – Building ecosystems in which systems social entrepreneurs can thrive). The identified inputs are the following ones : build capabilities, leverage the power of open information and develop funding models. The related enablers focus on fostering institutionalisation and promoting collaboration (Ashoka and al. 2021).

In what may concern the inputs, unlocking the power of open information by disclosing and co-creating data is based on the assumption that inefficiencies are produced when public sector data are kept private (Ashoka and al. 2021). After, building systems-thinking capabilities aims at defining a common language to address societal issues. The development of those abilities within public administrations could further accelerate the transition. The third area where systems social entrepreneurs needs to be supported refers to the improvement of funding models that should be recognising their characteristics to better meet their needs. It also encompasses the establishment of funds dedicated to systems change. Catalyst 2030 (2021) in its “Embracing complexity” report also emphasized five ways for funders to support systems change work being respectively : *“embrace a systems mindset, support evolving paths to systems change, work in true partnership, prepare for long-term engagement and collaborate with other stakeholders”*.

Regarding the enablers, promoting collaboration within and across sectors is essential to address complex and relentless SDGs-related issues (Ashoka and al. 2021). There is a necessity for co-creation to be supported by the complementarity of government institutions and building networks institutions. Not only does it have the potential to increase societal impact, but it could also create synergies between stakeholders. Moreover, fostering institutionalisation not only refers to the implementation of policies supporting social innovation, it also encompasses the establishment of strong infrastructure with the implications of all stakeholders (Ashoka and al. 2021).

3. Methodology

To conduct the research, the most prevalent option is to support the analysis of the ecosystem with qualitative data. Indeed, as we can observe in Herrero’s (2013) work, it is the methodology that seems the most adequate to tackle complex and innovative concepts such as

systems change. Secondary sources will be the principal means of collecting the necessary data. The analysis will be based on reports describing the current landscape of the social enterprises' ecosystems both in Belgium and in Europe. However, primary data in the sense of a semi-structured interview with Karel Vanderpoorten will help polish the investigation and either validate or complete the results obtained with secondary sources. Working as a policy officer in the DG grow department at the European Commission, his expertise on social economy provides a valuable methodological triangulation for analysing the ecosystems.

Henceforth, it raises the need for a framework capable of assessing collaborative systems change within social entrepreneurs' ecosystems. As observed in the literature review, the framework aims at opposing the current development paradigm, which emphasizes top-down solutions executed through hierarchical institutions. For this purpose, Catalyst 2030 (2021) has defined three pillars that can support its theory of change, which has been built on the belief that greater collaboration will result from shifting predominant culture towards equity. Although those pillars have been shaped to answer the goals of Catalyst 2030' s mission, it is also a strategy framework that have been set up for its members. Indeed, as a recognized worldwide movement, their strategy is built up for co-created and integrated approaches to ensure collective impact.

The first pillar relies on the development of an environment enabling social entrepreneurs to flourish. It will be evaluated through three criteria which are respectively : understanding the role of SE's, the responsiveness of the SE funding system and the improvement policy at the country level and issues at a specific level. The second pillar aims at catalysing collaborative action. The assessment criteria will review the degree of collaboration among social entrepreneurs but also with other stakeholders pursuing systems change. Lastly, the facilitation of a systems change learning will be appraised through the implementations of new mental models, cultures, tools, processes and organising approaches. Each criterion will

receive an assessment following the subsequent table. It has been organised and established following criteria for systems change coming from the ambition diagnostic template (Catalyst 2030 2021), the better tool for social entrepreneurs (European Commission and OECD, n.d.) and the 5 areas to create supportive ecosystems formed by Ashoka and al. (2021).

