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# **The social economy: an international perspective. Introduction**

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## The social economy: an international perspective

### Introduction

Research into the social economy is currently undergoing a process of scientific consolidation both internationally and in the Spanish-speaking world. Not only has the number of researchers who are interested in cooperatives, non-profit organisations or social firms multiplied, so have specialised centres and study centres. Other signs of scientific institutionalisation are the increasing diversity of the subject matter and approaches in this scientific community, its incorporation into national and international scientific associations, the international scientific conferences that are regularly held, such as the International CIRIEC Research Conferences on the Social Economy or those on cooperatives and the third sector organised by ISTR, EURICSE, EMES and the ICA, and even joint action by university researchers in relation to national and international administrations (such as input from the CIRIEC-Spain group of experts during the drafting of the first national Social Economy Act in the world, or the initiative by over 400 European social economy researchers to present a collective letter to the European Commission in October last year calling for action).

In the area of scholarly publications, the scientific merit of leading journals has been recognised. For instance, *CIRIEC-España, revista de economía pública, social y cooperativa* has been rated an 'excellent journal' following the rigorous evaluation carried out by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation's FECYT (Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology), the *Revista de estudios cooperativos* has just been included in SCOPUS and *Voluntas* and *Cuadernos de desarrollo rural* have recently been listed by ISI-Thomson.

In this promising context, CIRIEC-España is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2011. CIRIEC-Spain was founded 25 years ago as a scientific association with the firm intention of institutionalising and fostering quality research in the field of the social economy in its widest sense from cooperatives to non-profit institutions serving households with the support of the social economy business sector and of Spanish government bodies with responsibilities for fostering the social economy. On behalf of CIRIEC-España, we would like to take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude to them.

Over the years, the work of our association has been wide-ranging, diverse and sustained:

- Continuously conducting dozens of research programmes; four of the latest to be published are Barea, J. & Monzón, J.L. (2011a and 2011b), Monzón (2010) and Monzón & Barea (2007).
- Regularly, and punctually, publishing journals such as *CIRIEC-España, revista de economía pública, social y cooperativa* and *CIRIEC-España, revista jurídica de economía social y cooperativa*, which enjoy international prestige in the areas of economics and law, respectively.
- Co-publishing an informative magazine with a very wide circulation, *Noticias de la economía pública, social y cooperativa*, which has been awarded the Best Work of Journalism prize for its dissemination of the cooperative values.

- Developing a powerful information and documentation centre, CIDEDEC, that specialises in the social economy and related subjects, is open to the scientific community and maintains several data bases, including a register of over 500 social economy researchers.
- Periodically organising conferences and seminars that bring together hundreds of researchers from Spain and the rest of the world. For example, around 150 researchers will be attending the coming 14th Social Economy Researchers Seminar (*XIV Jornadas de investigadores en economía social*) in June 2012 (the International Year of Cooperatives), which will take place in the Basque Country, while the 3rd International CIRIEC Research Conference on the Social Economy, held in Valladolid in April 2011, attracted over 300 participants.
- Disseminating and raising the profile of the latest social economy related scholarly and business activities through the Spanish Social Economy Observatory (*Observatorio español de la economía social*) and the Latin American Employment and Social Economy Observatory (*Observatorio iberoamericano del empleo y de la economía social*). These Observatories' regular electronic bulletins, together with the Electronic *Bulletin of Mutualism and the Social Economy* that CIRIEC writes for the Mutualidad Divina Pastora, reach tens of thousands of households world-wide.
- Collaborating with CIRIEC-International and other international bodies in research projects and in actions of a scientific nature.
- Promoting the academic activities of RedEneues, the Spanish network of university centres and institutes for research into the social economy, and collaborating with the University of Valencia's Master's degree in Social Economy.

To mark CIRIEC-Spain's 25th anniversary, the editorial board of this journal has decided to publish a special edition based exclusively on contributions in English that give an account of the latest subjects being studied in this field. This continues the journal's new policy of publishing monographic editions in English. The previous special issue was no. 62, under the title "Spanish social economy: facts and researches".

The call for papers has elicited nearly 30 proposals in English. Following an arduous evaluation and subsequent revisions, the 10 papers finally selected reflect the wealth of approaches and subjects currently being studied in the field of the social economy. We would like to mention that the high average quality of all the contributions received made it far from easy to choose which to publish.

In essence, the articles in this special number address five major themes.

The first, naturally, is the social economy in the current economic and financial crisis. In particular, the articles in this subject area analyse the processes in which the savings banks and credit cooperatives are immersed, which pose a challenge to their continuing in the social economy. They are approached from the economic and legal perspectives in the papers by Gemma Fajardo, Salvador Marín, Ester Gras y Marcos Antón. From a different angle, the article by Oriol Amat and Jordi Perramon

looks at the strategies being put into effect by other social economy enterprises, in this case worker cooperatives, to face up to the recession successfully and generate high growth curves.

The second subject area is the emerging social economy, a socio-economic reality that not many years ago was being referred to as the 'new social economy' and which has given birth to concepts such as social entrepreneurship, social firms, social innovation or even the 'fourth sector'. This is a new area of research that raises ontological and epistemological challenges for the social economy, joining the existing ones relating to the non-profit organisations tradition. Two papers address this subject, proposing new concepts, relating the emerging social economy to the social economy approach, presenting a wealth of empirical data and revealing its very considerable potential. These articles are by Nuria Toledano and by Julio Jiménez and Alfonso Carlos Morales.

The third theme is the recurring confrontation of the non-profit and social economy approaches, in this case with reference to an economic reality, the Spanish foundations sector, that has been increasing rapidly in this country since the first Foundations Act was passed in 1994.

Corporate social responsibility is another field which is analysed in this number. It is highly topical and is being challenged by the current crisis. The fact that *CIRIEC-España, revista de economía pública, social y cooperativa* has already published two monographic issues on the subject in recent years bears out its interest and high profile. The present number includes two papers in this area. The first compares the corporate social responsibility perspective with the cooperative principles. The second has greater empirical content and studies the social disclosure of corporate social responsibility in credit cooperatives. The authors of the former are Elias Rizkallah and Inmaculada Buendía and those of the latter are Ricardo Server and Jordi Capó.

The last of the five themes addressed in this number is the governance of social economy enterprises. Of the two contributions in this area, the first, by Carmen Muñoz and Juan Briones, analyses the nature of corporate governance from the internal perspective of social economy enterprises, while the second, by Jose Luis Retolaza and Leire San-Jose, examines it from the external point of view, in other words, including the stakeholders in the analysis and studying the social permeability of these organisations.

Lastly, we believe that the articles in this special number highlight important challenges and we hope that these will help to fuel theoretical and empirical debates and lead to new research.

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