

Toward a Statistically Robust Assessment of Social and Solidarity Economy Actors. Conceptual Development and Empirical Validation

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Thematic line 1 Concepts and models of social enterprise

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Abstract

Many definitions and debates exist about the core characteristics of social and solidarity economy (SSE) and its actors. Among others, legal forms, profit, geographical scope, and size as criteria for identifying SSE actors often reveal dissents among SSE scholars.

Instead of using a dichotomous, either-in-or-out definition of SSE actors, this paper presents an assessment tool that takes into account multiple dimensions to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced view of the field.

We first define the core dimensions of the assessment tool by synthesizing the multiple indicators found in the literature. We then empirically test these dimensions and their interrelatedness and seek to identify potential clusters of actors. Finally we discuss the practical implications of our model.

Keywords

- Comprehensive and non-dichotomous assessment tool
- Core principles of internal functioning
- Empirical validation
- SSE principles
- Assessment grid

1 Introduction

In recent years, social and solidarity economy (SSE) has gained in importance, parallel to the rise of other related movements such as social entrepreneurship or more generally, corporate social responsibility (Schrempf, 2012; Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013). Various countries have developed specific legislation and created task forces or committees on the issue (see Borzaga & Defourny, 2001). Local umbrella organizations have been created or strengthened to better promote these types of socio-economic actors. Finally, various research programs and research centers have been initiated to better understand and support these movements.

Despite the increasing awareness, interest, and promotion programs, we still lack a clear conceptualization of the various streams and their respective definitions, scopes, and boundaries. 'Social' is often defined in a very generic way to include some contribution to societal welfare or to 'the community' – without further detail or operationalization. As for the economic aspect, some authors suggest that any organization is 'economic' as soon as it buys and sells some product within its operations, even if it this product is as simple as a pen and paper to take notes (see Rist, 1998). Others relate 'economic' to 'profit-generation'. As an intermediary position, a third group of scholars speaks of limited profit or simply suggests that an organization must aim at trading some goods and service to be 'economic'.

As a result, practitioners and scholars are overwhelmed by the multitude of combinations possible between the various definitions of social and the various understandings of economic. At the same time, there is a lack of tools for mapping the various definitions. Various risks result from this conceptual weakness. The first risk is the reduction of SSE and especially of its social dimension to arbitrarily chosen single dimensions. As a result, organizations can carefully develop their own definition of 'social' to claim that they are 'social' based on their own narrow, self-serving definition, as a new type of blue- or green- washing. On the opposite end of the spectrum, is the second type of risk that a definition or interpretation that is too broad and yet not clearly operationalized and therefore might lead to situations of easy contentment in which actors think they are perfectly 'social' and yet do not measure the possible gap between the principles to which they claim to adhere and the specific practices within their organization. In both cases, the concept of SSE is likely to lose any real meaning and to provide no added value. The third risk is that the absence of clear conceptualization might lead to unhealthy competition between the various streams rather than constructive collaboration. This might be the case especially between more traditional approaches of SSE within continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxon conception of social entrepreneurship.

In this article, we aim at developing a comprehensive operationalization of the founding principles of SSE. We summarize and integrate the indicators used in the various SSE streams into an 8-dimensional model and provide preliminary empirical results based on this model. These results allow for a discussion of the validity of the first five dimensions and for the identification of various clusters of actors.

The model presented in this paper contributes in various ways to the current theoretical discussion and practical application. First, the model proposed allows for assessing a variety of types of actors, regardless of their size, legal form or industry sector. Second, it allows for a nuanced assessment and graphical representation of individual actors. Instead of a dichotomous, either-in-or-out approach of SSE, the method proposed here also identifies actors located in the gray zone – that is, actors that for various reasons apply SSE principles only in part, but still differ from traditional businesses or traditional nonprofit. This includes actors that might traditionally be considered as SSE regarding their legal form or domain of activity, but do not in fact implement central SSE principles – or conversely, actors that are usually excluded from the SSE field that might nevertheless show high scores on most of the core SSE dimensions, such as some family businesses. Finally, the assessment grid allows for the identification of streams and clusters among SSE actors as well as among actors related to the SSE.

Beyond the theoretical contributions regarding the definition, delimitation, and operationalization of the SSE sector, the assessment and related radar mapping of actors might help consumers in their ethical consumption processes by allowing for a simple yet comprehensive representation of an organization's/store's score on the core values of the SSE. Furthermore, the mapping might be helpful to define public policies that suit the needs and reality of the SSE movement, while the assessment

grid might for instance help governments in setting criteria for organizations to benefit from SSE programs.

In the following chapter, we define eight dimensions that include most of the indicators currently found in the literature. In chapter 3, we present the results of empirical studies realized to discuss the first five dimensions and identify clusters among SSE actors. We end this paper with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications as well as further research possibilities.

