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**TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISES DEVELOPMENT – THE CASE OF REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA**

**ТРЕНДОВЕ, ИЗАЗОВЕ И НАЈБОЉЕ ПРАКСЕ У РАЗВОЈУ СОЦИЈАЛНИ ПРЕДУЗЕЂА – СЛУЧАЈ РЕПУБЛИКА СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА**

**ABSTRACT**

*The events that happened during the political, social, and economic processes, followed by the financial crisis in the European Union and other countries highlighted the need in 2008 to think about new, diverse models of economic growth and development. In recent years, social entrepreneurship has been recognized as an innovative model of economic growth, although it is still not sufficiently known, inadequately supported and legally unregulated yet in many countries. The benefits from the progress of this type of entrepreneurship are numerous, especially analyzed and evaluated from a social and economic aspect. Social entrepreneurship is newly, rapidly evolving entrepreneurship that is developing within the Republic of North Macedonia and it is one of the most notable innovations in civil society in recent times.*

*The main objective of this paper is to identify trends and challenges faced in the development of social enterprises in North Macedonia using the Delphi method, and to provide the best practices/solutions and appropriate guidelines to foster innovation and creativity in social entrepreneurship for supporting social enterprises. Namely, the research study includes various stakeholders, crucial for the development of this type of entrepreneurship: existing social enterprises, potential social enterprises, conventional businesses, key individuals/players recognized for their positive contribution to this sphere, specialized institutions/organizations, and experts in the area.*

*The analyzes confirmed that the majority of social enterprises are community-based organizations, and offer solutions to benefit whole communities, with a small number of employees, nevertheless, there is little to no awareness among the population about this kind of enterprises as well as among the managers of traditional businesses.The study identified the key challenges, categorized into legal, economic and social, which in turn, should be worked on and taken into account in building future strategies for the development of social entrepreneurship.*

***Key words****: social entrepreneurship, challenges, trends, strategies for social enterprises, North Macedonia*

***JEL:*** *M21, O31, I31, D63*

**SAŽETAK**

*Догаћаји које су се десиле током политичких, друштвених и економских процеса, праћени финансијском кризом у Европској унији и друге земљe, указали су на потребу да се у 2008 години размишља о новим, разноврсним моделима економског раста и развоја. Социјално предузетништво је последних година препознато као иновативни модел економског раста, иако је у многим земљама још увек недовољно познато, неадекватно подржано и правно нерегулисано. Користи од напретка овог вида предузетништва су бројне, посебно анализирани и оцењени са друштвеног и економског аспекта. Социјално предузетништво је ново предузетништво које се брзо развија у Републици Северној Македонији и једна је од најзапаженијих иновација у цивилном друштву у последње време.*

*Основни циљ овог рада je да идентификује трендове и изазове са којим се суочавају у развој социјалних предузећа у Северној Македонији кроз коришћење Делфи метод и обезбеди најбоље праксе/решења и одговарајуће смернице за подстицање иновације и креативност у социјалном предузетништво због подршке социјални предузећима. Наиме, истраживаћка студија обухвата различне актере, кључне за развој ове врсте предузетништва: постојећа социјална предузећа, потенцијална социјална предузећа, конвенционални бизниси, кључни појединци/играчи препознати по њиховом позитивном доприносу у овој сфери, специјализоване институције/организације и стручњаци за област.*

*Анализе су потврдиле да су већина друштвених предузећа организације засновани на заједнице и нуде решења за добробит читавих заједница, са малим бројем запослених, међутим, међу становништвом, као и међу менаџерима традицоналних бизниса, постоји мала или никаква свест о овој врсти предузећа. Студија је идентификовала кључне изазове, категорисане на правне, економске и социјалне, на којима би, заузврат, треба радити и узети у обзир приликом изградње будућих стратегија за развој социјалног предузетништва.*