Criteria for diagnostic	Profiling and understanding of SE's roles	Scalability and responsiveness of the SE funding system	Improvement of policy, frameworks, and sustainability practices at the country level and issues at a specific level	Collaborative action amongst social entrepreneurs	Collaborative action with other stakeholders pursuing systems change	New mental models, cultures, tools, processes and organising approaches
High	Role of SE's is both legally and politically recognized, while legal framework have been co-created with relevant stakeholders	Ensure budget allocation for social innovation and restructure investment incentives to encourage innovation in the social economy sector	High level of engagement and stakeholders collaboration with public administration	Presence of networks enabling SE to connect with peers and develop transnationally, ; therefore stimulating knowledge sharing	Create a high-level touchpoint for systems social entrepreneurs and social innovators (e.g. 'Office for Social Innovation')	Shifted mindset and appearance of measurement tools for systems change (e.g. culture of collaboration, co-creation as a principle of work, holistic approach and systems thinking language)
Average	Role of SE's is either politically or legally recognized	Establishment of new funding models and dynamics with philanthropists, impact investors or private sector	Allow for-profits to consider social motives and allow fiscal benefits for SE's	Networks impact are of a limited scale and are still emerging	Establishment of cross-sectoral networks enabling collaboration and reducing barrier (e.g. hub, incubators & trainings)	Recognising that the systems change challenge requires new mental models, cultures, tools, processes and organising approaches
Low	Role of SE's is neither politically nor legally recognized	Lack of information regarding the financing needs of social enterprises and potential funders	Define 'social enterprise' as a fundamental step before designing and enacting laws and policies	Lack of support for the development of networks	Establishment of a unique touchpoint supporting social entrepreneurs to make connection with governments	Lack of learning tools and facilitation process for systems change (e.g. few data retrieved)

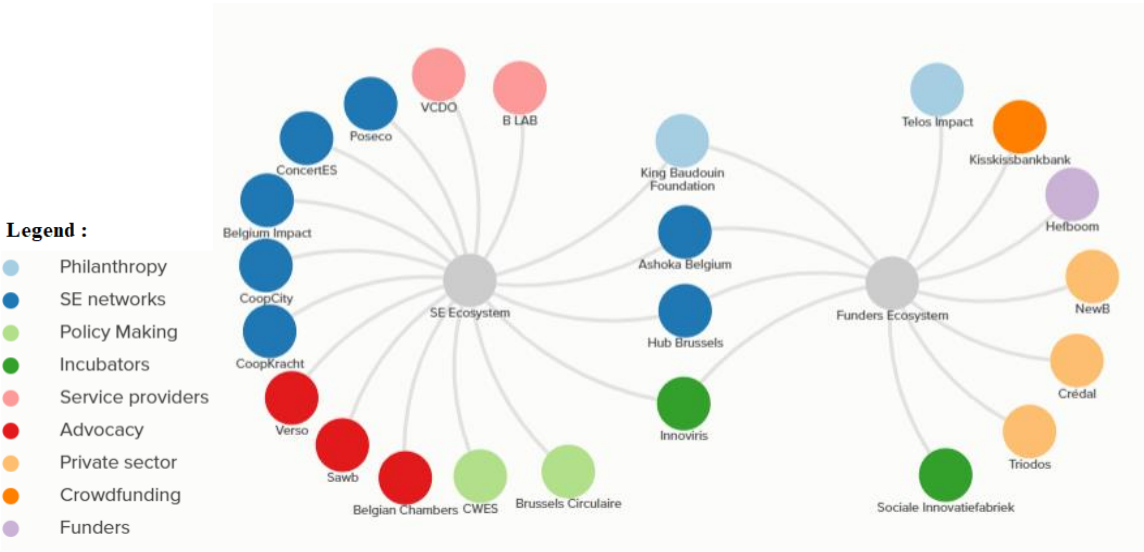
Table 1 : Criteria for systems change analysis

The criteria have been defined to assess the behaviour and level of acceptance adopted within the ecosystem and will help evaluate the ecosystem's readiness perceived by both

public institution at European and Belgian level. For this purpose, two reports (2020) from the European commission on social enterprises and their ecosystem will be used. The first report will provide insights on the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Belgium. The second report is a comparative report regarding social enterprises ecosystems in Europe. Its analysis will allow determining the most widespread European standards and will help situating Belgium compared to these.

4. Analysis

To begin with, it is relevant to provide an overview of the main actors surrounding the social entrepreneurs ecosystems in Belgium. Here, two main ecosystems were distinguished. On the one hand, the social entrepreneurs’ ecosystem is represented while on the other hand, players having a role in funding the ecosystems are highlighted. They have been categorized following their role within the ecosystems, while some players have important stake at the intersection of the funding and the SE ecosystems. Even though very few of those organisations are mentioning the concept of systems change within their reports and websites, this non-exhaustive landscape mapping will support the analysis of the Belgian ecosystem.



