Common Solutions to Common Challenges.

A Field Research on Social & Solidarity Economy in Athens and Thessaloniki in the Aftermath of the Crisis.

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Abstract

This research begins with a fundamental question: *Is there an alternative strategy to the current model of urban economic development in a country devastated by the economic crisis?* Greece exited the Troika's supervision on **20 August 2018**, yet its socio-economic conditions remain dire (unemployment above 20%). In this context, grassroots groups have sought to build alternative economic models.

Fueled by recent social movements, the **Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)**—dubbed as such by some—began to spread across various sectors, though it remains marginal. Years after its emergence, analyzing the state of the art, problematic issues, and open challenges of the Greek SSE is necessary to investigate whether alternative development patterns exist, despite their limitations and contradictions.

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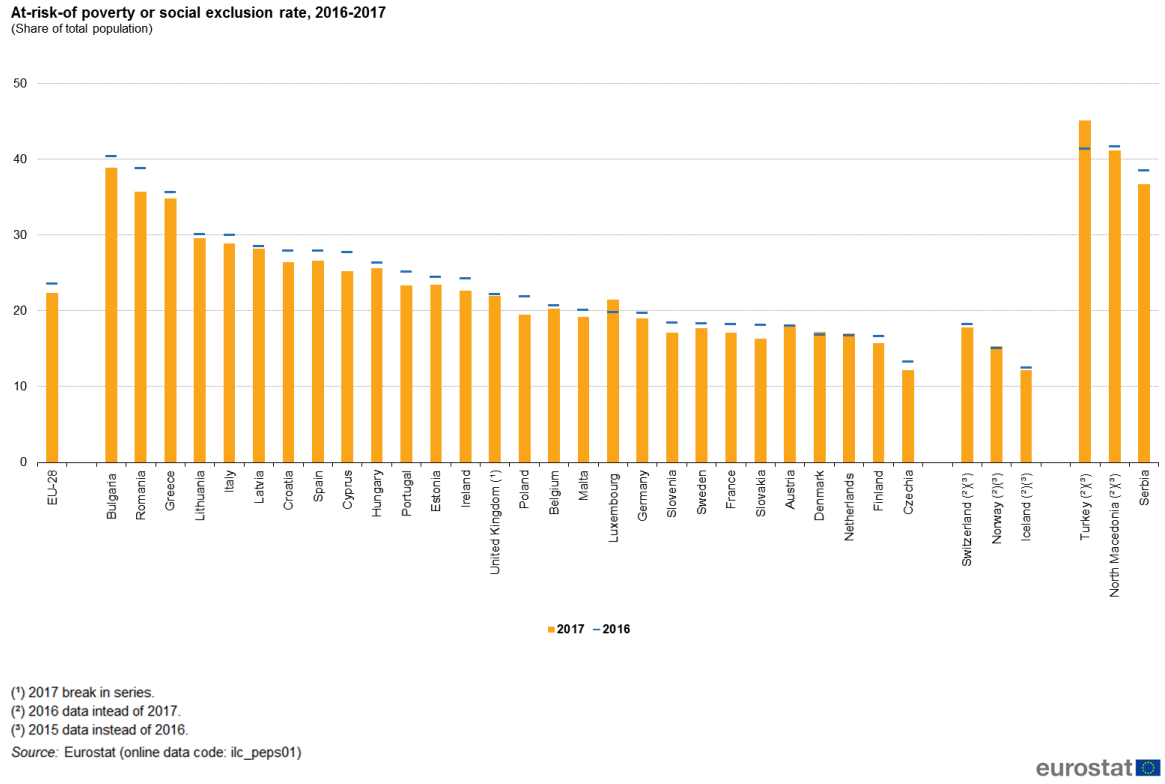
1. Framing the Context: Crisis, Unemployment and Social Movements

> *Capitalism may be crisis-ridden and cause great suffering in the world, but it also has an enormous capacity to effectively block alternatives. The problem of its transformation, at least in the developed world, therefore cannot be treated as mainly the problem of seizing the time when capitalism through its own contradictions becomes vulnerable to being overthrown. Rather, the problem of transformation requires understanding the ways in which strategies of transformation have some prospect in the long term of eroding capitalist power relations and building up socialist alternatives.*[1]

[1] Erik Olin Wright, Real Utopias in and beyond Capitalism: Taking the "Social" in Socialism Seriously. Fifth Annual Nicos Poulantzas Memorial Lecture. Nicos Poulantzas Institute, Athens, 2011, pp. 37-38.

On **20 August 2018**, Greece exited its eight-year loan program with the Troika (the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank). During this period, austerity measures devastated both social and economic indicators. For example, the **at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate** is among the highest in Europe.

Table 1: At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate, 2016–2017



(1) 2017 break in series.
(2) 2016 data intead of 2017.
(3) 2015 data instead of 2016.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_peps01)

eurostat

Surprisingly enough, there's not been a clear recognition of the fallacies of neoliberal austerity policies. This absence is evident across all levels: it persists in the academic world (at least in the mainstream), in the public discourse, and even in the common sense. I believe it's time to claim it strongly.

Not only did the public debt increase over time, up to 177.8% in 2018, but also the domestic demand fell together with job losses and consequent high unemployment, still over 20% of the active population.[2]

In this context, the SSE emerged not merely as a survival strategy but as a **political and economic response to the failures of the neoliberal model** (Papadaki & Kalogeraki, 2018). As my field research in Athens and Thessaloniki suggests, these initiatives represent an attempt to move beyond the "market vs. state" binary, proposing a model based on **horizontal cooperation and meeting social needs**.[3]

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2. Defining the SSE: Between Theory and Institutionalization

> *"This law was made to assimilate cooperatives according to EU directives and not to pave the way for workers to take the control of an abandoned enterprise"* (Viome worker).[4]

Defining the SSE is a complex task, as it sits at the intersection of various traditions: the third sector, the cooperative movement, and radical social movements. A crucial distinction must be made between **"SSE from above"** and **"SSE from below"**:

- **SSE from above:** Represented by the institutional framework, most notably **Law 4430/2016**. While this law provided a legal definition and a dedicated registry (Κ.ΑΛ.Ο), it also risked

[2] See Duval, "Ten graphs to understand the Greek crisis", *European Data Journalism Network*, 24th August 2018, https://www.europeandatajournalism.eu/eng/News/Data-news/Ten-graphs-to-understand-the-Greek-crisis (Last accessed: 05/03/2026).

[3] «Although it begun as an emergency response of communities and social movements to address the repercussions of extreme poverty caused from the neoliberal restructuring policies, the grassroots social solidarity movement is today one of the most important developments and forms of resistance and popular self-organisation that has emerged within the six years of the crisis. The more distant roots of this movement can be traced back to the anti-globalisation movement, the defense of public spaces by local communities, the growing culture of self-organised social centres and the 'no pay' popular campaigns against road tolls, public transport costs and extremely high prices in basic goods» Georgia Bedridaki, Antonios Broumas, "Greek society in crisis and in motion: building the material bases for an alternative society from the bottom up", *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, Volume 9 (1): 230-255, 2017, pp. 235-236.

[4] Worker of the recovered factory of Viome (Thessaloniki). Survey filled on the 5th November 2018.

"taming" the transformative potential of these initiatives by framing them primarily as tools for labor market integration (Nasioulas, 2016).

- **SSE from below:** Represented by grassroots collectives and workers' occupations. For these actors, the SSE is not just a "legal status," but a tool for systemic change and social emancipation, aligned with a broader global vision (RIPESS, 2015).