2 Developing an Assessment Grid for the SSE Core Principle

SSE movements are becoming increasingly visible in the public sphere and an object of study in the academic world (Borzaga & Defourny, 2001; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Levesque & Mendell, 2005).

At a regional level, various umbrella organizations are emerging, for instance in Switzerland with the creation of SSE chambers of commerce in the French speaking part of the country.¹ Local authorities also showing increasing interest in developing and supporting economic actors that are anchored in and benefit to the local community, as can be illustrated through the increasing support for the local SSE chambers of commerce in France.

At national level, various countries such as the United Kingdom and Italy have adopted their legislation to create new legal forms for hybrid, socio-economic actors (see Borzaga & Santuari, 2001; Haugh & Peredo, 2010). Furthermore, the UK has launched many initiatives, especially under the former Blair administration, to support local and community-based initiatives (Department of Trade and Industry, 2002; Snaith, 2007). In France, Holland's government has a now a delegate minister for SSE and consumption and is preparing a new law on SSE.²

At the supra-national level, the European Union is also showing increasing interest for the topic and is launching various initiatives, among others, to define and map social enterprises, their movement, and governmental positions within the various EU states. Initiatives to support this type of economy are also currently being developed.³

Finally, various research projects and research centers flourish to better grasp, understand, and define social entrepreneurship, SSE, as well as other related movement such as the common good economy – and if possible identify similarities and differences between these streams (e.g., Brandeleer, 2011; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010).

2.1 Traditional definitions challenged

Despite – or because of – the richness and variety of initiatives among civil society and governmental bodies, we observe a revival of the debates about the content and borders of the SSE field. While traditionally, various streams could be observed depending on regional and cultural factors (e.g., SSE in Latin countries, social entrepreneurship closer to the American business mindset...), these streams are nowadays confronting each other through globalization and the development of supra-national policies.

Three changes in the SSE context can be briefly explored here. First, we observe a blurring of the traditional boundaries between the for-profit and non-profit worlds, resulting from a combination of factors (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2003). On the one hand, traditional businesses become more and more involved in CSR as well as in social business (e.g., bottom of the pyramid) (see Prahalad, 2010). On the other, traditional nonprofit organizations become more and more interested in management

¹ APRES-VD and APRES-GE. See www.apres-vd.ch and www.apres-ge.ch.

² See <http://recma.org/node/3357>.

³ See for instance the initiative 2012/2004(INI) adopted by the European Parliament and entitled 'Social Business Initiative – Creating a favourable climate for social enterprises, key stakeholders in the social economy and innovation'.

and entrepreneurship (see Bradley, Jansen, & Silverman, 2003; Dees, 1998). Finally, the new social entrepreneurs seek to explicitly position themselves at the crossroad of social and business (e.g., Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). Social and economics seem, at first, no longer opposed, but might in some cases be two faces of the same endeavor (see Gonin & Gachet, 2011).

Second, the extension of the SSE movement outside of its originating countries such as France and Belgium leads to questions about the identification of actors through their legal form (Borzaga & Defourny, 2001). While traditionally, SSE simply includes all associations, cooperatives, mutual societies, and foundations, various definitions question this approach which led to a dichotomous, either-in-or-out conception of the SSE field. The growing interest of governments and of the European Union among others, for economic models that better contribute to the welfare of all members of society leads to new public policies with specific conceptions of what a social economy should and could be. Yet for various reasons, the approach traditionally based on the legal form in the SSE movement is being replaced by an approach that looks at values and principles that can better comprehend the reality of many organizations such as hybrid social enterprises and structures with multiple projects and economic logics (e.g., Gonin & Gachet, 2011). For instance, the SSE chamber in Geneva considers that if some conditions are to be fulfilled before joining the chamber, other criteria are rather some ideals toward which organizations should aspire and show progress in reaching these ideals. Following this logic, the chambers allow corporations or independent businesses to become members as long as they fulfill specific criteria with regards to issues such as their social objective, their governance, and their profit distribution rules – and show a plan on how to progress as regards their weaknesses.⁴ Similarly, the EMES criteria focus on core principles to identify SSE actors, rather than simply listing the legal forms that represent the SSE. The law project in France as well as the EU definition also foresees the inclusion of actors with legal forms atypical of the SSE, as long as they fulfill specific criteria. The either-in-or-out approach is therefore replaced with a notion of a grey zone. While no single enterprise can proposit to fulfilling these criteria, this nuanced definition implies that in addition to the actors forming the core of the SSE movement, many other organizations gravitate around the core by displaying mixed results with regard to the application of the SSE principles. However to measure the extent to which their practice correspond to the SSE principles, complex assessments tools are needed.