***Кључне речи:*** *социјално предузетништво, изазови, трендови, стратегије за социјална предузећа, Северна Македонија.*

***JEL****: M21, O31, I31, D63*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Social entrepreneurship is an innovative activity which creates social value that can occur in or across the non-profit, business, and public sectors. Namely, social entrepreneurship transforms society, tackles social problems, and improves society. Although social entrepreneurship has various titles, it gained practical significance during the 1970s and 1980s, but it was not until the 1990s that the subject gained attention from governments and the academic community. The Italian government created the first social firm model by adopting a specific legal form for social cooperatives in 1991. The UK government in 2004 established the second legal form for social enterprise in Europe by introducing the Community Interest Company. From the turn of the century onwards, the flow of publications became more substantial. At the same time, some highly successful social entrepreneurs have attracted considerable media attention, among them: Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen[[1]](#footnote-1) microfinance bank and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, and eBay's Jeffrey Scholl[[2]](#footnote-2), who founded Skol Foundation for supporting social entrepreneurship. Both were included among Time magazine's 100 People of the Year in 2006 (Hoogendoorn, Pennings & Thurik, 2010, p.4). Social enterprises (SE) are very important for local development. A social enterprise is an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders (European Commissions). Today, the European social economy provides more than 13.6 million paid jobs, employment of a workforce of over 19.1 million, including paid and non-paid, more than 82.8 million volunteers, equivalent to 5.5 million full time workers, more than 232 million members of cooperatives, mutuals and similar entities (European Economic and Social Committee, 2016, p.66).

Social entrepreneurs differ from traditional entrepreneurs in that their main desire is to make a difference in the world or in their communities. They often have personal experience with the causes they support, which inspires the mission of their business. While traditional businesses may measure success in terms of market share or year-over-year revenue growth, social entrepreneurs are more likely to focus on metrics such as jobs created, trees planted, or donations made to a charitable group that solves the problem they have. Numerous benefits derive from the functioning of social enterprises, which contribute to the employment of a vulnerable category of citizens - beneficiaries of social protection measures, which enables saving these social transfers, reducing the costs of further education and retraining. In addition to the social component, social enterprises also have an economic function. The economic criteria on which these enterprises will be based are significant for the rest of the enterprises and for the sustainability of the social enterprises themselves.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, there are significant beginnings of the development of social enterprises, but there are still unregulated conditions and several challenges for their functioning and development. It has been noted that many social entrepreneurs have been victims of social problems and have been resource constrained, often at almost every stage. Passion for social entrepreneurship is fueled by a sense of excitement, energy, and enthusiasm for solving social issues through meaningful activities that create social value. In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify the challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in the management and development of their enterprises through the example of social enterprises from Republic of North Macedonia. The paper is structured as follows: first section is related to literature review that include: evolution of social entrepreneurship, challenges faced by social enterprises - global and local perspectives, best practices in social enterprise development - insights from global and local contexts and empowerment as a mediating factor - insights from North Macedonia. Section two presents methodology i.e. material and methods used for preparing this paper, followed by trends, challenges and best practices of social entrepreneurship in Republic of North Macedonia in section three. The last section of the paper presents the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

1. **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social enterprises, which combine entrepreneurial principles with social goals to address a wide range of urgent societal concerns, have emerged as a dynamic and revolutionary force in the global economic landscape. The review of the literature digs into the many-sided trends, difficulties, and best practices in the growth of social enterprises, with an emphasis on their applicability and dynamics in North Macedonia and beyond.

The idea of social entrepreneurship has changed greatly through time and has become more popular as a means of addressing difficult societal concerns. Social enterprises, according to Mair and Marti (2006), are a type of "hybrid" organization that straddles the line between conventional for-profit companies and nonprofit institutions. Social enterprises, as hybrid organizations, help to realize social and commercial purposes (Armstrong & Grobbelaar, 2023). The study attempts to capture the conceptual framework related to the possibilities available for social enterprises to create sustainable social and financial worth and innovation, despite the constraints that exist in the companies, since these missions are not always in alignment with one another. In addition to Western contexts, this evolution is also noticeable in places like North Macedonia, where the emergence of social enterprises reflects a global trend towards joining entrepreneurial spirit for social betterment, albeit within a specific regional context.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines social enterprises as "any private activity carried out in the public interest, organized with an entrepreneurial strategy, but whose main objective is not profit-maximization, but the achievement of certain economic and social goals, and which has the capacity to bring innovative solutions to the problems of social exclusion and unemployment". Social enterprises are very promising, but they also face a variety of difficulties as they grow and operate, some of which are made worse by regional conditions. Globally, there are still considerable barriers to financing and funding systems (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006). This problem is made more difficult in North Macedonia by a lack of access to finance and a developing framework for assisting social entrepreneurs, necessitating the use of innovative techniques to obtain funding for their endeavors. Further challenges to expansion include managing the regulatory environment and raising awareness of social enterprise concepts in the area. Also, in North Macedonia, population concentration and socio-economic status, combined with a lack of environmental awareness, have raised alarms for many environmental issues that decrease the quality of the life for the country's residents. Social entrepreneurship, as a relatively new idea, has immense potential to hasten this shift toward

sustainable development. Chichevaliev and Ortakovski (2020) in their study attempt to answer the question "What can environmental organizations and social enterprises do to address environmental issues and contribute to the development of a contemporary "green" economy"? The research indicates that among other flaws, the absence of policy and legal implementation contributes to the weakening of green economy. Existing traditional institutions are not able to assist organizations in their efforts for sustainable development.