As with most terms in social sciences—which are never fixed or unitary—there are conflicting and **competing definitions**. The SSE as a concept is both old and new. Typically, it refers to the **Social Economy**, rooted in the European cooperative movement, and the **Solidarity Economy**, which stems primarily from social movements.[5] Broadly speaking, it can be seen as a response to urgent social issues such as unemployment and poverty, or as an **alternative economic model**. According to RIPESS, the Intercontinental network for the promotion of social solidarity economy:

> «SSE holds that self-management and collective ownership in the workplace and in the community is of central importance».[6]

At the institutional level, Greece has seen a **partial recognition** of the SSE with the introduction in 2011 of the first framework law (Law No. 4019/2011). **Law 4430/2016** reformed this framework, introducing strict requirements and a broader system for promoting and monitoring the ecosystem, though its implementation is still ongoing. The **Social Cooperative Enterprise (Koin.s.Ep.)** is introduced as the main actor of SSE.[7] While there are positive elements, the law still has several

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[5] «In the last decades, the term Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has emerged in order to capture the numerous alternative economic activities that are springing up worldwide. However, SSE is not a new concept; it embraces both Social Economy and Solidarity Economy. The former, mainly rooted in the cooperative movement, is understood as the group of entities 'where members are shareholders among whom profits are distributed' (Kousis and Paschou 2017, 150), whereas Solidarity Economy stems from social movements and promotes both political and economic goals for socioeconomic transformation (Adam 2016; Kousis and Paschou 2017)» Marina Papadaki, Stefania Kalogeraki, "Exploring social and solidarity economy (SSE) during the Greek economic crisis", *Partecipazione e conflitto. The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, 11 (1) 2018: 38-69, p. 39.

[6] RIPESS, "Global Vision for a Social Solidarity Economy: Convergences and Differences in Concepts, Definitions and Frameworks", February 2015, http://www.ripess.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/RIPESS_Vision-Global_EN.pdf (Last accessed: 05/03/2026), p.14.

[7] «Art 14. Social Cooperative Enterprises With §2, the types of Social Cooperative Enterprises at first introduced by Law 4019/2011 are deduced into two, taking into account the abolishment of the "Care" type:
Social Cooperative Enterprises for the Integration of Vulnerable and Special Groups
Social Cooperative Enterprises of Collective and Social Benefit.
In comparison to the Law 4019/2011 which practically allowed for any kind of activity, there is herein introduced a restriction to sustainable development activities and provision of general interest social services only.
§ 8 stipulates that the percentage of the mixed income derived of public entities is not allowed to surpass the 65% of the gross income of the Social Cooperative Enterprise, calculated in a three-year period. This is a provision restricting the exclusive dependency of social enterprises by public funding; it aims at inculcating the principle of economic viability and independency and deter phenomena of substitution of public organizations by social economy ones.
All beneficial provisions for individuals belonging to vulnerable groups of the population remain (Art 34, 2).

contradictions, and incentive policies for the social economy are limited. The implementation of these laws occurred within the framework of the EU's **"Europe 2020"** agenda.

Law 4430/2016 defines the SSE as follows:

> «"The Social and Solidarity Economy is defined as the sum of economic activities which are based on an alternative form of organization of the relations of production, distribution, consumption and re-investment, founded on the principles of democracy, equality, solidarity, cooperation along with the respect towards man and the environment"».[8]

However, the institutional approach to SSE is far from transformative. We must recognize that **competing definitions of SSE** underlie different policy options and ideological constellations:

> «In a nutshell, social enterprises can be seen as market-driven solutions to social problems (neo-liberal discourse), as remedies for the correction of both market and state failures (third way thinking), as emancipatory projects for economic and social transformation (radical approach)».[9]

It is well known that, in recent decades, the welfare state has undergone radical transformations. The social pact underpinning it no longer exists. This shift has affected, among other things, the very concept of social policy. For example, unemployment has shifted from being seen as an unintended and temporary condition to a **structural and intentional** one, requiring a new form of intervention. This is conceptualized as the **«active welfare state»**, which focuses exclusively on the **supply side** of the labor market (to be «reformed» and adapted), ignoring the **demand side.**[10] In this framework, the SSE is often considered merely a **management tool** for addressing the negative externalities of contemporary capitalism, without questioning its premises.[11]

Art 18 introduces the obligation of employing members of the cooperative at a minimum of 60% of the sum of employees, including non-members. This provision is in tune with the effort of ensuring jobs for members; it acts as an incentive for becoming a member of the cooperative when being employed by it; it can finally be said that it renders Social Cooperative Enterprises of Law 4430/2016 active producers of democratic employment» Ioannis Nasioulas, "The Greek Law 4430/2016 on Social and Solidarity Economy: Breakthroughs and Backdrops", *The Social Economy Institute Policy Brief*, #2 - 01 December 2016, pp. 13-14.

[8] *Ivi*, p. 7.

[9] Sofia Adam, "Social and Solidarity Economy and the Crisis: Policy challenges and opportunities", *International Conference in Contemporary Social Sciences*, Issue 8 (4), 2016, p. 6.

[10] See Katerina Vlasaki, "The 'Social Economy' in the time of crisis", *International Conference in Contemporary Social Sciences*, Issue 8 (5), 2016.

[11] «Given the significant decrease of GDP in crisis-ridden countries such as Greece, the promotion of social economy is often linked with the restoration of economic growth. In parallel, the social economy is also expected to address major social challenges (unemployment, social inequalities and new needs for social services) by fostering a new social pact with

The fundamental question at stake is: **How do we organize our societies and economies?** Consequently, what **role** do we envision for the Social and Solidarity Economy?

«The comparative advantage of the solidarity economy approach stems from the fact that it opens up again the quest for social transformation (Kawano, 2010; RIPESS, 2015). By social transformation, we address three fundamental economic questions: social needs, relations of production and relations of circulation. [...] Social and solidarity economy as a transformative project does not just aim to restore economic activity and create jobs but to challenge the core function of production for profit instead of the production for social needs».[12]

In this sense, I define the SSE as **a social space where the satisfaction of collective well-being—based on social needs—replaces private profit as the aim of economic activity**. Therefore, I consider the SSE a process of **emancipatory socioeconomic transformation**.

In recent years, many self-managed initiatives have emerged in Greece, often operating independently from institutions, following a **radical cooperative model**.

While some actors began before the crisis, it was only after 2011 that a **consistent SSE movement** began to spread. The crisis, in any case, has shaped the pace and relevance of the SSE in Greece.[13] Its main sectors of diffusion are: **food production and distribution, education, and services (social care, tourism)**.

According to the latest report, there are **1,138 SSE entities** registered in the new Registry of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security, and Social Solidarity, established by Law 4430/2016.[14] However, by its very nature, a social phenomenon is never fully captured by law or legal frameworks. We can identify at least three categories of SSE organizations:

- Organizations with a legal form on the official Registry,
- Organizations with a legal form not on the Registry,

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reduced roles assigned to traditional actors including the welfare state (European Commission, 2013a). This vision of the European policy agenda on social economy raises great expectations on the capacity of social economy entities to achieve multiple goals while leaving the building blocks of the growth model which led to the crisis in the first place, as well as its neoliberal management since then, unaffected. This paper argues that public policies grounded on this conceptualization of social economy are not likely to come up to these expectations and bear significant results» Sofia Adam, "Social and Solidarity Economy and the Crisis, cit., pp. 6-7.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] See Nick Temple, Angelos Vavarousis, Chrysostomos Galanos, George Tsitsirigos, Georgia Bedridaki, *Greece. Social and Solidarity Economy Report*, British Council, 2017, pp. 10-17.

[14] Κ.ΑΛ.Ο Ετήσια Έκθεση 2018, https://kalo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/kalo_annualreport2018.pdf (Last accessed: 05/03/2026).

- Informal organizations.[15]

The economic impact of the SSE in Greece is **extremely limited**, though difficult to quantify: many initiatives are informal or unregistered, the legal framework is inconsistent, and there is no universal definition of SSE. Moreover, many initiatives provide **collective benefits that cannot be monetized**. For these reasons, studying the SSE in Greece is a **methodological challenge**.[16]

Nonetheless—and perhaps precisely for this reason—it is worth examining **concrete attempts** to create sustainable alternative economic activities connected to societal needs and supported by local social movements.

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3. Field Research Analysis: Mapping the Alternative

The research focused on **18 case studies** in Athens and Thessaloniki. As shown in **Figures 1a and 1b**, the spatial distribution of these initiatives reveals a **high concentration in central districts**, often linked to pre-existing activist networks.

