

Characteristics of and development opportunities for work integration social enterprises in Latvia

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Abstract: Social entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly popular in Latvia because it allows enterprises to implement economic activities while tackling social problems relevant to society. Since 2018 when the Social Enterprise Law came into force, the number of registered social enterprises has reached 204 (in 2022). Work integration is the most common field of activity of Latvian social enterprises. According to the Latvian legislation, 13 groups at risk of social exclusion may be employed in a work integration social enterprise (WISE). The research aimed to analyse the operations of WISEs and identify the development opportunities. The research identified the strengths and weaknesses of WISEs (based on expert interviews and a literature review) and the development opportunities therefor.

Keywords: social enterprises, work integration social enterprises, social entrepreneurship

1 Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is an integral part of the diverse social market economy of Europe. By linking the creation of economic and social values, social enterprises play a key role in building an inclusive economy and society. Social enterprises, in particular work integration social enterprises (WISE) that are viewed as an alternative to creating a niche for a specially supported and protected labour market, play a key role in facilitating the integration of groups at risk of social exclusion into the labour market [1].

WISEs operate in almost all European countries [2], yet their legal forms and the employed groups at risk of social exclusion vary. The approaches applied stem from the national welfare system, the legal framework, traditions and the development of the non-governmental sector in a particular country [3]. Totally, social entrepreneurship accounts for about 10% of GDP in Western European countries, while in Latvia, considering the limited experience in such entrepreneurship and the current situation, the share of social enterprises in the total enterprises is unlikely to be higher than 3% [4]. Although the number of social enterprises in Latvia, incl. WISEs, increases every year, yet it is still small, reaching only 204 social enterprises in 2022 (including 28% operating in the field of work integration).

In recent years, many researchers have focused on WISEs, highlighting various aspects of such enterprises. For example, Escribano and Gonzales have analysed the establishment of and decision-making in WISEs [5], Chiaf and Giacomini [6] and Urmanaviciene [7] have focused on assessing the performance and social impacts of WISEs, while Jioyce et al. [8] have described the impact of such enterprises on individual health and well-being. Researchers have also identified the challenges most often faced by WISEs [9]. Researchers in Latvia have analysed the situation in the field of WISEs, mainly emphasizing the employment of persons with disabilities by such enterprises [3, 10], yet it is important to identify development opportunities for such enterprises based on their strengths and weaknesses.

The research **aim** is to analyse the operations of WISEs and identify the development opportunities. To achieve the aim, the following specific research **tasks** were set: 1) to give insight into the nature and historical evolution of WISEs; 2) to identify development opportunities for WISEs in Latvia based on a SWOT analysis. The strengths and weaknesses of, as well as opportunities for and threats to WISEs were identified based on expert interviews and a literature review.

2 Methodology

The research conducted expert interviews with a representative of the Ministry of Welfare, the director of the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, six owners and managers of WISEs, as well as a social entrepreneurship researcher at one of the largest universities in Latvia. The list of the experts and their characteristics showing their competences and knowledge are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Expert's code	Characteristics of experts
Ex_1	Owner of a WISE providing social care services
Ex_2	Owner of a WISE providing restaurant and mobile food service activities
Ex_3	Owner of a WISE producing corrugated paper and paperboard, paper and paperboard containers
Ex_4	Director of a WISE organizing accommodation in a guest house and other short-stay accommodation
Ex_5	Owner of a WISE producing knitted and crocheted apparel; footwear and clothing wholesale
Ex_6	Director of a WISE providing call centre operations
Ex_7	Representative of the Ministry of Welfare
Ex_8	Director of the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia
Ex_9	Researcher in social entrepreneurship from one of the largest state universities in Latvia

The research also analysed the literature on social entrepreneurship (incl. WISEs) as well as the legal framework governing social enterprises in Latvia.