Mapping of the Belgian social entrepreneurs ecosystems (Author’s analysis)

After, the analysis of the two reports from the European Commission (2020) complemented with specific research on several organisations coming from the mapping exercise and the interview with Karel Vanderpoorten have led to the following results for the social entrepreneurs ecosystems both in Belgium and in Europe. The results are commented below the table.

	Theory of Change	Belgian ecosystems	European standards
Develop Enabling Environment for SEs to Flourish	Profiling and understanding of SE’s roles	Average	High
	Scalability and responsiveness of the SE funding system	High	Average
	Improvement of policy, frameworks, and sustainability practices at the country level and issues at a specific level	Average-Low	Average-High
Catalyse Collaborative Action	Collaborative action among social entrepreneurs	Average-High	Average
	Collaborative action with other stakeholders pursuing systems change	Average-High	Average
Facilitate a Systems Change Learning Ecosystem	New mental models, cultures, tools, processes and organising approaches	Low	Low

Table 2 : Belgian and European social entrepreneurs ecosystems

In what may concern the overall profiling and understanding of SE’s roles within the Belgian ecosystem, it has been evaluated as average while most common European standards seems slightly higher. Indeed, the law of associations has appeared in the code of companies in 2019 to encourage a more entrepreneurial mindset for associations (EC, 2020). This emphasized the legal recognition of social enterprises in Belgium. However, it still lacks of political acceptance. This is the result of the absence of policy frameworks tackling social enterprises, which is not the case in most European countries (e.g. United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg, France, Greece) (EC 2020). The reason behind this absence resides in the

regionalisation of most competences regarding social economy in Belgium.¹ The absence of consensus around the cooperative legal form has generated low self-recognition and therefore a weak identity. Co-creation and mutual understanding is still lacking as social enterprises approaches defer depending on the different players engaged.

Regarding the funding ecosystem, it is assessed as being highly scalable and responsive in Belgium. Indeed, it is not difficult for social entrepreneurs to find access to financial supports or investment capital. Although the proportion of public subsidy has decreased over the past 20 years, it still represents an important amount. Moreover, it has been compensated by the development of support foundations and philanthropic actors (e.g. King Baudouin Foundation, Telos Impact) that have been crucial for the growth of the sector (EC 2020). The private sector has also known the emergence of social banks (e.g. Crédal, NewB, Triodos) which have a more general interest dimension. Meanwhile, some traditional banks (e.g. KBC) originates from the cooperative movement and are therefore less reluctant to fund social entrepreneurs, even sometimes outperforming social banks in terms of interest rate². Overall, the scope of social finance has grown over the past few years, with a plurality of access to resources such as public and private grants, crowdfunding platforms (e.g. Kisskissbankbank), funders (e.g. Hefboom), networks (e.g. Ashoka, Hub Brussels) and incubators (e.g. Innoviris, Sociale Innovatiefabriek). There is now a necessity for better matching the needs of social entrepreneurs within the funding ecosystem.

Comparatively, European standards are set to be lower than Belgian standards. Most European countries do not have access to public grants, even if there is a growing amount of demand for repayable financial resources (EC 2020). Philanthropic funds are well established and primordial for the development of the sector. Moreover, the European commission has

¹ Karel Vanderpoorten, interview by author, May 13, 2022

² Vanderpoorten, interview

introduced the Social Business Initiative (SBI) in 2011, which has launched discussion on how to better support social enterprise growth through a solid financial system (EC 2020). The scalability is still partial but has led to the launching of a dedicated axis for social enterprise finance within the EU Employment and Social Innovation programme (EaSI) (EC 2020).

After, the definition for social enterprise in Belgium lacks of a general framework within different regions of the country. While it is defined as a subset of the social economy in Wallonia and Brussels or as a synonym, it is the opposite in Flanders (EC 2020). The vision coming from the French-speaking Belgium is more corresponding to the European approach and have a stronger focus on social entrepreneurship, while in Flanders social economy mostly concentrate on the work integration social enterprises (WISEs).³ However, the French-speaking part definition is not allowing for social enterprises to pursue profit motives (EC 2020). Furthermore, the new law on associations has led to cooperatives only being recognised as social enterprises, including no fiscal differentiation. However, at European level, most countries can benefit from fiscal advantages when exercising as a social enterprise (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany) (EC 2020).