The organizations analyzed (see **Table 2** for details) operate in diverse sectors: from independent media like *Efsyn* (**A1**) to recovered industrial production at *Vio.Me.* (**T1**) and psychosocial empowerment at *Apò Koinoù* (**A6**). Despite their differences, the **cooperative form** is a shared political necessity across all cases.

Table 2: Mapping the SSE Local Ecosystems (2018-2019)

ID	City	Organization	Sector / Nature
A1	**ATHENS**	**Efsyn**	Cooperative Newspaper

[15] See Nick Temple, Angelos Vavarousis, Chrysostomos Galanos, George Tsitsirigos, Georgia Bedridaki, *Greece. Social and Solidarity Economy Report*, cit., pp. 38-39.

[16] «The study of the SSE sector in Greece is a methodological challenge (Adam and Telo-ni 2015), primarily due to the sector's relatively new expansion, as well as the recent establishment of a coherent legislative framework. Future studies could apply mixed method designs, i.e. combining quantitative data from different sources (such as official registers, studies based on the AAOA method) with qualitative data that could shed more light on our understanding of the Greek SSE sector and its potential» Marina Papadaki, Stefania Kalogeraki, "Exploring social and solidarity economy (SSE) during the Greek economic crisis", cit., p. 63.

A2		**Syn Allois**	Cooperative Grocery Shop
A3		**Lacandona**	Cooperative Bar & Fair Trade Shop
A4		**Cinergies**	Documentary Production Cooperative
A5		**Sociality**	Digital Communication Cooperative
-		**Co-Hab Athens**	Informal Group on Co-housing
A6		**Apò Koinoù**	Psychosocial Empowerment
A7		**Ekdoseis Synadelfon**	Publishing Cooperative
A8		**Perivolàki**	Cooperative Coffee Shop
A9		**Women Associations**	Women's Cooperative
T1	**THESSALONIKI**	**Vio.Me.**	Workers' Coop (Recovered Factory)
T2		**Allos Tropos**	Cooperative Grocery & Coffee Shop
T3		**I Mikrì Frida**	Cooperative Coffee Shop
T4		**Akivernites Politeies**	Bookstore & Coffee Shop
T5		**BiosCoop**	Consumer Cooperative
T6		**Dimiourgìes Koinsep**	Cooperative Pastry Shop

T7		**To Oraion Dtepo**	Cooperative Coffee Shop
-		**UnivSSE COOP**	Cooperative University of SSE

Figure 1a. Spatial distribution of SSE organizations in Athens (Points **A1–A9**).
Note: Co-Hab Athens is not mapped due to its informal/mobile nature.

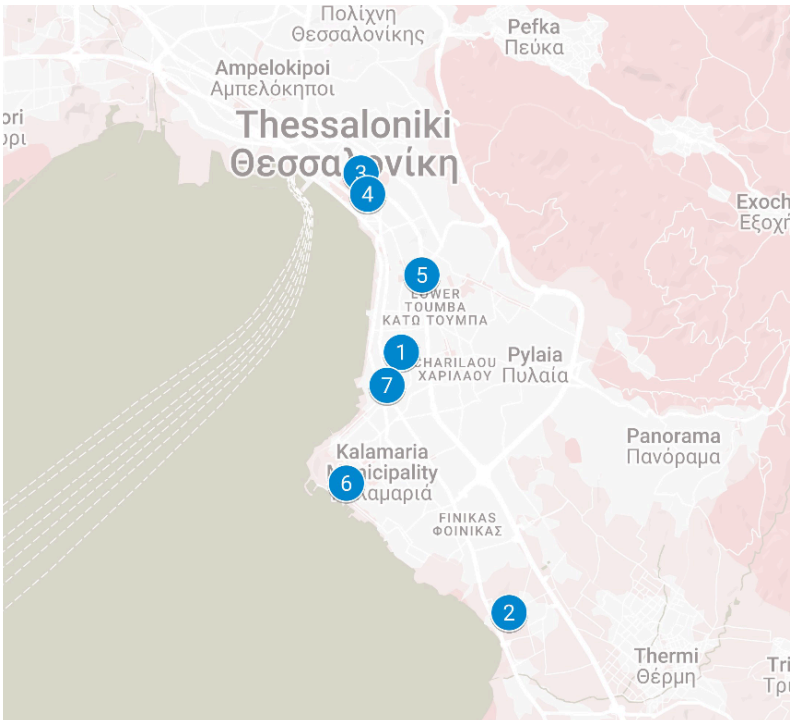


Figure 1b. Spatial distribution of SSE organizations in Thessaloniki (Points **T1–T7**).
Note: UnivSSE COOP is not displayed as it operates as a decentralized educational network.

Through a series of interviews and with the support of an online survey, I aimed to highlight the following aspects:

- The identification of social impact and how it is produced;
- The relationship between the SSE and the legal/institutional framework;
- The skills, training, and professionals crucial for developing the SSE;
- The role of social movements in creating support networks for the SSE.

The research involved **18 initiatives** in total. All of them, including the informal collective *Co-Hab Athens*, participated in the survey, providing a **comprehensive overview** of the SSE landscape in both cities.

Of the 18 organizations:

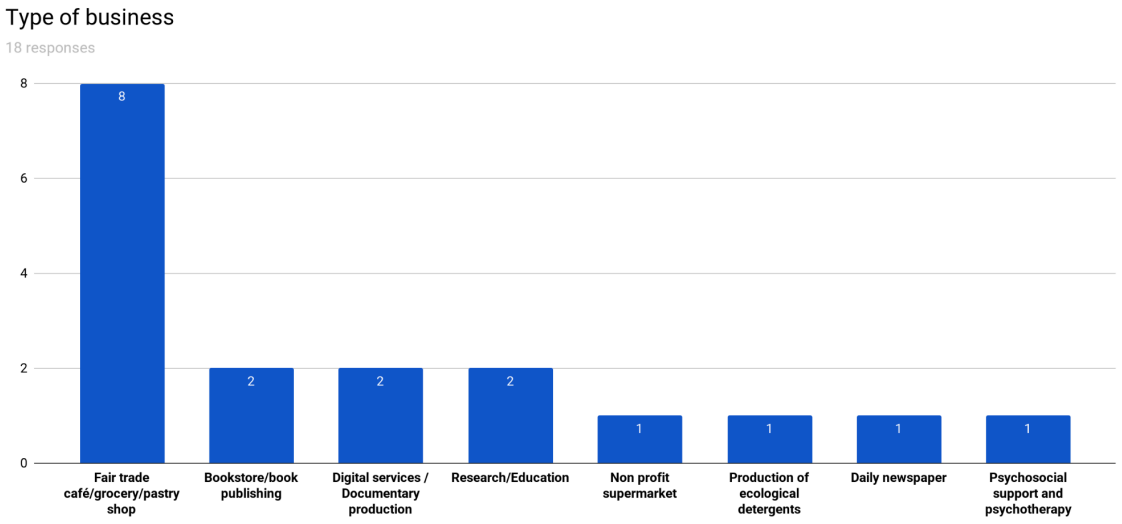
- **11** have been operating for less than six years, while **7** have been active for six to ten years;
- **12** enterprises have fewer than ten members, **4** have between ten and twenty-five, and only **2** have more than a hundred;

- **14** enterprises provide income for fewer than ten people, **2** for ten to twenty, and only **1** for more than a hundred. Notably, one initiative provides no direct income, reflecting its nature as an informal or purely activist-based collective.[17]

The profile of the SSE enterprises that emerges aligns with the existing literature: a **young, immature, and small-scale ecosystem**.[18]

The same is true for the **types of activities** promoted by the enterprises, the majority of which are related to **food processing and distribution, followed by education and services**.

