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(GECES)

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[REPORT #8: SCALING UP THE SOCIAL ECONOMY IN GREECE]

We need visibility and critical mass for the Social Economy in Greece. Strategic public policies should possess a grassroots equivalent. Mobilization of social forces and community activity is imperative. This is a concise report on the work being done in Greece.

The Action Group for Social Economy

Active citizens, atypical civil society networks, regular and social enterprises along with socially sensitive organizations have joined forces creating the Action Group for Social Economy (www.koinsep.com). The Action Group aims at raising the awareness on social economy, social entrepreneurship and innovation agendas, while contributing to the public dialogue on development potentials for the social sector and its crucial feedback to local employment generation.

First in the Action Group's agenda is presenting the European Commission's Social Business Initiative and its inherent dynamics. An out of the box approach is what everyday people need. Alternative channels of information are not yet there and the Social Economy Action Group seeks to bypass the more or less institutionalized intermediation of information between citizens and mechanisms that hinder the massive access of individuals and organizations to knowledge and know-how.

The Social Economy Action Group has launched a website kindly provided by the Social Economy Institute (www.social-economy.com), which envisages of evolving into an independent, free of charge, open-access, democratic and ever-developing single point of information for the social economy in Greece.

We are now preparing our first information event which will take place in Thessaloniki, GREECE, the 29th of March 2013. We will present the European Commission's Social Business Initiative and discuss the social and political significance for Greece, regarding employment generation through social entrepreneurship, the value of European Commission's financial, administrative and political support and the potentials for all people in the community level. Learn more about this event [here](#).

The UNDP-CLIMBIZ Challenge

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Black Sea Climate and Business Initiative, along various national and international organizations are now launching the 2013 Challenge for innovative and social enterprises throughout the greater Southeastern Europe region (Albania, Georgia, Russia, Armenia, Greece, Serbia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine) (<http://www.climbiz.org/>).

Promising start-ups will have the chance to compete and the most dynamic between them will be granted in-kind support with high added-value (practical support, coaching and mentoring, assistance and networking for the expansion and internationalization of their scope and activities) by leading public and private organizations.

Ongoing are information activities that would help to spread the word especially reaching those that should be supported. Nevertheless it is very difficult to reach start-ups due to information asymmetries and the inherent fear young entrepreneurs have in countries where deep economic recession and administrative burdens significantly hinder social and innovative entrepreneurship.

The Social Economy Action Group now helps to spread the word through alternative networks, so that transnational events are made relevant to the now forming population of social enterprises in Greece. This is of practical but also of ethical value, since empowerment and motivation are critical at this certain point, where the signs of economic stabilization and recovery are not here yet.

International partnerships and audit

Transfusion of know-how into the now evolving Greek social economy market is of critical value. Expertise and professionalization is highly needed, so as not to let fresh social enterprises divert towards the well-known, almost traditional and quasi-institutionalized paths of political mediation and virtuality. Abuse and misuse of European Union and national funding will be kept to the minimum if international cooperation with competent and well-seasoned organizations is coupled with strict European Commission auditing activity. An institutionalized set of eyes and ears is needed, notwithstanding the fact that the social feedback and outcomes of social enterprises are so difficult to measure and evaluate.

Indeed this is a call to the European Commission not to leave Greek social economy unattended! Significant financial support was granted by the European Commission, as Commission Andor announced in the first GECES meeting in Brussels, in May 2012. This support worth ten times its value since the Greek economy is in desperate need of financing and capacity building – even more this being the case for the least competitive of enterprises, the social businesses.

Things should not be left to their fate in Greece. Many parts are now trying hard to facilitate the healthy development of the social economy and envisage in securing the capacity for local employment generation. But the enemies of social economy and civil society are still there. The European Commission has the real capacity to ensure that no bubble effects will be allowed and that political will, funding packages such as the “ANDOR Package” and articulated policies will eventually reach the citizens which now face the historic challenge of rebuilding Greece.

Social Innovation Europe interview

Ioannis Nasioulas talks to Connor Friesen about the European Commission's Social Business Initiative.

“The Social Business Initiative provides a short-term action plan to stimulate the creation, development and growth of social businesses in Europe. Funded by the European Commission, the Initiative aims to increase the visibility of social businesses, improve their access to funding, and their legal environment.

The European Commission Group of Experts on Social Entrepreneurship (GECES) is a consultative, multi-stakeholder group on social business to examine the progress of the Social Business Initiative. The group is made up of representatives of the Member States, local authorities, social entrepreneurs' organisations, the banking and finance sector and the academic and university sector. The group is consulted by the Commission, on the opportunity, development, setting up and implementation of all the actions mentioned in the SBI, or further development of social entrepreneurship and social economy.