3 Specifics of work integration social enterprises

The initiative of WISEs in Europe dates back to the 1970s when civil society actors rushed to find ways to help people excluded from the labour market and unable to enter it [11]. Due to their background and prevalence, WISEs are also often referred to as a synonym for social enterprises, although it is only one kind of social enterprises [12]. The target group of WISEs is mostly people with disabilities, while other groups at risk of social exclusion are also targeted, e.g. people of pre-retirement age, people after imprisonment etc. [13]. However, in most cases such enterprises contribute to the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market. WISEs often work with several target groups, for example in Spain and Portugal they simultaneously employ minorities with long-term unemployment problems, young people and people with severe social problems [14].

In Latvia, the establishment of social enterprises and the acquisition of social enterprise status are governed by the Social Enterprise Law (in force from 1 April 2018), while the target groups of WISEs are determined in accordance with Cabinet Regulation No. 173 (in force from 27 March 2018); in total, the legal framework allows for the employment of 13 groups at risk of social exclusion. However, the roots of WISEs in Latvia are older than the current legal framework for social entrepreneurship. The origins of WISEs date back to Soviet times, as at that time there were various “combines” of the disabled blind and deaf people that were employed. After the restoration of independence, these organizations were privatized and some continue to operate, however, not all of them are recognized as social enterprises [7].

According to the Ministry of Welfare (data as at 31 May 2022), 204 social enterprises were registered in Latvia, incl. 28% were involved in work integration. Since the entry into force of the Social Enterprise Law, the percentage distribution of social enterprises by kind of economic activity has not changed significantly, which means that most of the registered social enterprises operated particularly in the field of work integration.

4 SWOT analysis of work integration social enterprises operating in Latvia

To identify development opportunities for WISEs in Latvia, a SWOT analysis with strategies was performed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of WISEs and the opportunities and threats of the external environment of WISEs (Table 2).

Table 2

SWOT matrix with strategies for work integration social enterprises	
	Endogenous factors - strengths and weaknesses

Exogenous factors - opportunities and threats	<i>Strengths</i> Enterprising management/ entrepreneurs; Attitudes of employees; Demand for jobs; Social benefits/ public support; Support from the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia for its members	<i>Weaknesses</i> Partial dependence on public funding; Insufficient free funds for business expansion; Limited marketing activities; Low-skilled labour; Small or medium quantities of goods or services produced
	<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>WO strategy</i>
More cooperation with the State Employment Agency; More public funding and support; Establishment of cooperation with the local government; Development of cooperation with educational institutions; Use of social media to promote goods/ services	<i>SO strategy</i> <i>In the short term:</i> establishing and expanding cooperation with the local government, using its support to foster social entrepreneurship. <i>In the long term:</i> more public support to increase market demand and create new jobs.	<i>In the short term:</i> initiating or increasing cooperation with the State Employment Agency, attracting employees and public funding. <i>In the long term:</i> encouraging the use of social media, thereby increasing demand in the domestic and foreign markets and consequently reducing dependence on external funding.
<i>Threats</i>	<i>ST strategy</i>	<i>WT strategy</i>
Decrease in private funds and grants; Pandemic-related restrictions; Lack of qualified labour; Decrease in market demand	<i>In the short term:</i> building up the skills and knowledge of current and new employees by providing additional funding for training courses. <i>In the long term:</i> cooperation with the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia to acquire public funding for long-term investments (similar to Altum grants).	<i>In the short term:</i> establishing cooperation with professional education institutions to hire qualified employees. <i>In the long term:</i> establishing long-term cooperation with private entrepreneurs to meet market demand.

Source: authors' own compilation

Strengths. As Ex_8 and Ex_9 have noted in the interview, social entrepreneurs are usually very **motivated and enterprising** in solving various socio-economic problems. They often lack business skills, yet overall, social entrepreneurs were referred to as “enterprising”, “brave”, “motivated”, “ambitious” etc. Often social entrepreneurs come from the non-governmental sector where they have already solved current social problems, working in their associations or foundations [15].