Table 3: Type of Business



Regarding their **social purpose**, the answers of the participants are quite diversified. Many respondents identify it as promoting alternative and fair trade between producers and consumers, namely providing affordable, high-quality, ethical products while considering environmental aspects (5 cases). A second relevant aspect of social purpose is the creation of employment for unemployed

[17] The discrepancy between the number of enterprises with more than a hundred members and paid workers is due to the fact that one of the two is a consumer cooperative.

[18] As written in the SSE Report: «SSE in Greece is currently significantly underdeveloped in relation to other European countries with the majority of SSE organisations in Greece been small in size and recently established, facing at the same time highly challenging economic conditions with regard to their start-up activities, financial sustainability and market growth» Nick Temple, Angelos Vavarousis, Chrysostomos Galanos, George Tsitsirigos, Georgia Bedridaki, *Greece. Social and Solidarity Economy Report*, cit., p. 10.

people, along with a different working model through self-management (4 cases). Other enterprises identify their social purpose as follows:

- Providing affordable books for people;
- Providing independent news coverage "by the people, for the people";
- Promoting alternative narratives of sustainable development;
- Empowering the online presence of organizations and companies;
- Providing psychosocial support, community empowerment, psychotherapy, research;
- Promoting neighborhood regeneration;
- Supporting SSE in general.

When it comes to identifying how the same enterprises **produce social impact**, we can say that it's mainly about providing access to services and products that benefit different actors in the local community (workers, consumers, producers, migrants, etc.). The most relevant elements are:

- Promotion of free cultural/art events (concerts, exhibitions, debates) and support campaigns for other social initiatives/movements (e.g., Zapatistas);
- Benefits to local producers, small cooperatives, and other SSE initiatives;
- Benefits to the local community and the environment;
- Direct democracy and self-management within the workplace;
- Coverage and storytelling of social issues, Social Solidarity Economy, and social movements;
- Support for traditional products and women's entrepreneurship;
- Creation of seminars, radio, free-access audiovisual and bibliographic material, SSE networking;
- Supporting vulnerable social groups.

Law 4430/2016 gives the following definition of **social impact**:

> "Social impact is the collective and social benefit produced by the activity of a Social and Solidarity Economy Organization, as defined in Art 3, in regard to economic, environmental, and social terms in local societies.".[19]

If the recognition of the existence of enterprises that integrate social and environmental aspects in their business models is a positive step in the promotion of SSE, many problematic issues emerge in the relationship between SSE in Greece and the legal/institutional framework. Controversies are related to definitions, financing, support and independence.

[19] Ioannis Nasioulas, "The Greek Law 4430/2016 on Social and Solidarity Economy: Breakthroughs and Backdrops", cit., p. 8.

As an example, let's have a look at how the enterprises define themselves and how the law defines them.

Table 4: How SSE Organizations Define Themselves

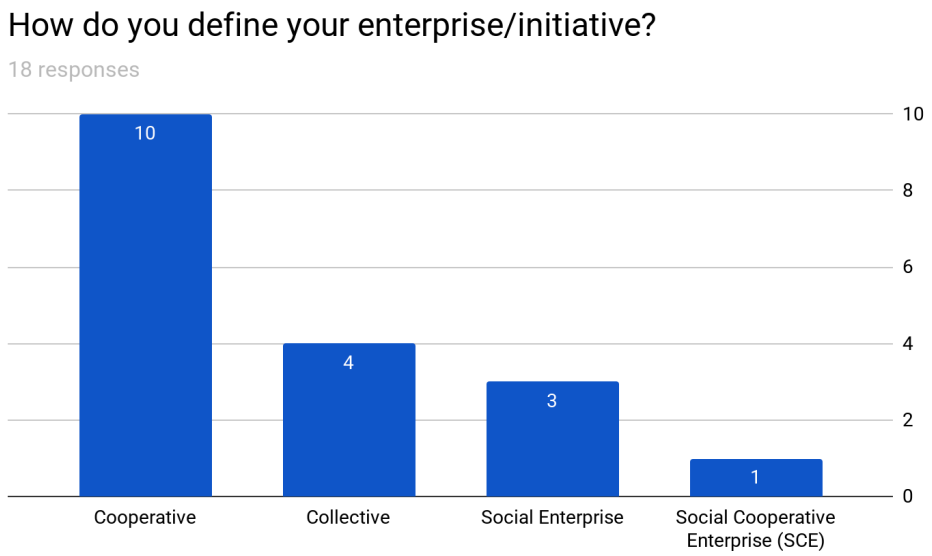


Table 5: Legal Definition

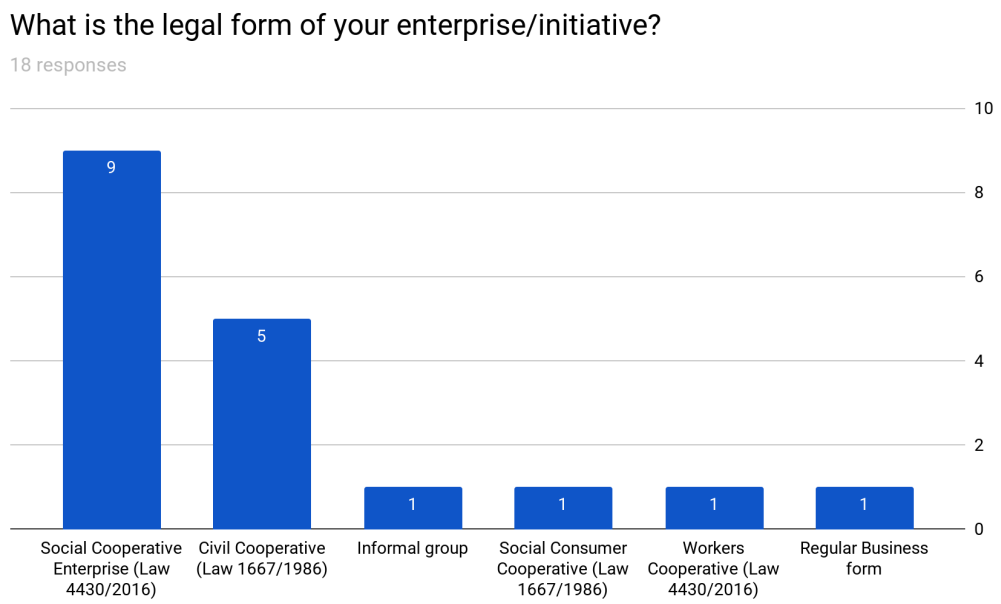
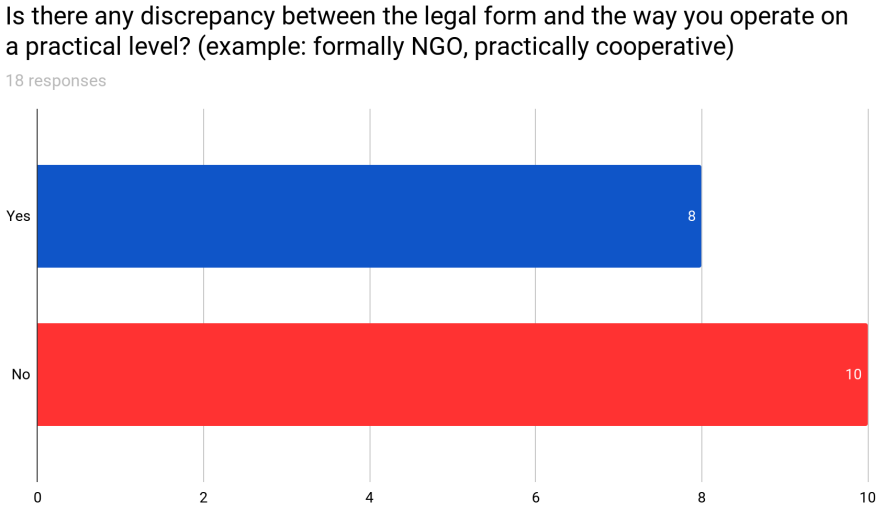


Table 6: Discrepancy Between Legal Form and Practice



It is quite obvious that there is a **discrepancy between self-identification and the definition by law**. It is interesting that the majority of enterprises define themselves as **cooperatives**, followed by work collectives. This means that the cooperative model, despite all its problems and discredited reputation, still carries some meaning of an alternative. At the same time, it's also clear that the new form of Social Cooperative Enterprise has given room for new businesses to be born.
Half of the enterprises believe that there is a **discrepancy between their legal form and the way they operate in practice**. Some participants identify the legal form as an **obstacle to real democratic relationships** within the enterprise. In other cases, for different reasons, the way the enterprise operates does not have **proper legal recognition**.