Furthermore, Collaboration among social entrepreneurs is increasing through the emergence of networks supporting social innovation within non-profit sector (e.g. Ashoka, King Baudouin Foundation, Sociale Innovatiefabriek). Those networks have collaborated with non-profit organizations to improve their competence and entrepreneurial mindset, as well as taking an advocacy role for the recognition of social economy as a legitimate economic sector that cultivates job creation and economic growth (EC 2020). Moreover, organizations such as Ashoka, Poseco and Belgium Impact have the mission of raising awareness around social entrepreneurship and stimulate co-creation between innovative social entrepreneurs. At

³ Vanderpoorten, interview

European level, collaboration among social entrepreneurs through supporting networks. (e.g. Catalyst 2030, Ashoka, Impact Hub) is also an emerging trend that is strengthening social entrepreneurs' community. Indeed, although it is recognised that networks could leverage the development of social enterprises, it is often considered as weak or not operational yet (e.g. Cyprus, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, Slovakia) (EC 2020).

Regarding the collaboration among stakeholders having interests in systems change in Belgium, it has been assessed as average-high. This has been confirmed by Karel Vanderpoorten, as he evaluated the connection between the highest political and social economy as good (e.g. SAW-B, CWES). As defined in the literature review, systems change involve the collaboration across sectors of a varied type of actors in order to address complex societal issues. The 13 Belgian Chambers of Commerce plays the role of representing the interests of companies that want to be sustainable in front of governments but also offering guidance and organising networking events (Belgian Chambers, n.d.). ConcertES also plays the role of representing stakeholders having an interest in social economy through a transversal platform. Moreover, although many of the competences concerning social entrepreneurship have been transferred to the regional level, the role of SPF Economy is to provide a national institutional platform for reliable information on social entrepreneurship (SPF Economie, n.d.). As observed, roles are well orchestrated and decentralized in the governments and cross-sectoral networks are rising. A more concrete example is the development of social integration economy that has been elaborated at the national level through collaborations between the government, SE networks, and relevant stakeholders (e.g. King Roi Baudouin Foundation). However, the level of specialisation of the government point of contact should be increased and more specific to social entrepreneurship and innovation.

At European level, other countries have opted for decentralized policymakers and transversal platforms (e.g. France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands) (EC 2020). Most countries

consider that local authorities are better positioned to collaborate with social enterprises to experiment with innovative interaction. However, it has still led to the creation of ministerial units at different level (central, regional, municipal) in different European countries.

Lastly, the facilitation of systems change learning is currently low both in Europe and in Belgium. One of the main cause is the lack of data surrounding social entrepreneurs' ecosystem, which increases the difficulty to make decisions supporting social innovation (EC 2020). This is also the direct consequence of the absence of consolidated agenda for research in most countries. In the specific case of Belgium, even with the existence of the Centre for Social Economy of the University of Liège, few data are retrieved, more especially in Flanders⁴. There is also a lack of agreement behind the ideology and the building of a common language when speaking about social entrepreneurship⁵. However, dynamics are still evolving. First, the Belgium statistical office (Statbel) is currently running a pilot on social economy and its economic performance⁶. After, The emergence of B corp increases the amount of available tool for social enterprises to be recognised and certified. Their mission is to change the economic system through collective action to address societal challenges and totally fits with systems change definition (B Lab, n.d.). Although the acknowledgement and credibility of the movement is growing, their global impact is still limited to 4000 corporations. Moreover, the rise of social funds and social investment also include the appearance of a more market-oriented approach for social entrepreneurs (EC 2020).