Research studies have found an acute problem in the labour market of Latvia (an imbalance between its supply and demand): on the one hand, relatively high unemployment rates, and on the other hand, job vacancies [16]. This means that there is a high demand for jobs from individuals at risk of social exclusion. This has also been indicated by Ex_2, i.e. when opening a cafe employing disabled people, the entrepreneur received a large number of applications for the vacancies. *“We still receive several applications every week. Despite the fact that we have not published a job advertisement at the moment and are not looking for employees and we even have to lay off some employees now [because of the Covid-19 pandemic], nevertheless there are still a lot of people calling and saying that they are ready to come and do any kind of job, as being employed is very important for them”*. Besides, the entrepreneurs also had a positive opinion about their employees’ **attitudes towards work**, especially those at risk of social exclusion.

To foster the development of social entrepreneurship in Latvia, the Social Enterprise Law prescribes various **public support mechanisms** available to all social enterprises (not only WISEs), i.e. various expenses related to the achievement of their goals or any operational improvement are exempt from enterprise income tax; the local government is entitled to grant property tax relief; a public person has the right to transfer the movable property belonging to him or her to the ownership or use of the social enterprise free of charge; it is allowed to hire volunteers. However, the most financially significant kinds of support for social enterprises are the financial support administered by the financial institution Altum and the Ministry of Welfare (hereinafter Altum grants). Ex_2 stated in the interview. *“In our case, the Altum grant was the most important support without which we would not have started and survived. Every day, municipal and national orders helped us very much, and there have been three privileged procurement contracts – we received orders that we were able to process”*.

However, there are few specific support mechanisms or tax relief for WISEs in Latvia. It is positive that from 1 January 2021, WISEs may apply for a tax credit. This means that the social enterprises that employ disabled or mentally handicapped persons are entitled to a lower employer mandatory state social insurance contribution (MSSIC) rate (21.94%). In addition, a one-time salary has also been introduced – if a person with disability or mental disorder has been unemployed, the enterprise is entitled to apply for the one-time salary for the first month of the employment. Although the number of support instruments for WISEs is small, the entrepreneurs interviewed appreciated and used the available support instruments.

Ex_5 stated that their company, as well as other social entrepreneurs were involved in the activities carried out by the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia (SEAL), through which they tried to influence and improve the social business environment at the national level, while at the same time the SEAL provided significant support for social enterprises (mainly in terms of information provision).

Weaknesses. Battilana et al. [9] point out that one of the weaknesses of WISEs is the **low productivity of their employees**, which is significantly affected by their abilities and qualifications, especially in situations if people with disabilities are

employed. Disability researcher Russel also points this out [17], emphasizing that in many cases employees with disabilities are viewed as a burden that incurs additional costs and reduces enterprise profits. Other research studies have also stressed that the main barrier to integrating people with disabilities into the labour market is incompatibility related to the lack of a qualified, skilled and motivated labour force and low qualification supply [16]. This was also indicated by Ex_3 in the interview: *“Some of the employees are entrusted low-skilled tasks: cleaning premises, arranging materials etc. The most capable employees are involved in the production process. The knowledge and skills of employees are limited. For example, for one of the employees, this was the very first work experience at the age of 45”*. Ex_6 stressed similar challenges. However, this is a challenge not only for social entrepreneurs who employ people with disabilities but also for entrepreneurs who employ other groups at risk of social exclusion. Ex_4 gave the following explanation in the interview: *“Often people are not very motivated because if they may get some social support, they often apply for it. The managers and owners of social enterprises should also be prepared for the situation where the performance of an employee could be affected by his or her health and psychological condition”*. In relation to the weaknesses of WISEs, it was also emphasized that they were partly dependent on public funding. This was pointed out by Ex_9, which, analysing the experience of several social enterprises, concluded that they would not be able to develop effectively without public support. This was due to the unsteady financial performance of companies, which was affected by factors in both the external and the internal environments. For example, Ex_5 indicated that the enterprise incurred large losses in 2018; however, in 2019 and 2020 it was able to recover and end the years with profits. Ex_9 indicated that WISEs should also be **more active in marketing**, incl. on social media, to contribute to both their visibility and the overall popularity of social entrepreneurship.