Viome, the only recovered factory in Greece, is a special case. Despite being a workers' cooperative, it faces ongoing legal and bureaucratic challenges due to its unconventional status.

Efsyn, a self-managed cooperative newspaper born out of the crisis of the historical *Eleftherotypia* in 2012, is particularly striking:[20]

> "*Journalists cannot be publishers according to the Greek legal system, so we have established an anonymous company in which the co-operative is the main shareholder. We are workers, paid by the Public Limited*

[20] «In 2012, after the bankruptcy of "Eleftherotypia", a historic and widely circulated center – left newspaper, a group of fired journalists and media workers established the cooperative newspaper "Efimerida ton Syntakton", in order to provide independent and antagonistic information to the public. The newspaper of the journalists, as its title actually means, has gradually earned its position among the ten most popular printed newspapers in the country but is by far the newspaper within the "big 10" with the strongest liaisons with the social struggles» Georgia Bedridaki, Antonios Broumas, "Greek society in crisis and in motion", cit., p. 248.

Company".[21]

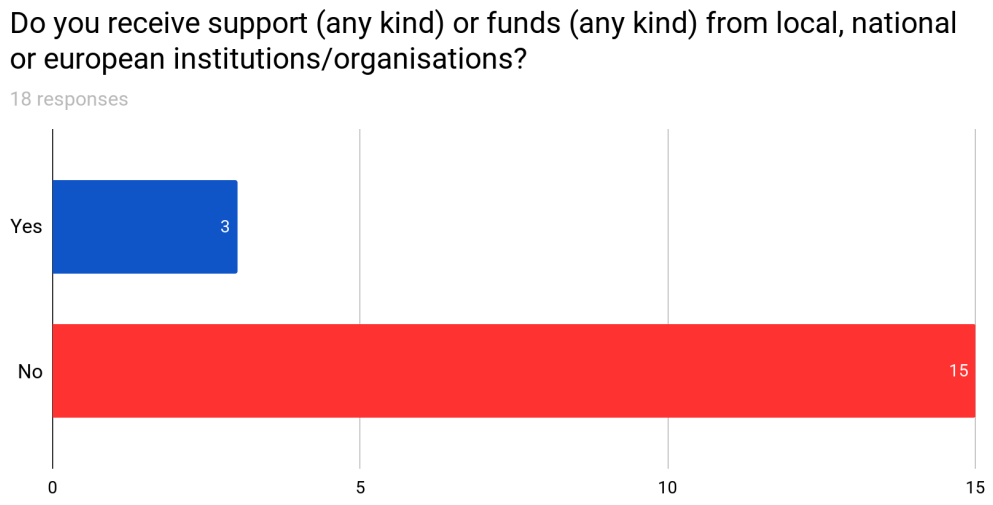
Nonetheless, the **majority of the enterprises (14 out of 18)** are registered on the new Registry, which means they are **officially recognized as SSE organizations**.

When asked about the new law on SSE (**Law 4430/2016**), the opinions expressed are varied:

- In **three cases**, no specific opinions are expressed.
- In **eight cases**, the considerations are **mainly or completely negative**. The main reasons include:
    - Excessive bureaucracy
    - Perception of political patronage
    - Risk of labor exploitation through the use of voluntary work
    - Absence of tax or other incentives
- In **seven cases**, the opinion is **partially or completely positive:**

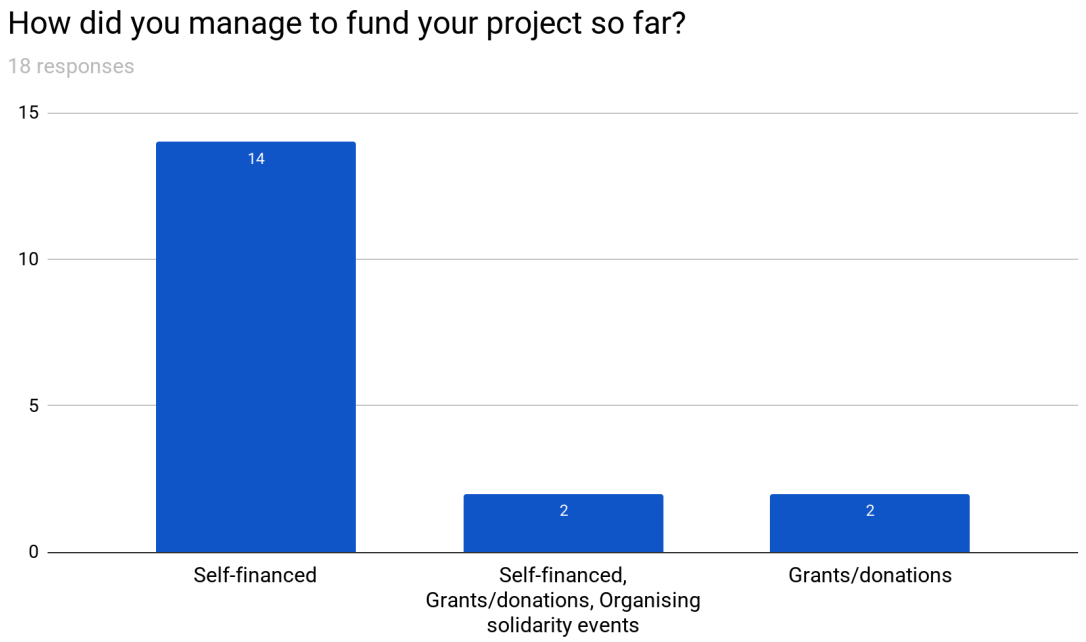
"*Holistic approach and definition of SSE. Introduction of Workers' Cooperative. Decoupling of legal form and SSE enterprises*".[22]

Tab. 7: Institutional support



[21] Worker of the cooperative newspaper Efsyn (Athens). Survey filled on the 4th December 2018.
[22] Worker of the cooperative Syn Allois (Athens). Survey filled on the 26th November 2018.

Tab. 8: Funding sources



The issue of **funding and support** emerges as an extremely sensitive and controversial topic. The majority of respondents claim the **independence of their enterprises** from any kind of institution. This is due both to the **libertarian/anarchist ideology** often linked to these initiatives and to the **negative heritage of the old state-patronized model** of agricultural and farming cooperatives.[23]

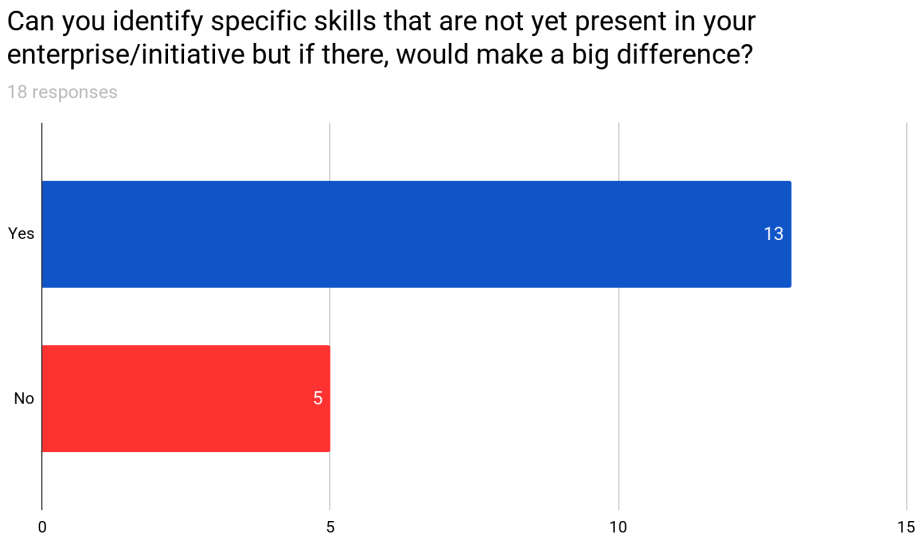
It's worth noting that in two cases, the enterprises receive support from **grassroots initiatives**. At the same time, at least four enterprises participated or participate in **European-funded projects** (ESPA, Erasmus+). One received support from the **Greek Manpower Employment Organization (OAED)**.