Despite these challenges, social enterprises in North Macedonia and similar regions have adopted innovative business models, such as community-based initiatives and collaborations with local NGOs, to create positive social impact. Kulshrestha et al (2022) propose the idea of "sustainable social enterprises," which maximize the advantages of cross-sectoral cooperation, active participation in creating solid social networks, and leveraging social capital to effectuate societal transformation. According to Dees (1998) drawing inspiration from global best practices, these local adaptations affect the resilience of social enterprises in North Macedonia. Collaborative partnerships with governments, nonprofits, and the private sector are instrumental in expanding the reach and effectiveness of social enterprises both locally and globally (Nicholls & Cho, 2006).

Social enterprises are becoming more well-known as socially creative businesses that strive to reconcile their economic and social goals, so an investment in human resources has become essential for social enterprises. Güler (2022) discusses the core human resources practices in social entrepreneurship, including recruitment, career management, training, pay and performance management, among other management techniques, which gives a competitive edge and fosters trust between employees and the companies. In the context of North Macedonia, Fowler and Hope (2013) in their paper titled “Linking Social Entrepreneurship and Social Change: The Mediating Role of Empowerment” shed light on the role of empowerment as a mediating factor. The research investigates the impact of Macedonian social enterprises in empowering local communities, which leads to sustainable social change. Empowerment, in this context, acts as a catalyst for positive transformation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of social entrepreneurship and community development.

To conclude, the literature reviewed on social enterprise development, when considered within the global and regional context of North Macedonia, underscores the importance of this emerging field as a powerful means to address diverse societal problems. While challenges persist, local adaptations, innovative approaches, and insights from global literature offer pathways for social enterprises in North Macedonia and similar regions to thrive and create lasting social impact. The implementation of innovative methods varies depending on how social enterprises and other businesses are directed. Perceiving the various business models used by social businesses and the impact of innovative management techniques on the expansion of social enterprises, Magdicheva-Shopova (2019) seeks to understand the importance and effects of contemporary, innovative management for the development of social enterprises in North Macedonia.

1. **METHODOLOGY**

The main objective of this paper is to identify trends and challenges faced in the development of social enterprises in the Republic of North Macedonia and to provide the best practices/solutions and appropriate guidelines to foster innovation and creativity in social entrepreneurship for supporting social enterprises.

In order to achieve the aim of the paper, primary and secondary research was conducted. The secondary research is based on the most relevant research and papers, conference papers, open-access materials, study reports related to the research topic and other relevant publications. Primary research is based on:

- Delphi method made with the key stakeholders (current and potential social enterprises, specialized institutions/organizations, and experts from the field of social enterprises in the country

- Identification and analysis of the existing legal regulations, programs, etc. related to this field in North Macedonia.

An anonymous questionnaire with mostly closed-ended questions was sent to key stakeholders in the period of 10 August to 10 September 2022. The research included several stages, after the initial sending of electronic questionnaires of identified stakeholders for this study, in the next stage direct individual communication and interview with owners of social enterprises was done to identify the current situation, challenges, needs and future plans of the social enterprises.

For the purposes of this paper, a descriptive analysis was made, through processing, categorization, and summarization of the obtained results from the owners of social enterprises, from experts in this field, as well as other key activists in the same field.

1. **TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA**

Social entrepreneurship is a new entrepreneurship that is developing within the Republic of North Macedonia, and it is not yet legally regulated. The original predecessors of social enterprises in the Republic of North Macedonia have existed since 1900, when many voluntary associations, including cooperatives, societies, and other forms of functioning of autonomous associations are founded - consumer cooperative in rural environments in 1900 and fishing cooperative from 1914, youth cooperatives in 1938 (Ilievski & Iloska, 2018, p.12). This entrepreneurship represents one of the most notable innovations in civil society in recent times in the Republic of North Macedonia. The significantly changed market, competition and new technologies are reasons that make individuals and companies look further into the future, all to see where they stand in the market.

