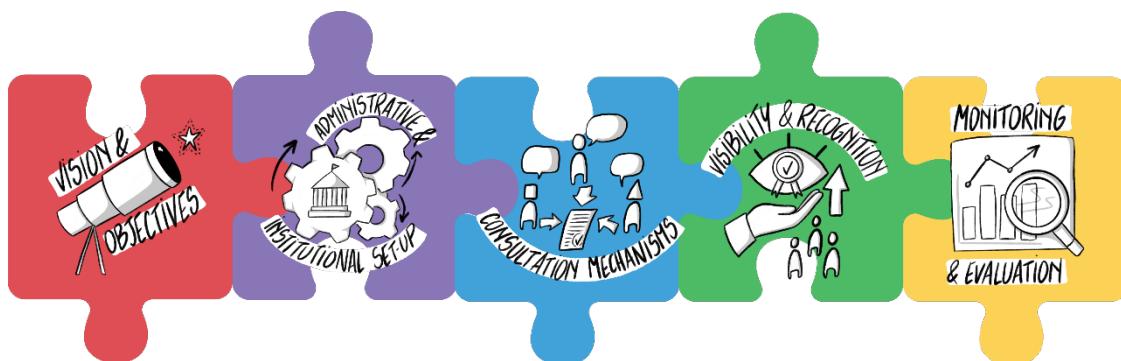


Mutual learning workshop on ‘Building blocks of a social economy strategy’

6 March 2024, online

Flash report

‘Building blocks of a social economy strategy’ is the first workshop in a series of three mutual learning events organised by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) to support national and regional authorities in designing, implementing, or updating their social economy strategy. This first event welcomed 53 public officials from national, regional and local administrations across 21 Member States, as well as four independent national experts, one representative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and several representatives from DG EMPL and DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW). Participants were invited to discuss two out of the five building blocks of social economy strategies as presented below, namely 1) defining the vision, mission, and strategic axes of the strategy; and 2) adapting the relevant administrative and institutional set-ups for improved coordination. The five building blocks were set out by the [Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions](#).



Opening the event, Ruth Paserman, Director for Funds Programming and Implementation at DG EMPL, explained that the social economy was a complex ecosystem requiring both organisational support and sufficient funding and resources. However, this support remained uneven across the EU, and Member States were at different stages of developing their social economy ecosystems. To tackle these challenges, the European Commission adopted its [Social Economy Action Plan](#) (SEAP) in 2021, announcing concrete measures to foster the European social economy. To showcase the EU support available for the social economy, the Commission established an online one-stop-shop, the [Social Economy Gateway](#). In addition, the European Commission has worked with stakeholders to co-create a new [transition pathway](#) towards a greener and more digital proximity and social economy based on 14 action areas.

As highlighted by the thematic expert Eva Varga, the social economy is essential for delivering both sustainable economic development as well as realising social and environmental policy goals. Social economy entities are active in many sectors ranging from agriculture to healthcare and tourism. They often offer innovative solutions while creating a positive impact on society. Therefore, ensuring that social economy strategies are aligned with broader policy objectives and goals is crucial. Another success factor for setting up an effective social economy strategy is the importance of including relevant stakeholders in both the strategy design and its implementation

to ensure that its vision and objectives are fulfilled. The thematic expert also emphasised that while establishing a legal framework was essential, implementing a strict regulatory framework too early could hinder the ecosystem's development. Therefore, it is important to carefully assess existing legal frameworks to support the ongoing growth of the social economy, making sure they are flexible enough to adapt to future needs.

During the workshop, two Member States shared specific examples of how they have designed their national social economy strategy. **Germany**'s vision for its social economy [strategy](#) focuses on boosting its society's prosperity, fairness and resilience through supporting social enterprises and strengthening social innovation. As a first step, workshops and consultations were carried out with key stakeholders from all areas of the economy to map the needs and challenges of the German social economy. This included specific workshops with the regions to discuss any existing regional strategies and ensure an alignment on definitions. The results of this process were then reviewed by all 16 federal ministries, with some of them including their own measures in the final strategy document. The work was carried out under the joint initiative of the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, which contributed to the strategy's wide political acceptance.