To summarize, SSE has to be a **grassroots and independent movement** to be coherent with its premises. At the same time, creating an enabling environment—in terms of legal framework and some sort of institutional support—is crucial for its development. This tension cannot probably be solved but it has to be seriously tackled if the SSE sector aims at being effective.[24]

[23] See Georgia Bedridaki, Antonios Broumas, "Greek society in crisis and in motion", cit.
[24] An example in this sense emerges clearly from the report promoted by the British Council: «The survey responses are reinforced by the qualitative fieldwork, which highlighted a distinct absence of tools for providing effective finance. What

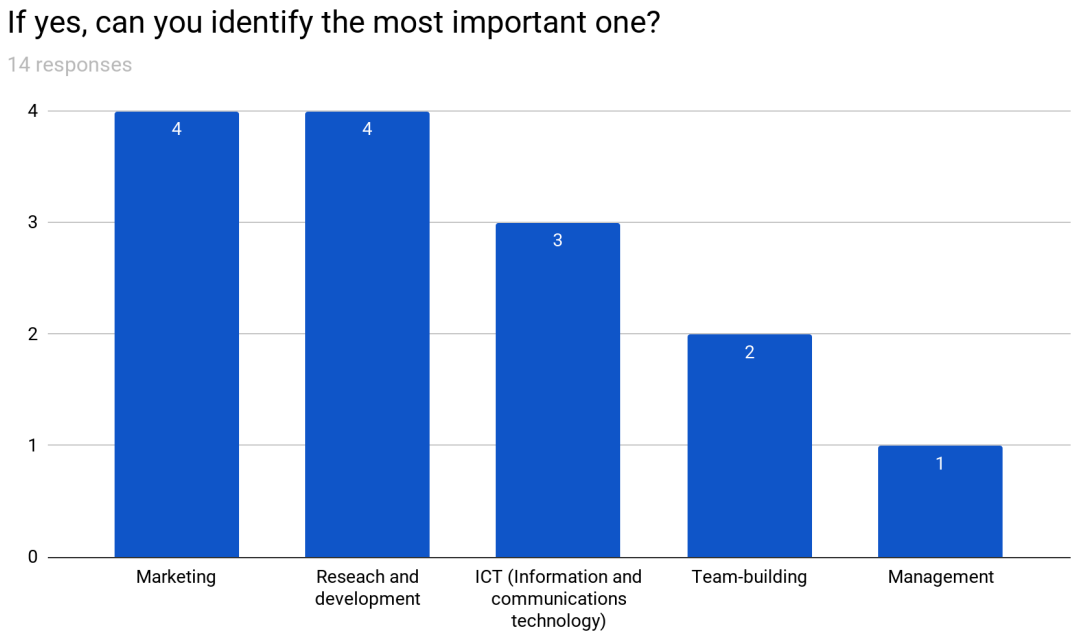
Turning to the issue of the skills, training, and professionals relevant to developing SSE, it is clear that there is a **gap** between the **skills needed** and the **ideological commitment** of organizations.

Table 9: Skills Needed vs. Available Skills



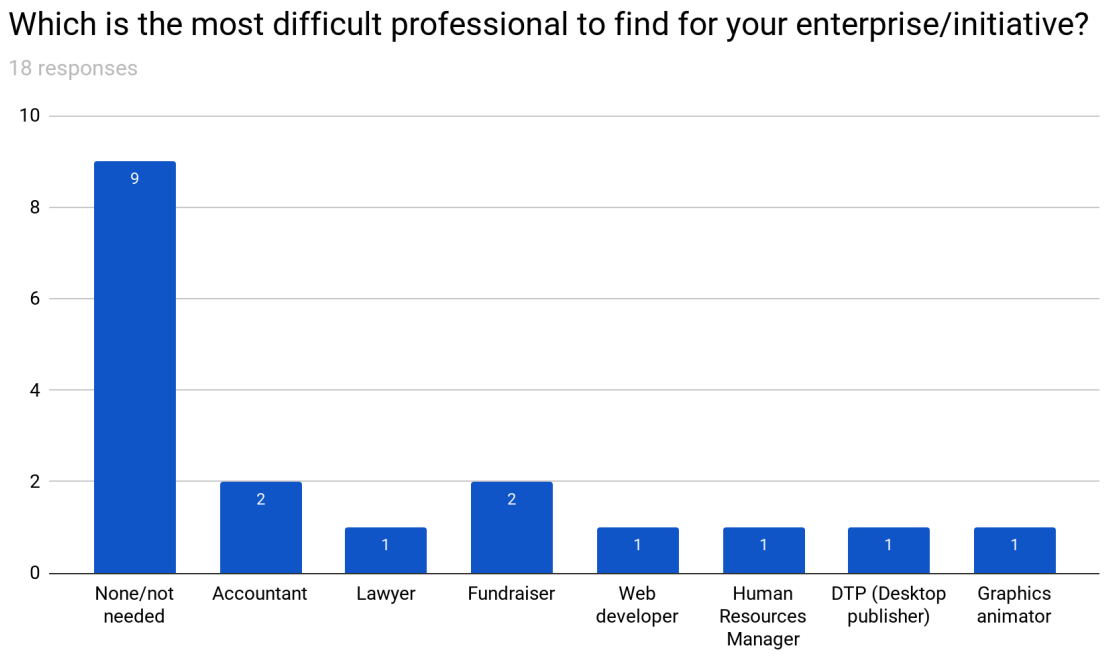
emerges more clearly in the fieldwork is the extent to which there is a fundamental challenge for some of the SSE organisations that have deliberately established themselves in opposition to the mainstream economic system (and, therefore, finance providers). This is connected to the broader scepticism about mainstream notions of economic growth. The participants, however, did also view the wider collapse of private finance as an opportunity to consider and develop alternative forms of finance. In this sense, the SSE can be part of redesigning a new social economy and more 'social' finance» Nick Temple, Angelos Vavarousis, Chrysostomos Galanos, George Tsitsirigos, Georgia Bedridaki, *Greece. Social and Solidarity Economy Report*, cit., p. 83.

Tab. 10: Skills needed



Not surprisingly, the skills that are most needed, such as **marketing or research and development**, are common to any enterprise. Social and Solidarity Economy enterprises are not just ideological projects—they are **enterprises with revenues and expenses**, so they must be **sustainable** to survive and generate income.

Tab. 11: Professional figures needed



The majority of the enterprises recognize that they need to develop their **team-building skills and relationships** as well. Team-building is perceived as a crucial element by all respondents, something that needs to be improved all the time:

> "*we either won't stop working on it, or we will stop working in general*".[25]

Critical aspects related to team-building include:

- The **collective decision-making process**,
- Management of the **division of labor**,
- Handling **personal tensions**.

In two cases, specific **team-building events or training** are mentioned.

The relevance of team-building skills is embedded in the very type of enterprise based on **self-management and workers' control**. Concerning the decision-making process, the assembly of members (most commonly weekly) is the place where all decisions are taken. Great emphasis is placed on the **democratic process**:

[25] Worker of the coop Cinergies (Athens). Survey filled on the 3rd January 2019.