Opportunities. To involve people with disabilities efficiently into the labour market, there should be more necessary, well-considered and result-oriented measures with new more effective and complex mechanisms, based on mutual interest partnerships between government institutions, employers and workers organisations and training institutions [16]. One of the opportunities identified by the research is to **increase cooperation with the State Employment Agency (SEA)**. Ex_5 pointed out that in their practice, they used the opportunity to cooperate with the SEA to provide a subsidized job. The entrepreneur pointed out the high bureaucratic burden as a negative side of cooperation, as it was necessary to fill in a large number of various documents related to the involvement in the project, personal employment characteristics and other criteria. This does not encourage entrepreneurs to participate in this programme, yet overall the availability of such programmes was viewed positively. Ex_6 also pointed out that the enterprise has cooperated with the SEA in providing subsidized jobs and receiving the tax relief specified in the programme, which was an important resource for providing employees; however, it required some time to fill in the documents.

Ex_2 pointed out that it was important for the **government to support** WISEs, especially the salaries of employees at risk of social exclusion. *“It is better to support my enterprise because if not, they will turn to the State Employment Agency and social services to receive the same money through social benefits”*. Ex_2 also stated that **cooperation with the local government** was essential: *“We cooperate with the local government of Riga on the use of premises without rent. This is important support for us to expand and develop”*. Ex_1, however, pointed out that municipal social services often perceived them as competitors rather than partners in the provision of social services. This indicates that experience in cooperation with the local government was different. It is also noted that cooperation could be implemented in various ways, incl. using the support instruments specified in the Social Enterprise Law, as well as other opportunities and resources available to the local government [18]. Ex_6 considered positive cooperation to be an important opportunity: *“At the beginning of operation of the enterprise, we participated in a competition and received financial support from the local government of Riga, which was quite significant support for the purchase of equipment, rental of premises and meeting other needs at the initial stage of our business”*. Ex_9 pointed out that it was also important to **increase cooperation with educational institutions**. This was essential to develop the skills and competences that meet the needs of the labour market. The mentioned expert also pointed to the following opportunity – **use of social media to increase the sales of goods/services produced by WISEs**.

Threats. The **pandemic-related restrictions** made a significant impact on social enterprises. According to the results of a survey [19] during the first wave of Covid-19 (mid-March to late May 2020) among social enterprises, most of them were extremely worried, very worried or somewhat worried about the impact of the coronavirus on their social enterprises. Of the total social enterprises surveyed, 46.3% worked in limited mode during the crisis, while 27.78% were closed. Some respondents noted that the crisis hit them severely since their activities depended on buyers, and the number of quarantine and pandemic orders practically zeroed. Even when the quarantine was lifted, it was not possible to return to the initial phase. Of the total social enterprises surveyed, 70.37% reported that their revenues declined during the crisis. During the second wave of Covid-19 (ongoing from October 2020), almost 50% of the total social enterprises surveyed worked in limited mode, 12.96% were closed (downtime) and for 3.7% respondents the crisis had a fatal impact on them, and they supposed that their enterprise would have to close in the follow-up months or they were closed already [19]. It could be concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the entrepreneurs, incl. social ones. Ex_2 noted that *“in November, all the activities, all the premises leases and orders were cancelled. As a result, the question was what we would do and how we would do it. We cannot survive with the output what we have today. The question is how to respond and operate”*.

A **decrease in financial support and grants** is also a significant threat. According to the entrepreneurs who had been granted an Altum grant, it would be much more difficult to develop their social enterprises without the grant. However, it should be

taken into consideration that such grants are not unlimited. A shortage of **skilled labour** (especially those who can and want to work with individuals at risk of social exclusion) as well as an **overall decrease in market demand** because of the economic situation are also significant threats. This is also proved by the literature review, i.e. social entrepreneurship development is influenced by the demand (desires of the public for social services/products as customers or users) [20].

Strategies for developing WISEs in Latvia were developed based on the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified.