Slovenia also included a large number of stakeholders in the preparation of its social economy strategy. The government appointed a dedicated body – the Social Economy Council – to carry the responsibility of establishing the strategy which is included in its [Social Entrepreneurship Act](#). The Council brings together 21 representatives from relevant ministries, social economy entities, local communities, social partners and professional organisations in the field of social economy. This Council has appointed an expert group that provided an operational definition of the social economy and its principles. It also proposed four focus areas for the future strategy. To be finalised in 2024, the strategy requires consultations with the public, social partners, civil society and across ministries. Following the adoption by the Council, the Ministry of Economy, Tourism and Sports' operative programme will be adopted and implemented to achieve the established strategic goals.



During the workshop's working groups, it was highlighted that two-thirds of the 23 Member States represented during the event, either already have a national social economy strategy in place (green) or their strategy is currently being prepared (blue)¹. Countries that have not yet planned a strategy are presented in orange. To be noted that France has several regional strategies in place.

Based on the discussions, the main policy objectives to be achieved through these strategies include 1) improving access to the labour market, 2) fostering social inclusion, and 3) promoting social innovation. Participants also mentioned additional policy objectives, such as the promotion of rural

development in Finland and Bavaria (Germany). In more than half of the Member States, the ministry in charge of labour and social affairs is responsible for the social economy portfolio, while in four Member States, it is the ministry of economy and in two Member States the ministry of welfare.

Key learnings and insights from the mutual learning workshop

The key insights of the workshop are further detailed below, complemented by existing national examples and promising practices. These learnings are structured around the first two building blocks of social economy strategies as detailed in the [Council Recommendation](#), namely 1) vision and objectives, and 2) administrative and institutional set-ups.

¹ The list includes IE and FI as they were represented by independent experts. Strategies in place: BE-Wallonia, DE, EL, ES, IE, FI, PL. Planned: BG, CY, CZ, HR, LT, LU, RO, SK, SI. Not yet planned: AT, EE, FR, HU, LV, NL, PT.

Establishing a long-term vision with clear-cut objectives is the cornerstone of a social economy strategy

Defining the concept and vision for the social economy ecosystem through a participatory process facilitates stakeholder buy-in for strategy implementation

- A clear definition of the social economy and its key concepts is essential to establish a solid vision and mission for the ecosystem. This work must be done through a participatory process, engaging all key actors from various strategic policy areas. The involvement of stakeholders from the start helps identify specific regional/national needs and goals, often based on qualitative data. This early engagement, in turn, fosters the buy-in and improves the motivation of the stakeholders for the effective implementation of the strategy. In addition, inviting diverse perspectives also contributes to freeing the social economy from the label of being solely an employment/social inclusion vehicle.
- Similarly to Slovenia's Council of the Social Economy and its wide-ranging consultations, **Estonia** designed a social innovation vision document through a co-creation process with all sectors and levels of society. For this purpose, a working group was established by the National Foundation of Civil Society under the Ministry of Interior, bringing together representatives from key ministries and major umbrella organisations. This group held inter-ministerial as well as regional meetings to discuss the vision for social innovation in the country – keeping the latter open to anyone interested in participating. As a result, the inputs from these brainstorming sessions and workshops – involving about 300 organisations – were fed into Estonia's final vision document.

Linking the social economy strategy with other related strategies improves policy coherence and facilitates its implementation

- The vision and objectives of the social economy strategy should be aligned with other national strategies to avoid silos and create synergies. The strategy should incorporate various policy areas to be effective. Given the cross-cutting nature of the social economy, the responsibility of the strategies should be shared among multiple line ministries to ensure its mainstreaming across multiple policy fields.
- Various Member States are aligning their policies to harness the contribution of their social economy ecosystem. **Poland** is planning to strengthen the green and digital skills components in its social economy strategy to align it with key current policy objectives at the EU level on the green and digital transitions.
- Alternativ'ES Wallonia, the social economy strategy of **Wallonia (Belgium)** for 2019-2024, focuses on the creation, development and growth of social economy entities in five priority sectors (food, energy, housing, culture and re-use of goods with zero waste, and circular economy). The strategy is implemented through ten transversal measures, which are intertwined with other regional policies to maximise their impact.

Investing in skills and capacity-building of social economy entities should be included in the vision to ensure that the social economy ecosystem is able to contribute to the strategy in full.