5. Results

The analysis of the landscape surrounding social entrepreneurship in Belgium led to the conclusion that Belgium is evolving and developing a stronger ecosystem, while disparity between the Flanders and the French-speaking part can be observed as a barrier for further

⁴ Vanderpoorten, interview

⁵ Vanderpoorten, interview

⁶ Vanderpoorten, interview

development. Moreover, in comparison with the European standards, the Belgian ecosystem is performing relatively well. However, there is still a need for progress and an even stronger ecosystem could be build with the concept of Collaborative Systems Change. Fundamental aspects of the concept are defined by the 7 C's framework : Convene, Connect, Collaborate, Co-create, Celebrate, Cohere, Change, Consciousness (Catalyst 2030 2021). An investigation on how those attributes, linked with the concept of systems change as reviewed in the literature, can strengthen the Belgian social entrepreneurs' ecosystem will be provided. The recommendations will be built around the understanding of the ecosystem, the 5 areas to create supportive ecosystems mentioned in the literature review (Catalyst 2030 2021) and the ambition diagnostic tool (Catalyst 2030 2021). Although these recommendations will be written in accordance with each pillar concerned and for the specific case of Belgium, it is critical to remember their interdependence and to approach them in a holistic manner.

Concerning the profiling and understanding of SE's role, the first action to take is to politically recognised the importance of social entrepreneurs by co-creating a strategy framework at federal level aiming at providing a strong infrastructure to guide social innovation. This can be challenging in regards with the disparity between the regions but is essential to create a framework and a language that is common within the country. Fostering institutionalisation through participatory approaches can be key to support social entrepreneurs into the achievement of the SDGs. To better profile social entrepreneurs' role, it is also crucial to increase awareness around their systemic impact by cooperating with stakeholders and providing regular reports. As highlighted by Karel Vanderpoorten, raising awareness also requires tools (e.g. Labels) and performance measure that can prove the ecological and social value of social entrepreneurs.

Secondly, even though the Belgian funding ecosystem around social entrepreneurs has been understood as high, there still exist areas of improvement. First, examining and mapping

all funding options for social entrepreneurs in collaboration with philanthropists (e.g. King Baudouin Foundation, Telos Impact) and funders (e.g. Hefboom) could help identify the gaps and needs within the funding ecosystem (Catalyst 2030 2021). Another way to optimise funding has been provided in the ambition diagnostic tool. It has been observed that there were a slight decrease in the budget allocation for social innovation in Belgium. The aim is to keep it as high as possible, while allowing local execution. Moreover, rather than providing funds to specific projects, it is valuable to promote collaboration among social entrepreneurs with long-term initiatives objectives such as SDGs-related portfolio (Catalyst 2030 2021).

Regarding the improvement of policy, it is important to provide tax benefits to both social enterprises and their investors at the federal level. This is currently not the case in Belgium. Private companies with social impact should benefit from fiscal differentiation in order to incentivise organisations to engage in societal challenges. It could also take the form of social impact credits for the SDGs, as it has already been done with carbon credits in Europe (Catalyst 2030 2021). This measure implies the understanding of the way tax factors can affect the value proposition of an organisation, but also the value and impact generated by social innovation (Hlady-Rispal and Servantie 2016).

After, the collaborative actions among social entrepreneurs can also be enhanced, especially by increasing the scale of networks to the national level. Although accelerators and incubators such as Ashoka, Sociale innovatiefabriek or Hub Brussels already provide training and mentoring programme, there is a need for collective action standards aiming at strengthening systems social entrepreneurs capabilities (Catalyst 2030 2021). For this purpose, the main active accelerators and incubators players of the ecosystem should organise formal communications with social entrepreneurs networks builders (e.g. Ashoka, Coopkracht, Hub Brussels) defining most pressing needs for social entrepreneurs and therefore increase their national coverage. Their role is also to connect a diverse set of players

in the ecosystem to facilitate the sharing of knowledge. Moreover, synergies and opportunities could also be gained by collaborating with other European similar networks⁷.

The previous point further leads to the necessity of collaborative action across sectors for actors having a role in systems change. For this, the first initiative that should be taken is to improve SPF Economy level of specialisation and even create a dedicated section for social entrepreneurship. It should be a permanent office, being in charge of the budget for a long-time period and should be the reference point for social entrepreneurship in Belgium. Also, the Belgian government should be looking for talent having experience in all relevant sectors (private, public and social) in order to define a common language for cross-sectoral networks and therefore reduce barriers for collaboration. For the stimulation of collective action, governments should also embrace the celebration concept, in order to keep key players engaged towards systems change. Although the Voka Charter for Sustainable Entrepreneurship (VCDO) (CCIW in Wallonia) already offers awards and certifications for good practitioners, implementing such awards for civil servants might also be effective.