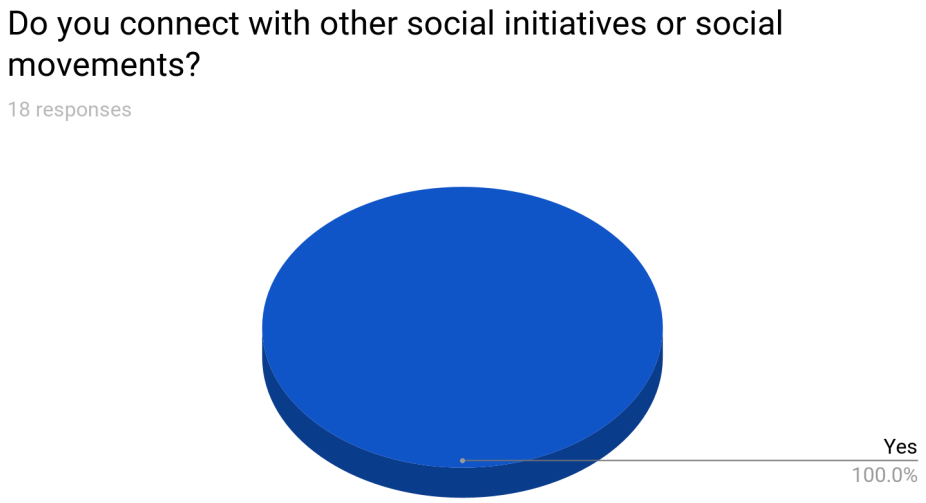
- **9 enterprises** follow or try to use **consensus decision-making**,
- In **four cases**, the **majority voting system** is explicitly mentioned as the main decision-making process or as a secondary choice when needed.

It is therefore **extremely important** to consider and foster skills specifically related to SSE's goals, such as:

- **Team-building** and **facilitation skills**,
- **Cooperative leadership**.

At the same time, a **robust knowledge of business**—in terms of financing, marketing, research, and development—is crucial, always tailored to a **social business model**. In other words, there must be a **delicate balance** between focusing on **social and political impact** and on **strictly business aspects**.

Tab. 12: Connections with social movements



Being part of a **network** is extremely relevant and valuable for all the enterprises. For the majority, these connections serve **both economic and political purposes**:

> "*With other collectives, in business but also in solidarity terms and the purpose is to build a strong social movement*".[26]

[26] Worker of the cooperative Akivernites Polities (Thessaloniki). Survey filled on the 14th December 2018.

However, the connection with social movements/initiatives is **primarily political**, focused on **solidarity**, rather than being strictly business-oriented.[27] Still, some enterprises have developed **B2B relationships**.

All enterprises have connections with:

- Other **SSE initiatives**,
- **Trade unions**,
- **Collectives**,
- **Recovered factories**,
- **Social struggles** in general.

Many enterprises are members of **informal networks of cooperatives/collectives** at **local, national, and European levels**. In Athens, for example, **five enterprises** are members of the **workers' cooperative network Diktyosi**.[28]

Challenges and Future Prospects

Main Obstacles

From the interviews, three main obstacles emerge:

1. **Access to Capital:** Reliance on crowdfunding or members' savings (Katomeris, 2018) limits the ability to scale up.
2. **Institutional Bureaucracy:** Several entities like *Co-Hab Athens* and *UnivSSE* prefer to remain informal to avoid perceived state co-optation (Nasioulas, 2016).
3. **Self-Exploitation:** Sustainability often relies on voluntary or underpaid labor, raising questions about the long-term replicability of the model.

When asked about the **main challenges** they faced during their startup, respondents highlighted:

- **Internal challenges**: Lack of working capital, difficulties in financing projects, **unpaid work**, lack of business skills, managing workflow and human relationships.
- **External challenges**: Legal or bureaucratic obstacles, difficulty in finding clients.

[27] "We connect with our Union, we strike when they strike, support financially etc, we connect with other Koinsep which have a more radical vision too" Worker of the cooperative Ekdoseis ton Synadelfon (Athens). Survey filled on the 3rd January 2019.

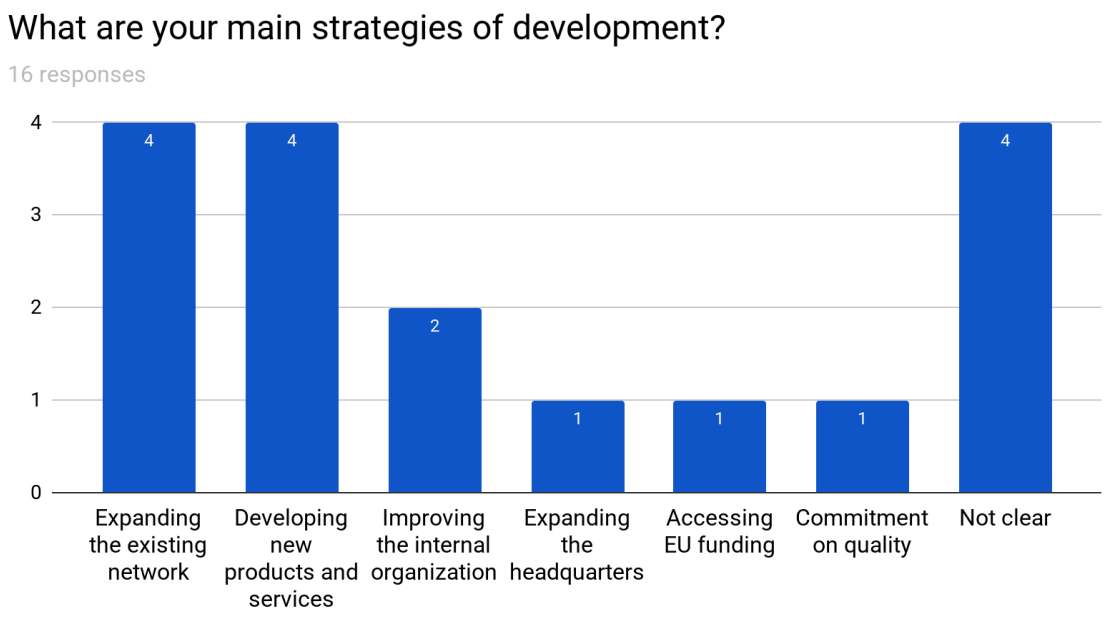
[28] Diktyosi is a local network of nine work collectives based in Athens, https://kolektives.org/ (Last accessed: 05/03/2026).

Regarding the **main threats** to their survival, most respondents mentioned:

- **Economic aspects**: A hostile economic environment, competition from big enterprises, changes in markets, lack of financial liquidity, or business-plan failure.
- **Internal tensions**, **legal obstacles** (e.g., the case of *Viome*), and **bureaucracy**.

Strategies for Development

Tab. 13: Strategies of development



The **strategies for development** imagined by enterprises include:

- Expanding **distribution networks** (e.g., *Syn Allois* **A2** and *BiosCoop* **T5**),
- Creating **new products and services** (e.g., expanding the digital edition of *Efsyn*),
- Better use of **social media**.

In some cases, there is **no clear strategy** or it is not yet being elaborated.

Aspects like **business planning and development strategy** cannot be underestimated. They are likely the **decisive elements** that will determine the **long-term sustainability** of such non-capitalist economic organizations. Despite all the difficulties faced, **13 out of 18 enterprises** are satisfied with the results achieved so far.

4. Conclusions: Beyond Marginality?

"What is the benefit for you of being a member of the coop?"

"*It is the political values that are achieved through my participation, meaning to take control of important aspects of my life. The main idea was to make something work now, not in the future*".[29]

The Social and Solidarity Economy is a **nascent sector** in Greece. Aside from the agricultural cooperative tradition—which left a negative legacy (corruption, political control)—there was practically no identifiable SSE sector before 2000, especially before the crisis. A significant push came from **recent social movements**. Despite the challenges, the context, and many unresolved issues, this path is worth exploring.

Key Provisional Conclusions

- An **immature ecosystem**: small businesses (fewer than 10 workers) and young enterprises.
- A **lack of knowledge in business management**[30]
- Strong **ideological and value-driven motivation**.
- Economic activities **tend to break even**.[31]
- The most common challenges are: **lack of liquidity, difficulty in securing seed capital, and internal tensions** (due to self-management, political conflicts, and organizational deficits).