The need for such tools is further increased by the fact that more and more customers require information about the social and environmental impact of any given product (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Hibbert, Hogg, & Quinn, 2002; Huybrechts, Mertens, & Xhaufclair, 2006). Similarly, investors and donors require clear and measurable economic and/or social results from their investment (see Grimes, 2010). This forces organizations to translate their often highly general principles and values such as community benefit, participatory governance, and citizen initiative into more explicit and operational, qualitative or quantitative, concepts. The heterogeneity of the donors/investors and their principles lead however to a multiplication of the measures and variables used by SSE organizations. This multitude of dimensions results in turn, in a very heterogeneous picture of the movement in terms of the principles focused upon and the indicators used. Consequently, some actors are strong on some principles but tend to neglect others, raising the issue of the minimal application of the principles needed to be considered part of the SSE field.

In the next section, we develop a model that integrates as many of the indicators found in the literature as possible to assess organizations from multiple perspectives.

2.2 The 8-Dimensional Assessment Grid

Because of the higher complexity, the increasing blurriness, and the absence of operationalization of many SSE values, a typology of the current streams within the SSE movement becomes necessary. An assessment grid that encompasses all core SSE principles and that can be applied to all types of SSE actors is required in order to pinpoint to specific criteria of actors across countries and industry sectors. To reach these objectives, the assessment grid needs to encompass the characteristics outlined below.

⁴ See the website of the SSE chamber: <http://www.apres-ge.ch>.

First, it must be applied in impartial manner to as many types of actors as possible, regardless of their size, legal form, industry sector, and country of operation. As the dichotomous approach is replaced by a cloud approach with many actors in a grey zone around SSE, the grid must ideally be applied to core SSE actors as well as actors in the grey zone or even outside of the SSE movement such as family businesses and SMEs. To reach this objective, we include in the assessment grid all core dimensions of SSE without giving preference to some dimensions over others – knowing that some SSE streams might score low on some dimensions that are less relevant for them.

Second, the assessment grid must allow for a fair comparison between the various actors. This implies that each dimension is to be evaluated and represented separately and in a non-dichotomous manner. This allows for measuring and comparing the strength and weakness of an actor to the performance of other actors regardless of their respective conceptions of SSE, industry sectors, or geographic location. To facilitate comparisons, we chose the radar graph to represent, on a single graph, an actor's performance on each dimension and to compare it to the score of other actors.

Third, the assessment grid must help practitioners in defining criteria or labels for the SSE. By choosing to represent separately an actor's score for each of the core principles, our model provides a means to assess an actor while at the same time leaving it to the practitioners (state or SSE umbrella organizations for instance) to define the minimal criteria necessary to be considered as part of the SSE. These minimal criteria can for instance be based on a minimal overall average, on a minimal score to be obtained on certain or all dimensions, or on a combination of both.

Finally, our model seeks to avoid the traditional economics vs. sociology trap. Instead, we suggest that economic activity is always related to its social context and that most dimensions show both an economic / management aspect and a social one (Granovetter, 1985). For instance, democratic participation is a central value in sociology and political sciences, yet has tremendous managerial implications. Similarly, while often decided based on managerial and financial criteria (except for work insertion organizations), the creation or suppression of job can have tremendous social impact. Therefore, we avoided the qualification of our dimensions as either 'social' or 'business/economic'.

Based on these four characteristics, we created an assessment grid that contains eight dimensions summarizing the many indicators found in the literature on SSE as well as on social impact and social utility measurement (among others, Brandeleer, 2011; Fonteneau, Neamtan, Wanyama, Morais, & de Poorter, 2010; Hart, Laville, & Cattani, 2010; Jeantet, 2009; Levesque & Mendell, 2005; Mertens, 2007). Five of these dimensions have already been largely discussed in the literature and adopted in practice. These are (1) democratic and participatory governance, (2) autonomy, (3) not-for profit management, (4) entrepreneurial mindset, and (5) plural economy. The remaining three dimensions reflect elements either implicit to other dimensions or adopted by only some streams of the SSE literature. These are (6) corporate social responsibility, (7) social issue tackling, and (8) contribution to social cohesion.

2.2.1 Democratic and participatory governance

Democracy and participation reflect the SSE ideal in which the organization is a result of a citizen-led initiative and remains owned or at least governed by the community. Consequently, stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, employees/volunteers, as well as any third party concerned with the organization's activity and its impact, are to be involved in governance and management. While many streams of SSE consider participatory governance as a central element (e.g., Laville, 2003b; Laville, Magnen, De França Filho, & Medeiros, 2005), it is interestingly not taken into consideration by the social entrepreneurship stream, unless the specific focus of the social enterprise is democracy (see Smith et al., 2013). Furthermore, the width, – the number of stakeholders taken into consideration – and the depth – the range and types of decisions processes to which stakeholders are associated – show great variation among SSE members. For instance, some organizations involve their employees and volunteers in all strategic and/or operational decisions, but fail to integrate other stakeholders such as beneficiaries. Conversely, other organizations involve many different stakeholders, but only for major strategic decisions.