- Upskilling of the social economy facilitates the professionalisation of the ecosystem, increasing its visibility and long-term sustainability. Certain Member States noticed that individuals interested in the social economy often lack entrepreneurial skills. These competences, such as creating a business plan, are essential, however, to managing social economy entities. On the other hand, business support organisations and some government units lack knowledge of key issues of the social economy (e.g. social impact measurement or participatory governance). With the current focus on green and digital skills as part of the transformation of the economy, the development of dedicated training programmes can help increase the competitiveness of social economy entities.
- For instance, at the EU level, the Commission is currently collaborating with the OECD to carry out the Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy, a policy learning network aiming at enhancing youth entrepreneurship (including social entrepreneurship) policies. At the national level, **Finland** is designing a Master's programme on social entrepreneurship, which will be available from 2025.

- **Slovenia** actively supports the social economy sector's professionalisation, including through the organisation of fairs and international events. It also collaborates with universities and is shaping new post-graduate courses for the social economy that will be included in its educational system.
- **Portugal** has created a centre of innovation and social economy to improve and develop related skills and competences. A national programme is also available to encourage the development of digital skills of social economy entities through targeted incentives.

Aligning administrative and institutional frameworks with the aims of the social economy strategy facilitates implementation

Creating a dedicated institutional body to implement the social economy strategy contributes to better coordination between the main actors in the administration and the social economy ecosystem

- Improving cooperation across the main governmental departments and agencies relevant to the social economy is key to ensuring the success of a strategy. For this purpose, it can be useful to set up a dedicated body/policy unit with a clear mandate, as well as sufficient financial and human resources to support the active coordination of the strategy. This institutional body should serve as a contact point for national stakeholders that can facilitate networking and help with setting up a legal framework as well. This approach is also beneficial in the long term, as it creates the conditions for the follow-up of the strategy. Member States have established various ways of coordinating the work of their key social economy actors, such as through central coordination units, joint task forces, state or advisory councils, competence centres and steering groups.
- For instance, **Spain** created the State Council for the Promotion of Social Economy, which is coordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy. The Council includes representatives from nearly all ministries and different levels of the administration – such as from the central government and regional territories –as well as enterprises and experts. The body reconvenes every 3-4 months and works in parallel committees to gather various views.
- **Poland** has a national committee for developing the social economy, which is the advisory body for the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy. This body comprises representatives of the public administration – including ministries and regional institutions – as well as of the social economy ecosystem and universities.
- **The Brussels region (Belgium)** has an advisory council for social entrepreneurship, including representatives of the public administration, political authorities, social partners, and social economy organisations. The council also has a role in executing the legal framework. A need has emerged to reactivate and refocus discussions in the council to ensure that debates focus on the most relevant issues and that there is enough input from the mainstream economy.

Political endorsement of the social economy strategy facilitates its implementation

- Political recognition of the importance of the social economy is a key success factor for the implementation of a social economy strategy. As the social economy is connected to nearly all sectors of the economy, coordination and support from within the government will increase the effectiveness of the strategy. Several participants mentioned their interest in seeing the ministries of economy, finance, agriculture and/or environment getting (more) involved in social economy policy. The existence of a strong ecosystem can also help obtain political support.
- Following the last federal elections in 2021, **Germany** started prioritising its social economy strategy, whose implementation was organised under the joint leadership of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The involvement of these ministries from the start facilitated the swift adoption of the strategy.

- **Luxembourg** focuses on increasing the number of social economy entities to convince policymakers of their importance and of the need to invest in social economy strategies.
- In **Île-de-France (France)**, the body responsible for the social economy invites local authorities to meet social enterprises to enhance political support and encourage mutual understanding of their work.

Next steps

A [self-assessment sheet](#) was designed to support Member States in assessing how advanced they are in developing a social economy strategy in their country. The self-assessment sheet covers the five building blocks that are essential to building the strategy. Carrying out a self-assessment can be useful also when a country does not yet have a social economy strategy in place, and it is possible to obtain a relatively high score even if not all the elements listed in the assessment are covered. Member States are invited to fill in the self-assessment sheet in view of the second workshop participants where they will have an opportunity to discuss the assessments with their peers.

For more information and the available background materials, please refer to the [resource page](#).

The upcoming workshops on ‘Developing strategies for the social economy in the Member States’ will take place as follows:

- Workshop 2: ‘Exploring the building blocks of a social economy strategy’ (in-person workshop in Brussels, Belgium, on 23-24 April 2024);
- Workshop 3: topic to be confirmed (online workshop on 13 June 2024).

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