An **SO strategy** is a strategy considering an enterprise's internal strengths and external opportunities, which would be the most desirable position for a WISE, building on its strengths and external opportunities and benefiting from it in the long term. A short-term strategy involves establishing or expanding cooperation with the local government, promoting social entrepreneurship as well as raising public awareness of WISEs. This can contribute to the establishment of new social enterprises, thereby increasing the employment and quality of life of the surrounding population and groups at risk of social exclusion. In her doctoral dissertation, Oborenko too [3] has pointed out that local governments have both an interest and an important role to play in creating favourable conditions for social enterprises in the areas in which they are engaged in, thereby contributing to meeting social needs. However, the development of such enterprises depends on the attitude and activities of local governments, the professional competence of municipal officials and their overall interests. Since the social issues and problems faced by social enterprises and local governments are similar in many cases, it would be useful for both parties to agree on cooperation. In practice, however, it is often difficult for social enterprises and local governments to find common ground, and the path to an effective and productive partnership is time-consuming and difficult [21]. In the interview, Ex_4 also noted the important role of local governments in social entrepreneurship: *"Local governments are those being aware of their small enterprises and being able to help them to develop. The money that is earned by the small enterprises also goes to the municipal budget through taxes etc. If the local government is involved, the owners of small enterprises go to it and talk about what they need, and the local government can help to the best of their ability"*. In the long term, it would be necessary to increase public support to stimulate the demand for goods or services produced by WISEs, thus contributing to the performance of the WISEs and increasing the number of jobs. Ex_2 noted that *"it would be good if national and local institutions gave orders to each social entrepreneur, for example, to make gifts, and then nothing else would be needed. For example, a national institution would order all souvenirs from a particular social enterprise. Or we would serve all coffee breaks for a ministry. Then there should be no talk of tax relief. We would have public support in this way"*.

An **ST strategy** is a strategy considering internal strengths and external threats, and the enterprise's strengths are used to minimize the impact of external threats. In the short term, additional funds should be invested in upgrading the skills of current and new employees by providing additional training or courses, thus reducing the low level of skills of employees and increasing job performance. In the long term,

WISEs, in cooperation with the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, would need to attract more public funding for long-term investments in order to contribute to the viability and development of the enterprises.

A **WO strategy** is a strategy based on weaknesses and external opportunities, which minimizes the impact of weaknesses and uses external opportunities. In the short term, social enterprises would need to increase cooperation with the State Employment Agency by attracting additional funding from employment programmes and reducing their direct costs. In the long term, social enterprises would need to expand their marketing activities through social media to stimulate the demand for goods or services, develop their business and reduce their dependence on public or other funding.

A **WT strategy** is a strategy considering weaknesses and external threats. In the short term, social enterprises would need to establish cooperation with professional education institutions that train persons with disabilities and hire employees trained in needed specialities, thereby reducing the risk of shortage of qualified employees. Such a strategy is important because education and skills are a significant factor in employment. In order for people with disabilities to be able to perform not only low-skilled work, their education and professional rehabilitation have to meet the needs of the labour market. It is important to shape the professional rehabilitation process towards the needs of labour demand. In the long term, however, it would be important to establish cooperation with various private enterprises in order to stimulate a constant demand for goods or services and to contribute to the enterprise's stability in market conditions.

Conclusions

In the world, the origins of WISEs date back to the 1970s, and the WISEs focus on the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market. Such enterprises were already known in Latvia in the mid-1970s and 1980s, yet they were not defined as WISEs. In Latvia, the Social Enterprise Law entered into force in 2018, allowing enterprises to officially acquire social enterprise status (including specifying the field of activity, e.g. work integration), and statistical data on the number and performance of WISEs are now available. In Latvia, such enterprises mainly employ people with disabilities, yet in total they may employ 13 groups at risk of social exclusion.

In Latvia, the main strengths of WISEs are enterprising people who start up and manage social enterprises, as well as the attitude of employees at risk of social exclusion towards work and the desire to work. Public support instruments and support from the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia to its members, incl. WISEs, were positively rated. However, the main weaknesses were the dependence of WISEs on public support, as well as the insufficient marketing activities. To foster the development of WISEs, it is important to increase their cooperation with the State Employment Agency, local governments and educational institutions, as well as to use IT and social media to promote WISEs and their products. Of course, the threats to the external environment should also be taken into account: the Covid-19-related restrictions, a lack of qualified labour and a decrease in external funding in the future.

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