Public knowledge about the concept of social enterprise, social entrepreneurship and the social economy is limited. A major challenge is the lack of institutional capacity and knowledge to recognize the value of the sector and support its development. Regarding the institutional set-up, there is no specialized government body in charge of the development of the social economy sector, which clearly demonstrates the lack of knowledge of the bodies in this area (Ilievski & Iloska, 2018). The Law on Social Entrepreneurship has been in the process of being submitted for many years, and this prevents the faster development of social enterprise. But it is a pleasing factor that in addition, there is a strategy for the development of social enterprises in the Republic of North Macedonia 2021-2024, as well certain municipalities have already adopted strategies for social enterprises, such is the example of the Municipality of Bitola, which has already created a strategy for social enterprises 2023-2026. The Center for Social Enterprises plays a major role in the development of social entrepreneurship. The Center for Social Enterprises[[3]](#footnote-3) is designed to function as an incubator to support existing and new social enterprises, as well as civil society organizations that have economic activity. Currently, the use of the premises in the Center is free for social enterprises and civil society organizations.

In the Republic North Macedonia, a total of 57 social enterprises have been identified in the eight planning regions in the Republic of North Macedonia. Most of the legal entities are civil organizations (associations of citizens, associations, foundations) registered according to the Law on Citizens' Associations and Foundations (a total of 34 social enterprises or 59%). Furthermore, 37% of legal entities are enterprises registered under the Law on Commercial Companies (limited liability companies LLC and one-person limited liability companies - LLC). As cooperatives, according to The Law on Agricultural Cooperatives and Farmers according to the Law on Agricultural Practices activity is registered only 4% (Strategy for social enterprises 2023-2026). The social enterprises in the country are small entities/organizations, with a small number of employees, ranging from 1 to 5 people.

For the purposes of this paper, 30 forms (organizations, associations, cooperatives) of SE were contacted, but direct communication was established with 14 of them. The organizations that have the form of social enterprises usually use some of the following legal forms: cooperatives, trading companies, associations, and foundations and similar. From Table 1, can be seen the main activity of the organization/enterprises that work in the field of social entrepreneurship and their main target group. A large part of them are non-governmental organizations and with all citizens as a target group. But some of them are good examples for social enterprises that work with groups of people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

**Table 1: Main activity and target group in the scope of social enterprises/organizations**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Interviewed SE** | **Activity of the organization** | **Target group** |
| SE 1 | Social integration and strengthening of the SEE region through individual and group coaching in the areas of education, legal aid, employment and psychosocial support. | All citizens |
| SE 2 | Inclusion of marginalized citizens communities. | Sex workers and drug users |
| SE 3 | Creating positive policies and strategies for successful rehabilitation and reintegration by providing inclusive jobs. Services in the home, intended for people with Alzheimer's disease, people with multiple sclerosis, people in need of palliative care, children and adults with disabilities, old and frail people, chronically ill, absence from family care. Social services, intended for children and adults with disabilities, people who have suffered a stroke, parents, and families of people with disabilities. | People with Alzheimer's disease, people with multiple sclerosis, people in need of palliative care, children and adults with disabilities, old and frail people, chronically ill and people, absent from family care |
| SE 4 | Rental of space for organizing events and co-working space | All citizens |
| SE 5 | Cares for a better future for marginalized groups, as well as for public space and the environment | Representatives from the most vulnerable groups in society |
| SE 6 | Increasing knowledge among Roma women | Roma women |
| SE 7 | Preservation, appreciation, affirmation and presentation of Macedonian culture and tradition | All citizens |
| SE 8 | Rehabilitation of addicts, a process that lasts at least 18 months, and ends with their reintegration into society. | Drug, alcohol and gambling addicts |
| SE 9 | Donating clothes and distributing them to the most vulnerable | All citizens |
| SE 10 | The first bar in the country where the hosts are people with hearing impairment and communicate with their guests in sign language. | All citizens |
| SE 11 | Recycling | All citizens |
| SE 12 | Handmade works of copper, clay, craftsmanship of jewelry, crocheted and knitted products and others. Art pieces. | All citizens |
| SE 13 | Hotel that employs people with Down syndrome | All citizens (people with Down syndrome) |
| SE 14 | Production of products from recycled material | All citizens |