Furthermore, for democracy to be effective within their organizations, SSE actors must show a high level of transparency. All stakeholders must be able to access key information about the

organization, such as statutes and composition of the board, but also annual report, strategy, and financial structure. Only in doing so are stakeholders able to actively take part in annual meetings and vote in an informed manner.

Finally, democracy also implies that each person has a similar weight in elections and votes, regardless of statute or capital (i.e. the 1 person 1 vote principle).

2.2.2 Autonomy

The autonomy dimension seeks to reflect three central indicators of SSE – two formal and one informal. First, the SSE definition usually insists on the SSE actors' emergence from civil society in opposition to government-led initiatives.

Second, the organization is to be led without the interference of public or private institutions. No seat of the board is to be attributed by statutes to delegates of the governmental agencies or to private institutions such as funding partners.

Finally, to avoid indirect influence of key partners, actors must not be financially dependent upon a few single customers, agencies, or donors. To ensure their autonomy, organizations must therefore seek to find numerous sources of income.

2.2.3 Not-for profit management

The third dimension represents SSE's main difference with traditional for-profit business. Not-for-profit management implies that the organization has set, in its founding acts, social objectives before financial ones.

Further, profit distribution is strictly limited. While some streams of SSE insist on that no profit be distributed by SSE actors, others see a limited profit distribution as acceptable among SSE actors.

Finally, not-for-profit also implies that devolution of assets be well defined in statutes or minutes in case of the organization's dissolution. Assets are in this case usually to be distributed to other not-for-profit organizations pursuing similar objectives.

2.2.4 Entrepreneurial mindset

Entrepreneurial mindset refers to an approach that regularly review products, services, and processes in order to adapt them to the organization's changing environment and find new customers and financial sources. As such, the entrepreneurial mindset is not to be limited to product innovation or start-up. While entrepreneurial mindset is often considered as a core difference between social entrepreneurs and traditional nonprofit organizations, many SSE actors show various facets of an entrepreneurial mindset (see Gonin, Gachet, & Lachance, 2013). Entrepreneurial mindset is for instance reflected in the evaluation of the organization's social and / or economic performance in order to ensure that objectives are met.

Furthermore, organizations with entrepreneurial mindset seek to develop and offer goods and services that others do not yet offer in their service area – either to address a social issues not yet addressed yet or to address it from another perspective.

Finally, the entrepreneurial mindset can be observed among older organizations that introduce changes in their offer, processes, and/or structures and ways of functioning. This can also include actively seeking new partnerships and collaborations, and identifying trends and needs that are likely to emerge and that might offer new opportunities or threats for the organization.

2.2.5 Plural economy

A final characteristic widely accepted among SSE scholars is the notion of plural economy (Laville, 2003a). Plural economy highlights the social embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) that inserts trading activity in a broader web of social relations. It points toward possibilities to develop economic activities outside of the traditional markets and its reliance on traditional currencies. In the same line as the suppression of the business vs. social dichotomy, plural economy refers to the combination of the commercial and non-commercial logics as well as of the monetary and non-monetary trading. Plural economy assumes that each of these types of exchange shows strengths and weaknesses and all imply the embeddedness in some community as well as interaction with other individuals or organizations.

The mix of economic logic can be found as regards labor forces (mix of paid and unpaid workers) and financial sources (selling of goods and services to private or public institutions combined with donations, subventions, and/or membership fees). Furthermore, plural economy includes also informal, non-monetary exchanges of goods and services in a spirit of community sharing. For instance, organizations can trade the use of a conference room or projector against the use of a minivan or a tent for a bigger event.

2.2.6 Social issue tackling

In addition to the five widely accepted dimensions discussed thus far, three further criteria are often considered to be equally important for SSE, but are lacking in operationalization. All three of these dimensions relate more directly to social aspects (AVISE, 2007; Bouchard, Fontan, Lachance, & Fraisse, 2003; Bouchard, 2004; Gadrey, 2005, 2006; Noguez, 2003; Rodet, 2008). However, we noticed that social aspects have not yet been clearly conceptualized, even though the word 'social' can be found in many recent concepts such as Corporate *Social* Responsibility (CSR), *social* Investment, *social* entrepreneurship, *social* and solidarity economy, *social* impact, and *social* performance (see European Commission, 2013; Pärenson, 2011). Moreover, social and societal are often mixed and not clearly differentiated. For example, the 'community interest' criterion is the only criterion of the SSE Chamber in Geneva that is not defined in detail.