Finally, the implementation of new mental models, tools, processes and organising approaches is the most difficult one to assess and it is therefore challenging to provide relevant recommendations. Indeed, this is because the development of those concepts are the one where the systems are getting closer to transformational changes but also where consciousness are changing and norms shifting away from the more individual focus. More than initiatives such as B Corp, a fundamental step towards the building of new dynamics within social entrepreneurs ecosystem needs to emerge. Indeed, in Belgium, very few data reports are monitoring social entrepreneurship. There is still the 2020 reports from *L'Observatoire de l'Economie Sociale* that has been shaped by ConcertES and its members. Nonetheless, it mainly focuses on social economy as a whole and do not report anything about

⁷ Vanderpoorten, interview

its impact. Therefore, governments could collaborate with social entrepreneurs and ConcertES to co-generate and disclose the data they collect. More than making governmental data free to access, governments and social entrepreneurs should develop approaches to collect data that answer their needs (Catalyst 2030 2021). Moreover, the formalisation of policy experimentation through co-creation could be a stepping stone towards the incorporation of effective social innovations within governments actions (Catalyst 2030 2021).

6. Conclusion

This research provides interesting insights about the social entrepreneurs ecosystems in Belgium and its readiness to further adopt systems change theory. The ecosystem has been compared with European standards and complemented with the interview of Karel Vanderpoorten. Moreover, this paper delivers a first map representing the main actors having the potential to support the Belgian social entrepreneurial ecosystem. All of the above methods have led to two main conclusions. Those will be followed by the limitations of the study, complemented with suggestions for further researches.

First, the aim of this paper was to assess the Belgian social entrepreneurs ecosystem readiness in relation with systems change. When compared with the European standards, Belgium is performing slightly better thanks to a highly scalable and responsive funding system but also because of the higher amount of collaboration within the ecosystems. However, very few organisations from the landscape mapping have already adopted the concept of systems change. Indeed, when matched with the literature review, and more precisely the characteristics of collaborative systems change, it is observed that there is a need for further progress in order for social entrepreneurs to bring transformational change.

Secondly, collaborative systems change has promising features to strengthen the Belgian social entrepreneurial ecosystem and therefore helps answer the needs of SDGs-related issues.

This paper mainly highlights the role of the governments but also the needed legal framework for implementing systems change within the ecosystems. Therefore, the “how” question encompasses the 5 areas facilitating social entrepreneurs’ mission shaped by Ashoka and al (2021), including the building of capabilities, the development of funding models and the power of open information, which are all three enabled by the promotion of collaboration and the fostering of institutionalisation. Moreover, the realization of the 7C’s framework (Catalyst 2030 2021) might also be helping. It includes a strong culture of collaboration with main identified actors from the landscape mapping having conversations about most pressing topics, but it also implies the implementation of co-creation, collective action and systems thinking language as principles of work.

Finally, limitations of the analysis such as the restricted amount of data available could slightly bias the results. Indeed, systems change is a brand-new topic with still very few resources and some institutional boundaries. Also, the two reports from the European Commission used to conduct the analysis provide insights from an external perspective and possibly miss some understanding from the field. In this sense also, some recommendations might ignore the complexity behind the disparity between the Flanders and the French-speaking part of Belgium. Moreover, the paper essentially focuses on legal framework while other horizons could be relevant. This is also a direction for future researches. The collection of more data linked with the definition of indicators might also be a stepping stone for measuring the impact of systems social entrepreneurs. After, bringing all stakeholders from the mapping exercise around the table to shape specific needs of the ecosystems could help designing new dynamics around social entrepreneurs. This could also be done through discussions about the topic reunifying actors from different countries. Indeed, isn’t it in the nature of systems change to bring holistic conversations across sectors and countries with the aim of, in the short-term, reaching the 2030 sustainable development goals ?