*Source: Authors’ analysis*

Social enterprises in North Macedonia are organized in the form of LLCs, Associations, non-governmental organizations, as well as associations of a group of citizens that do not yet have a form and are in the formation phase. They are mostly represented as associations, but there is a large part that still does not have a form but provides services from a social aspect. They are mostly represented in the following areas: production of eco-products, services in tourism and hospitality, sale and resale of products, care services, renting space for creation and socializing, making jewelry and decorations and more. The following social forms can be cited as good practices: “Ulaf ste”[[4]](#footnote-4)- It is the first bar in the country where the owners are hearing impaired and communicate with their guests in sign language; “ Face to face”[[5]](#footnote-5) - is a street magazine - sellers of the magazine are representatives of the most vulnerable groups in society, who are trained to sell and earn half of the amount of a sold magazine; “ Care plus”[[6]](#footnote-6) - association for health education and research formed by six volunteers, medical students; and “ Mama Organa[[7]](#footnote-7)” - social enterprise for the production of natural fertilizers, soil improvers (perlite, vermiculite, zeolite), eco sand for pets, etc.

The main idea of the owners for creating a social enterprise/ organization is desire to improve the lives of people with a certain type of addiction, disability, or old age, as well as their employment - creating equality and eliminating discrimination.

From the analysis and similarity of the received answers from primary research, the Table 2 highlights the key challenges in the development of social enterprises in Republic of North Macedonia.

**Table 2: Key challenges in the development of social enterprises**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Main challenges of social enterprises** | 1. *Legal challenges:*  * Unregulated activities due to the absence of laws and regulations that would regulate the area. * Insufficient state incentives and programs Insufficient Institutional support and others.  1. *Economic (financial) challenge:*  * Need to provide long-term financial resources to cover general expenses, as well as short-term financial resources to provide current activities. * Need for development of business skills: presentational, promotional, communication, etc. * Insufficient business cooperation and understanding from traditional businesses/organizations.  1. *Social challenges:*  * Working in an environment where knowledge and awareness among the population as potential consumers are low. * Addiction, misunderstanding of the environment and disappointments. * Difficult communication and understanding due to disability |
| **Types of support needed** | * Financial support * Institutional support (expressed through a clear strategy for local development in the field of social entrepreneurship) * Material support (equipment of workshop, exhibition space for the exhibition of finished products for sale, raw materials, and work materials) * Educational support (competence building, workshops, and trainings) * Corporate support (of the traditional business) |
| **Key factors for the development of social enterprises** | * Financial factors * legislation and long-term planning * Institutional factors (support from institutions and municipalities) * Civil factors (low awareness and knowledge of the population for social entrepreneurship). |

*Source: Authors’ analysis*

During the interviews, it was found that the biggest obstacles (challenges) for SE are: the insufficient finances that prevent them from realizing their ideas, as well as the lack of institutional support and the lack of interest of citizens and companies.

Organizations/enterprises/associations in infancy have a desire for development, each in a different way to contribute to the environment, as well as improving the value of life of vulnerable categories of citizens. If this trend continues, social entrepreneurship in the Republic of North Macedonia may contribute an initially significant percentage to the GDP rate. All organizations, associations, enterprises that were surveyed aim to expand and upgrade. They aim to employ more people from vulnerable categories and give value to their work, while encouraging them to invest in themselves by helping society.

1. **CONCLUSION**

Social entrepreneurship in the Republic of North Macedonia is in the initial stages of development. Namely, it is important to emphasize that in the country there are social businesses of different scales and forms that are trying to develop the concept of social entrepreneurship, but they still need a lot of support from different aspects. Every day they face difficulties of a different nature - social, economic, legal, etc. It is necessary to work on raising the awareness of the citizens about what social entrepreneurship is, as wellas encouraging traditional businesses for greater cooperation and support of social enterprises.

It is crucial for stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, to work together and adapt strategies to the unique needs of Macedonian communities while also contributing to a larger discussion on social enterprise development globally as social entrepreneurship continues to develop. Strategies for encouraging social entrepreneurship must incorporate the following measures and activities: finalizing the process of adopting legislation; creation of educational programs for social entrepreneurship, support for young people to open a social business, support for existing companies to invest in social business (exemption from taxes, percentage coverage of costs for monthly compensation of employees), increasing awareness and knowledge among the population about the meaning of social entrepreneurship, the institutional support expressed through a clear strategy for local development in the field of social entrepreneurship; planning of budget funds for social entrepreneurship, etc.

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