The first additional dimension with little operationalization is what we call 'social issue tackling'. While all social enterprises claim that they explicitly pursue a common welfare objective, few have developed measuring tools to ensure that their activities really contribute to solving the issue they tackle. Moreover, as the expectations of these institutions might be highly diverse, the measures are equally variegated, leading to the absence of standard variables for measuring social impact and hence preventing possible comparison across actors, methods, and structures.

Variables are therefore needed to operationalize social issue tackling across actors as different as community supported agriculture, work insertion programs, and waste recycling organization.

2.2.7 Contribution to social cohesion

While the previous dimension focuses on assessing the impact that an organization has on the specific issue it aims at tackling, the contribution to social cohesion dimension relates to the broader, often indirect, impacts an organization has on the community in which it operates. This broader impact can show multiple aspects. For instance, a work insertion organization that opens a bar in a park not only contributes to work insertion, but can also contribute to making the park a safe place through their presence – and allowing elderly persons in the neighborhood to go out again and to remain part of a social network (see Delhommeau & Stokkink, 2008). Similarly, associations with strong internal democratic processes offer places where citizens can develop their civic mindset and acquire experience in democratic process.

Although indirect, these impacts still represent important contributions to social cohesion and democratic mindset. In some cases, indirect contributions might be even more significant than the impact initially intended by the organization. For instance, offering a job to an unemployed person without any vocational training not only helps the individual, it might reduce tensions in the person's home, help the person's child succeed in school, and hence prevent that child from also requiring

specific work insertion measures at a later stage. For these reasons, SSE actors might want to be active in identifying their indirect contributions and perhaps make them more visible and quantifiable. In some cases, small adaptations of their functioning and/or of products and services might even increase these indirect contributions without necessarily threatening the organization's primary mission or inducing important additional costs.

We suppose that the last two variables, contribution to social cohesion and social issue tackling, represent a key difference between social entrepreneurship and the SSE movement. While social entrepreneurship focuses on the social impact, the SSE movement follows more general principles and values. As a result, we suggest that in general, actors within the social entrepreneurship stream are stronger in operationalizing the measure of their social impact on a specific issue, but might neglect their broader societal impact. Conversely, SSE actors might be stronger with regard to the application of general principles and impact on society in general, but lack tools to measure their impact and to ensure that they really contribute to solving the issue they pursue. Further empirical research is however needed to verify these propositions.

2.2.8 Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility includes social and environmental responsibilities that are related to the production and distribution of the organization's main goods and services. This includes criteria for the supply chain outside the organization as well as aspects related to the production within the organization, such as working conditions and environmental protection measures.

Interestingly, while relying on central values of the SSE movement, this aspect seems neglected in the literature and moreover among SSE actors. Various elements suggest that SSE organizations might tend to forget about their broader responsibilities. Similarly to traditional business that might be tempted to reduce their CSR efforts in order to better fulfill shareholders' expectations, SSE actors seem to sometimes forget their broader responsibility as they focus on addressing the needs of their primary stakeholders, that is, the beneficiaries of their goods and services. This risk might be even higher among actors of the social entrepreneurship stream in situation where investors set pressure, not to distribute profit, but to show that the social issue they promised to tackle has been (partly) solved through their intervention.

3 Empirical Study

To better understand the width and depth of SSE in Western Switzerland, the eight dimensions presented in chapter 2 have been operationalized through a series of questions and two questionnaires have been distributed to various samples. The first questionnaire includes questions relative to the first five dimensions, while the second contains questions relative to social issue tackling, social cohesion, and CSR. The aim of the empirical study is twofold. First, we aim at mapping actors evolving around the SSE field. The second objective is to validate the use of these dimensions as indicators of SSE activity and assessment tools.

We are currently working on the data analysis of the results of the second questionnaire. This section therefore addresses only the first five dimensions and relies on two different methodologies. In the following, we first present the three sub-samples contacted for the study. We then describe SSE actors based on the five dimensions developed in the theoretical part. In a third step, we discuss the results obtained through a data reduction technique akin to the principal component analysis to identify clusters. We end this chapter by comparing the results of the various sub-samples and legal forms.

3.1 Sub-Samples

As the SSE movement is very new in Switzerland, no register or umbrella organization can provide a comprehensive list of actors. Furthermore, the study aims at exploring not only actors explicitly identified as SSE actors, but also actors that might be related to it even without any explicit affiliation. Conversely, we do not consider actors that claim to be 'SSE actors' or to be affiliated to the

SSE movement because of their legal form, as necessarily '100% SSE'. Finally, the study is conducted by two research teams with the same questionnaire in two different cantons, Vaud and Fribourg. For these reasons, three sub-samples based on different methodologies were contacted to answer the questionnaire, two in the canton de Vaud and one in the canton de Fribourg.