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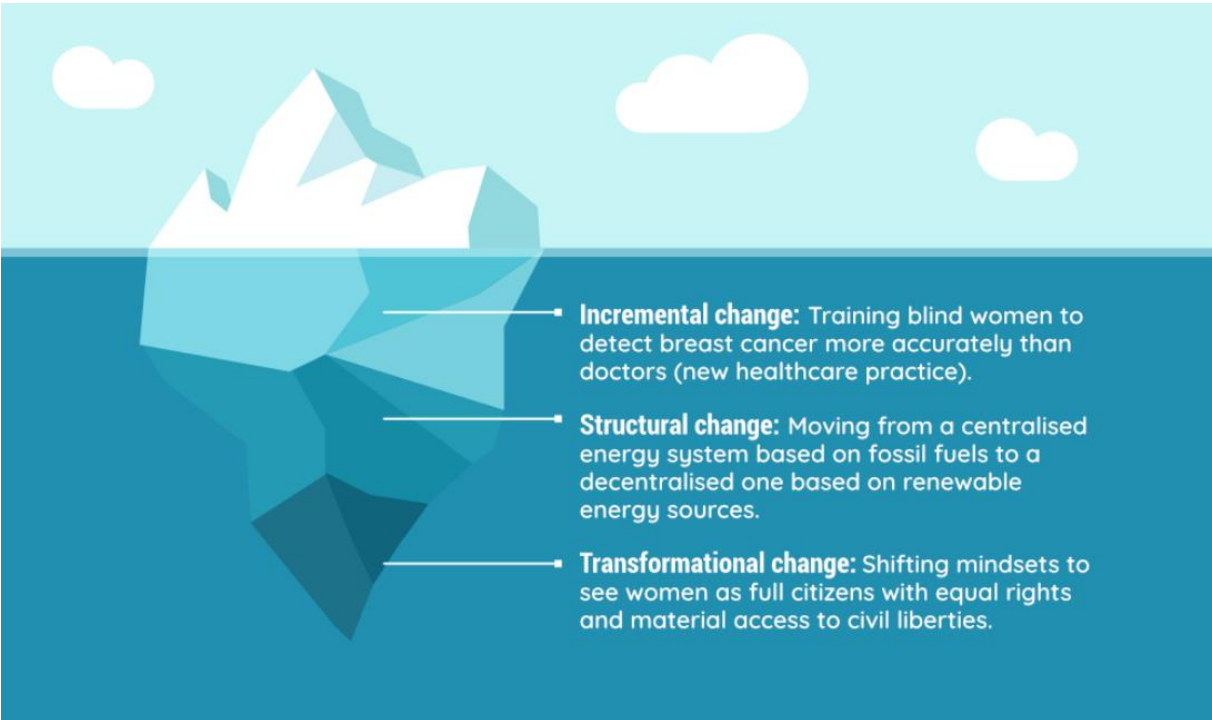
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – The iceberg (Ashoka and al. 2021, 10)



Appendix 2 – Building ecosystems in which systems social entrepreneurs can thrive (Ashoka and al. 2021, 22)



Appendix 3 – Interview questions

1.	How would you generally assess the level of the social entrepreneurs ecosystem in Belgium? Is it an environment where social entrepreneurs can really thrive ?
2.	Would you say that the differences on Social Economy definitions are a barrier for the improvement of the ecosystem?
3.	How would you assess the political recognition of social enterprises in Belgium? Does it have policy framework?
4.	How would you assess the scalability and responsiveness of the funding ecosystem ? Also in terms of budget allocation and new funding models ?
5.	Do you consider that there is a high level of engagement and stakeholder collaboration with public administration for the improvement of policy and frameworks for sustainability practices ?
6.	What can you say about the amount of quantitative data retrieved on Social Economy to measure impact and progress?
7.	What are the next most pressing steps for Belgium to improve its social entrepreneurial ecosystem ?