In a recent report from the GECES to the European Commission, Ioannis Nasioulas took a strong interest in ensuring that the Social Innovation Europe online infrastructure remains a useful tool for the Social Business Initiative in 2013. He wrote:

“Social Innovation Europe has proven to be a tool of invaluable impact to the dissemination and visibility of social innovation and its practical significance for Europeans and their communities. It can act as an incubator for a variety of Social Business Initiative projects.”

The report addressed the “untapped potentials and capacities that can expand the existing portfolio of Social Innovation Europe in light of the Social Business Initiative and GECES policy orientations.”

The full report is available [here](#).

What are the concrete goals of the Social Business Initiative for 2013?

The Social Business Initiative is a dynamic policy agenda. It ever-evolves along with ongoing and emerging national and transnational initiatives and in that sense public debate on the subject is crucial to the materialization of the political goals set by the European Commission. The main portfolio of the GECES in 2013 involves

- a) a set of ongoing actions to assess the social economy institutional environment in the European Union, such as pooling data on the governance and regulation of mutuals, cooperatives, social enterprises and non-profits
- b) deliberating on optimal methods and tools that should be deployed, especially for transnational peer-learning, project-based collaborations and networking

- c) uncovering latent resources that might be of value to social economy financing
- d) and building a viable and dynamic financing sector for the Social Economy

In fact, this last political goal is far-reaching vision which includes improving the social economy technical “parlance” used in analysis, recalibrating European Union and national institutional arrangements in such a way that a Social Economy Single Market can be established and deploying fully operational funding mechanisms that could bring together both the public and private investments sector.

A GECES Sub Group on Social Impact Measurement is now set up and my initial understanding gained by my collaboration with all the excellent partners involved in it is that it will eventually reach its target, develop a methodology to measure the socio-economic benefits created by social enterprises, proceed to the development of rigorous and systematic measurements of social enterprises’ impact on the community, thus achieving to scale up an overall mechanism able to demonstrate that the money invested in social enterprises yields high savings and income.

My vision of a Social Economy Single Market sees infinite potential in such coordinated European Union activities. It is my firm belief that techno-political and analytical dimensions can be coupled and a data-led policy can be constructed regarding social economy. As is evident, though, this is a large-scale project which involves not only the construction of new funding institutions and fields, such as the emerging Social Entrepreneurship Funds but also a new, innovative and internationally applicable nomenclature on all the technicalities that such a daring project involves. It would make justice to say that the GECES and GECES Sub Group will substantially contribute to an operational upgrade of the scientific and political language and conceptualizations utilized so far for social economy, social entrepreneurship and impact investment.

How will the GECES be contributing to those goals? What outcomes do you want to see for social businesses by 2014?

What is most necessary is to have the big picture and avoid further fragmentation of EU policies on cohesion, employment and entrepreneurship. This involves grounding policies in local peculiarities and social economy is full of them! GECES Experts possess the competencies to have an integrated view of what is currently going on in the European socio-institutional locus and they are in a position to provide feedback to the Commission that will eventually prove valuable in a time of intense crisis, and at a time where readily deployable, straight-forward solutions are needed. To combat unemployment, job-loss and degrading investment in an ever-contracting fiscal environment is not easy. We need alternatives and innovative modalities, out of the box. Bringing both ends closer is the first task that I now see GECES Experts are focused on. And this is the value-added potential of the Social Business Initiative.

How can the online infrastructure created through the Social Innovation Europe initiative be practically useful to you this year?

Social Innovation Europe platform has contributed substantially into raising awareness on the connections between social economy, civil society, entrepreneurial and research innovation. In fact, it provides for a live outlook of the Social Economy Single Market throughout the European Union.

My wish is to see Social Innovation Europe developing towards two main orientations: expansion and replication. This platform gives voice to grassroots initiatives, specialized stakeholders and experts from related grounds and it would be very promising to enrich its capacities with even more articulated activity. Especially in regard to applications on statistical aggregation and analysis that would gather, elaborate and refine data, producing practical information, the creation of open access databases of social economy actors and a rapid response information system regarding public procurements for social enterprises and NGOs. Furthermore, emerging national agendas on social economy might find of value to replicate the successful trajectory of Social Innovation Europe grounding it into local context. In the long run, we could help build an integrated network of national platforms with visible value added for the fruition of the Europe 2020 Strategy goals”.

[Read the interview in its original site [here](#)]