3.1.1 Snowball sub-sample, Canton de Vaud

The first sub-sample of the Canton de Vaud, the SSE sub-sample, is composed of organizations that can be related to the SSE movement in the canton de Vaud either because they are members of an umbrella organizations of the SSE movement, or because they have been recommended by SSE members. In addition, this sample includes a few actors that declare themselves as part of the SSE even though they show neither formal affiliation nor fulfill traditional criteria such as legal form.

A snowball methodology has been used for forming this sub-sample, with the intention of identifying as many organizations as possible that could potentially be related to the SSE and its principles. This method has been acknowledged as particularly suited to identify actors who are not systematically listed in some index and who do not necessarily publicly show that they belong to some group or movement – as it is the case for SSE actors in Switzerland (Noy, 2008; Etter & Perneger, 2000; Schiltz, 2005).

In a first step, members of various umbrella organizations have been listed as part of the sub-sample. The umbrella organizations contacted at this first stage of the snowball approach include the local SSE chamber of commerce, Swiss FairTrade, work insertion organization umbrella structure, Community Supported Agriculture structures, microfinance networks, as well as the housing cooperative network

In a second step, we contacted these organizations via email and asked them to communicate names of actors they think might also belong to the SSE movement. The organization that we could include through this process were then contacted and also asked to tell us about organizations they would consider to be related to the SSE movement. Furthermore, a form on the project webpage allowed organizations to either provide us with their own contact information or to communicate actors they think would fit in our sample. The snowball approach provided the research team with 656 actors and their addresses in the Canton de Vaud.

3.1.2 Business Name Index, canton de Vaud

The snowball sub-sample has been complemented with a second sub-sample in the Canton de Vaud that builds on the common assumption that associations, foundations, and cooperatives form the core of the SSE movement⁵ – even though SSE is not necessarily limited to these forms. Through this means, we identified 2'506 associations, foundations, and cooperatives that were not already identified through the snowball methodology. It should be noted that associations are not obliged to be listed in the index or in any other index. Consequently, only a minority of associations have been reached through this approach. However, the index contains those organizations with the most commercial objectives as well as the largest ones – which required to register.

Once the members of two sub-samples were identified, we sent a paper questionnaire to all 3'162 actors, and included in the cover letter a link for those who prefer to fill an electronic questionnaire (those filling in the electronic questionnaires were promised a personalized feedback). A reminder email was sent a few weeks later to those of the snowball sub-sample who did not reply. Phone calls were also made to the members of the umbrella organizations in a third step. As we did not have email addresses of the actors of the second sub-sample (business name index), neither the financial means to call all of them, no reminder was sent for this group. We still obtained 322 exploitable questionnaires from the second sub-sample (13%), in addition to the 253 exploitable answers from the snowball sub-sample (39%).

⁵ Swiss law does not foresee mutual societies. Mutual banking and mutual insurance companies usually use the cooperative legal form.

3.1.3 Canton de Fribourg

For the sampling methodology in the Canton de Fribourg, the situation was even more difficult because there is no SSE movement or umbrella association similar to the SSE Chamber in the Canton de Vaud. The third sub-sample of Fribourg is therefore based on the registry from government departments involved in the social sector, some umbrella associations, internal databases from the school of management, and active research through the internet. The selected organizations typically have a strong social dimension and are mostly foundations, associations and cooperatives. The base sub-sampling included 154 actors that are representative of the social economy of the Canton in term of type of activities. They were contacted via email. Two reminders were sent and 31% of the total number of questionnaire released was returned and exploitable.

3.2 Descriptive results using the assessment grid

A first descriptive analysis based on the two sub-samples in the canton de Vaud allows for plotting the organizations on a radar graph representing the first five dimensions developed in the theoretical section, namely (1) democratic and participatory governance, (2) autonomy, (3) not-for profit management, (4) entrepreneurial mindset, and (5) plural economy. Each dimension is built on three representative indicators evaluated in a dichotomous manner. If the criteria for the indicator were met, one point was attributed, otherwise 0. The maximum 'points' for each dimension is therefore 3. For instance, to obtain all three points for the autonomy dimension, an organization must in the first instance have more than three clients or donors with the largest three representing not more than 50% of income. The Second point was attributed only if public authorities were not involved in the creation process of the organization. The third point is obtained if no seat in the board is reserved by the statutes or minutes to representative of public or private institutions. The indicators used to build each dimension are listed in Table 1.