[29] Member of the consumer coop BiosCoop (Thessaloniki). Interview held on the 10th October 2018, Thessaloniki.

[30] According to the largest study to date on the SSE in Greece: «The findings from the fieldwork compound this, with many participants highlighting challenges in relation to a lack of skills and knowledge, including (internal) communication skills, decision-making and associated conflict-resolution skills, and general business and managerial skills. This is no surprise given the starting points of many of these entities and how little capacity and experience they have. It is noticeable that while a large majority of the organisations surveyed can demonstrate decision-making by the assembly (81 per cent), participation of members (75 per cent), allocation of work by collective decision-making (73 per cent) and regular information meetings (63 per cent), much fewer have a business plan (45 per cent), internal auditing (34 per cent), or any way of evaluating the organisation's viability (15 per cent). This provides a picture of a small, principled and highly values-driven group of organisations, but one whose business skills, processes and experience are limited» Nick Temple, Angelos Vavarousis, Chrysostomos Galanos, George Tsitsirigos, Georgia Bedridaki, *Greece. Social and Solidarity Economy Report*, cit., p. 84.

[31] In the survey there is no data collected on the economic performance of the enterprises strictly speaking, nonetheless the data emerged on different occasions during the interviews. Moreover, the data available from the existing literature are consistent with it. See the already mentioned report by the British Council. In any case, many members of the coops claimed this fact as coherent with their anticapitalist nonprofit stance.

- Reliance **primarily on own resources**.
- A **problematic relationship with the institutional and regulatory context**.
- The ecosystem **survives thanks to solidarity networks, informal exchanges, and relations with local communities and social movements**.

The Core Tension

There is a **clear tension** between:

- The **need for independence and autonomy**, and
- The **structural asymmetries** that make such autonomy nearly impossible without **institutional transformation**.

This tension has been described by Sofia Adam:

> «Addressing social needs via new productive relations presupposes in turn the need to move beyond the binary state-market or put it differently to accomplish a mix of resources (Gardin, 2006) which protects the autonomy of SSE practices versus the dominant tendencies for isomorphism towards the state or the market (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). Without ensuring alternative circuits for the exchange of credit, the purchase of inputs and distribution channels for their products based on relations of reciprocity, SSE entities are doomed to obey the dictum of the market and the logic of commodity or depend exclusively on the resources made available by the state. On the other hand, contrary to what might be seen as conducive to their transformative potential, exclusive reliance on symmetrical exchanges among similar minded initiatives may also pose threats if it restricts these initiatives to dwarfish and marginal productive activities. It is exactly in the management of these tensions towards a post-capitalist future where the true strength of SSE lies as a social transformative project».[32]

I therefore believe it is essential to **directly address these tensions**, as the risk of **co-optation on one hand and marginality on the other** is always present. Even if we acknowledge that the SSE cannot be left solely to **EU policymakers or populist governments**, we must also have a **clear alternative vision**—a model, tools, and definitions—to promote it. In this sense, SSE movements must **engage in the debate and assert their stance**. The recognition of elements in business beyond profit must be leveraged to **transform reality toward the desired direction**.

[32] Sofia Adam, "Social and Solidarity Economy and the Crisis", cit., pp. 8-9.

Rethinking SSE

First and foremost, SSE is **not merely about integrating social aspects into a business model**, as the social enterprise narrative suggests.[33] Instead, it is about **organizing economic activity from the ground up**, where individuals collectively determine:

- **What to produce**,
- **How to produce**, and
- **For whom**.

Collective ownership and **self-management** are fundamental elements that must be **continuously revitalized**.

Second, we must acknowledge that **specific skills** are crucial for SSE development, including:

- **Technical skills** (not just business or organizational skills),
- **Analysis and research** (markets, ecological footprints of production, supply chains).

Understanding the **complexity of systems of social reproduction** is essential for building an alternative to the *status quo*.

The Role of the Legislative Framework

Even if controversial—as in the case of the Greek SSE movement—the **legislative and regulatory framework** cannot be ignored. For example, having a **framework law on SSE** is better than having none at all. If the law's perspectives, aims, and tools differ from those of the movements, it is essential to:

- **Participate in the debate**,

[33] «The recent focus of the European Commission on social businesses follows a certain tradition which confuses different terms (social enterprises, social entrepreneurship and social businesses) and treats all legal entities as pertinent to the label of social business given that they perform a social utility function. As such, we lose sight of the fact that social enterprises at least in Europe form part of the universe of social and solidarity economy practices as collective endeavors which move existing boundaries of traditional social economy actors to more socially useful directions. Therefore, the quest to open up the legal status of a social enterprise to all legal entities is grounded more on the focus of finding market solutions to social problems (especially in the framework of the retrenchment of the welfare state and the current neoliberal management of the fiscal crisis) than on the quest to respond to unsatisfied social needs in ways which promote further democracy and solidarity» *Ivi*, p. 20.

- **Raise voices**,
- **Propose alternatives**,
- **Push for further change**.

Only in this way is there a chance to overcome the impasse between the **institutional framework** and **grassroots movements**.

Financing: A Critical Challenge

Access to finance is one of the **key issues** for SSE everywhere. While tools like crowdfunding can be effective in specific cases, **solid financial systems must be developed**.[34]

The Strength of SSE

One of SSE's greatest strengths is its **heterogeneity, pluralism, and diversity**. It is crucial to preserve these elements while also finding ways to **build on common ground**:

> *«The solidarity economy seeks to reorient and harness the state, policies, trade, production, distribution, consumption, investment, money, finance, and ownership structures to serve the welfare of people and the environment. What distinguishes the solidarity economy movement from many other social change and revolutionary movements of the past is its pluralist approach—eschewing rigid blueprints and the belief in a single, correct path. The solidarity economy values and builds on concrete practices, many of which are quite old. Rather than seeking to create utopia from thin air and theory, it recognizes that a concrete utopia—a utopia in action—already exists. It is rooted in the practices of participatory democracy and promotes a new vision of the economy: an economy that places people at the center of the system and values relationships over goods».*[35]

The Greek SSE (2018–2019) emerged as a bold **political laboratory**, a space where the seeds of an **alternative economic model** were sown. Though numerically marginal, its true significance lies not

[34] The authors of the report on SSE in Greece made some proposals for the Greek context that could be valid elsewhere: «1) Establish an independent **social enterprise pre-start grant fund** that offers grants to help individuals or teams start up, test out and pilot their activities. [...] 2) Convene a **social finance task force** to identify specific financing gaps and to develop proposals on prospective financial innovations to decide whether they would be viable or effective in a Greek context. [...] 3) Improve the **accessibility** to mainstream Greek government and European Union funding programmes for SSE organisations. [...] 4) Work with cooperative and mainstream banks to provide access to basic **business banking** services. [...] 5) Consider corporate social responsibility regulation, which requires large private sector businesses to put a proportion of their profits towards social impact projects» Nick Temple, Angelos Vavarousis, Chrysostomos Galanos, George Tsitsirigos, Georgia Bedridaki, *Greece. Social and Solidarity Economy Report*, cit., pp. 84-85.

[35] RIPESS, "Global Vision for a Social Solidarity Economy", cit., p. 10.

in scale, but in its **transformative potential**: the ability to **reimagine what is possible**.

To transition from isolated experiments to a cohesive economic system, three pillars are essential:

- **Networking**: Building short supply chains that link producers, consumers, and communities (e.g., Syn Allois A2 and BiosCoop T5).
- **Education**: Cultivating technical skills rooted in social ethics, ensuring that innovation serves people and the planet (e.g., UnivSSE).
- **Political Recognition**: Elevating the SSE from a mere "social buffer" to a **cornerstone of urban development**, where solidarity economies shape the cities of tomorrow.

These pillars not only respond to the tensions identified earlier but also pave the way for **overcoming co-optation and marginality**, enabling the **proliferation of transformative alternatives**.

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