Appendix 4 – Interview with Karel Vanderpoorten (Policy officer at European Commission)

1.	<p>Let's first focus on a conceptual discussion on what social economy, social entrepreneurs and social enterprises are. In Belgium there are big differences in terms of legal recognition and frameworks.</p> <p>Social Economy in Flanders is nothing more than work integration social enterprises (WISEs) which is a very specific aspect and certainly not the wider approach on Social Economy.</p>
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	<p>In Wallonia and in Brussels, they have more or less a similar approach, which is getting closer to the one from the EU. This means that this Social economy approach is the one starting from the most recognised legal form which are Cooperatives, Mutual Society, Foundations and Associations and more recently the Social enterprises. This latest is in most countries not a specific legal form but since the launch of the SBI and the social economy action plan it has joined the family of Social Economy.</p> <p>So you can still observe different vision of Social Economy around Europe but this is also true in Belgium. It is really important to understand the differences intra Belgium. I think that definitely the Brussels and Wallonia vision is more corresponding to the European approach with a strong focus on social entrepreneurship. Back to Flanders, although the legislation is not recognising the same definitions while social economy might not be a political priority, I believe that there is still a flourishing ecosystem around social enterprises and cooperative movements. You have for example the Sociale Innovatiefabriek, which is an institution promoting social Innovation.</p>
2.	<p>Of course, it can always be more favourable. Having a broader vision on Social Economy would be more efficient. However, without having specific policy from the government they are already promoting social entrepreneurs for example through the Flemish European Social Fund that puts lots of effort on social innovation.</p> <p>Although the federal level has very little competence when it comes to social economy, organisational forms are still a federal competence (e.g. ASBL, CVBA).</p> <p>However, sometimes it felt like people does not speak the same language when different players from different regions were brought together. Of course they can</p>

	<p>still collaborate but I still feel some strict borders where the ideology behind the concept is still differentiated among the ecosystem. Sometimes it is linked with socialism but sometimes also capitalism.</p>
3.	<p>Actually it doesn't have much but this is because the policy framework is regionalised. Social economy is in the hands of the regions while legal forms are decided at the federal level.</p>
4.	<p>For me funding is always split into 2 visions : you have funding in terms of grants and you have access to investment capital and loans.</p> <p>Programmes and tools to support financing for social economy were born because there were a market gap. Indeed, the banks in the market were not willing to finance social enterprises as they finance other business because they perceived them more risky while they are actually less evidence that can prove that. This is the result of a lack of knowledge about their business models.</p> <p>In Belgium, there is a quite well developed social finance system, which means banks are willing to finance social economy organisations. Many of the Belgium banks originates from the cooperative movement (e.g. KBC) meaning that they are very much open to fund this type of organisation.</p> <p>Those last years, because of really low rents, social banks have been outperformed by traditional commercial banks in the loans given to social entrepreneurs. If you think about Crédal or Hefboom, for example, even with the EaSI guarantee from the European commission (dealing with risk so that the banks is more willing to provide a loan to social enterprise), are not competitive anymore because any commercial banks are willing to give lower rents to social enterprises. This means that the biggest boat will most likely find easy access to financing and investment capital.</p> <p>There is little signs that social economy in Belgium have difficulties to find access</p>

	to finance. Also we have a very developed microfinance market, with many active players in this field
5.	I believe there is a quite good connection between social economy and the highest political. For example next week there will be the 25th anniversary of Verso which is one of the Flemish umbrella for social economy or social profits and Jan Jambon will be there. This is a sign that he values the presence of this type of actors. In Wallonia, the connection between SAWB (umbrella for social economy in Wallonia) are very strong for the development of social economy. It is not surprising that one of the most important research and study center on Social Economy is established with EMES in Liege.
6	Very few data are retrieved, especially in Flanders. However, it is better established in Brussels and Wallonia. Everything starts with your policy definition and what you take into the scope or not. I also know that for example the Belgium statistical office is currently running a pilot on Social Economy and economic performance. So even if its quite developed, it is difficult to bring information on a global scale in the country because of the different approaches.
7.	Generally you can hardly denied that Belgium has a pretty well developed ecosystem. Should it be regarding regulatory framework, access to finance, innovation support mechanisms. The only thing in my opinion that should be improved is general awareness among public and citizens regarding the value of social economy and social entrepreneurs. This is currently very much a niche which is not really recognised by the general audience in Belgium. The most important to raise awareness is to make sure that there is solid business models behind so that they are not seen such as grant consuming machines but rather as valuable organisation with high social or ecological impact. In this sense , there is also a need

	<p>to improve the communication around the performance in terms of impact. Labels might also help!</p> <p>The second thing is that Belgium and particularly the Flemish part lives in its own cocoon when it comes to social economy while there is so much to learn by networking with other European similar organisations.</p>
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