Dimension resulting from literature review	Indicators
Democratic and participatory governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum 1 annual meeting based on the '1 person 1 voice' principle • Involvement of customers / beneficiaries in decision processes • Transparency
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The three biggest customers / donors represent less than 50% of income • Public authorities not involved in the creation of the organization • No board seat attributed by statutes to representative of public or private bodies
Entrepreneurial mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization makes an evaluation of economic and social performance • The organization offers a good or service that no other organization provides in the area • The organization has grown or initiated changes in structure or product/service in the past 3 years, respectively plans to do so in the coming 3 years
Plural economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combination of paid and unpaid work • Presence of non-monetary exchange of good/services • Combination of sales and other types of revenues (subventions, donations, etc.)
Not-for-profit management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutes or legal form foresee nonprofit or limited profit • Profit is distributed not only to owners • Statutes foresee that not only owners will benefit in case of dissolution

Table 1: Indicators used for each dimension

Even though the dichotomous approach of the indicators might lack refinement in some cases (e.g., an organization loses the point for board autonomy regardless of whether there is one board seat or the majority of seats reserved for specific institutions), it allows for more easy questions and for less arbitrary formula to estimate partial scoring.

Figure 1 below shows the mean results for the various legal forms of both sub-samples in the Canton de Vaud. What can be observed is that contrary to the idea that cooperatives are the SSE legal form that is closest to traditional businesses, cooperatives show lower average score on entrepreneurial management, and at the same time, do not show a significantly higher score on participative management than traditional businesses. Furthermore, while autonomy represents a central value of SSE, it seems that traditional SSE legal forms are still weak on this dimension in comparison to other traditional business legal forms. Finally, associations seem to better fulfill SSE criteria overall, while foundations show very low scores on average. A closer look suggests however that foundations of the business name index sub-sample are particularly weak on the application of SSE principles.

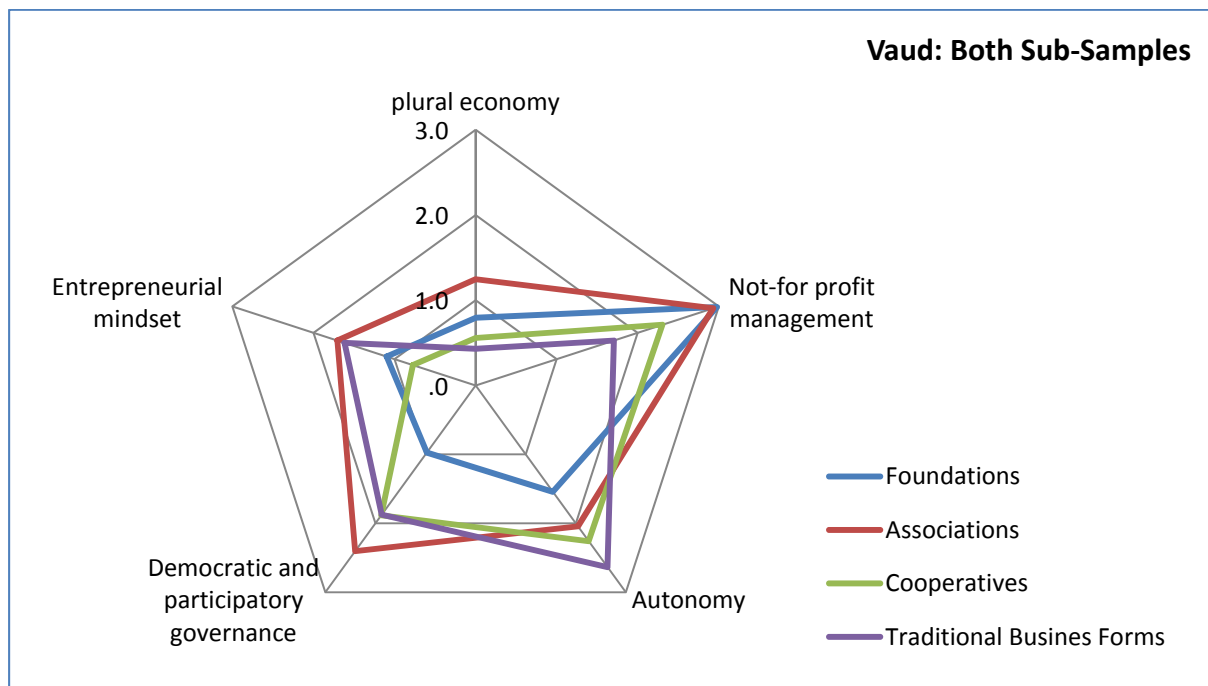


Figure 1: Comparison of the scores of the first 5 dimensions depending on legal form in the two sub-samples of the Canton de Vaud
Note: Traditional business form' includes corporations, LLT, independent as well as less common business legal structures.

On Figure 2, the average of all organizations within the first sub-sample (snowball approach) is compared to the average of the second (business name index). The small difference observed on the not-for-profit management dimension represents no surprise as this criterion is in most cases, required by law for the vast majority of the sample. More important differences are however observed on the entrepreneurial management and the democratic governance dimensions – two essential factors of the SSE. These differences highlight that the legal form might not be sufficient to ensure that the SSE principles are applied, but that these values are lived by those actors who adhere to the SSE movement or are considered as such by their peers – regardless of their legal form.

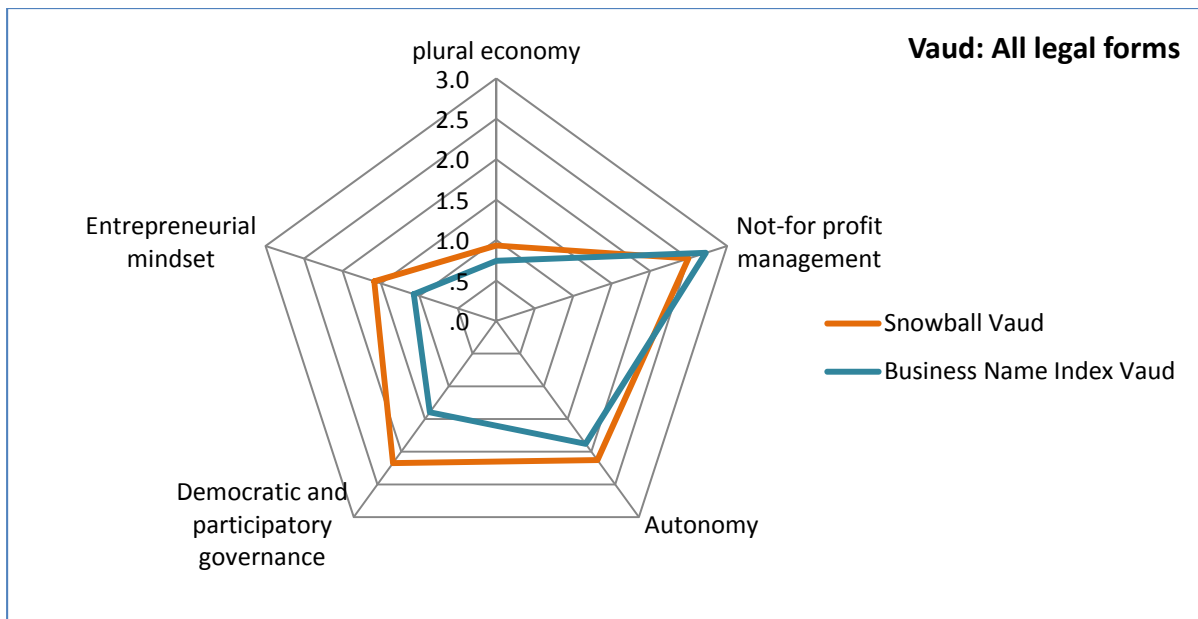


Figure 2: Comparison of the scores on the first 5 dimensions in the Canton de Vaud

3.3 Dimension reduction of the grid and cluster identification

In the previous section, we have created an assessment tool with five dimensions including three indicators that were based on the literature review. In this part of the article, we seek to evaluate to which extent these dimensions have internal consistency and whether some of these are interrelated. By internal consistency, we mean that, if an organization has a high value on one indicator of the dimension, it should also have high value on the other indicators. This would indicate that the three indicators are able to bring out a latent concept, namely the dimension.

To do so, we chose to use an exploratory rather than a confirmatory approach in order to give us the opportunity to refine our assessment tool according to the results, and not to seek to demonstrate, at all costs, the empirical validity of the construction. We used an extension of the method of principal component analysis (namely hierarchical multiple factorial analysis, see Le Dien & Pagès, 20013). It can take into account the hierarchical nature of our construct, in which each dimension of our assessment tool (e.g. democratic and participatory governance) is divided into indicators (e.g. equal weight in elections and votes; width and depth of democratic and participatory governance; access key information about the organizations) – each indicator having been measured with a set of variables. For example, the access to key information about the organization has been evaluated through the degree of transparency for various information and data about the organization.

The factor analysis revealed two axes summarizing together 20% of the variance⁶. By looking at the variables composing these two axes, we can deduce that the first axis represents a measure of the extent of the organization implementing the SSE principles in its management, while the second axis measures the entrepreneurial orientation. Due to the limited space available, only the main results will be presented. Figure 3 shows, in absolute values, the association of the different theoretical dimensions and their corresponding indicators with either of the two axes, or both if the dimension is on the diagonal. The closer a dimension and its corresponding indicators are to each other, the higher is their internal consistency. This will be the first result discussed. Then the axes themselves will be described. Finally the distribution of organizations along the axes will be considered.

⁶ The other axes didn't highlighted interesting structures.

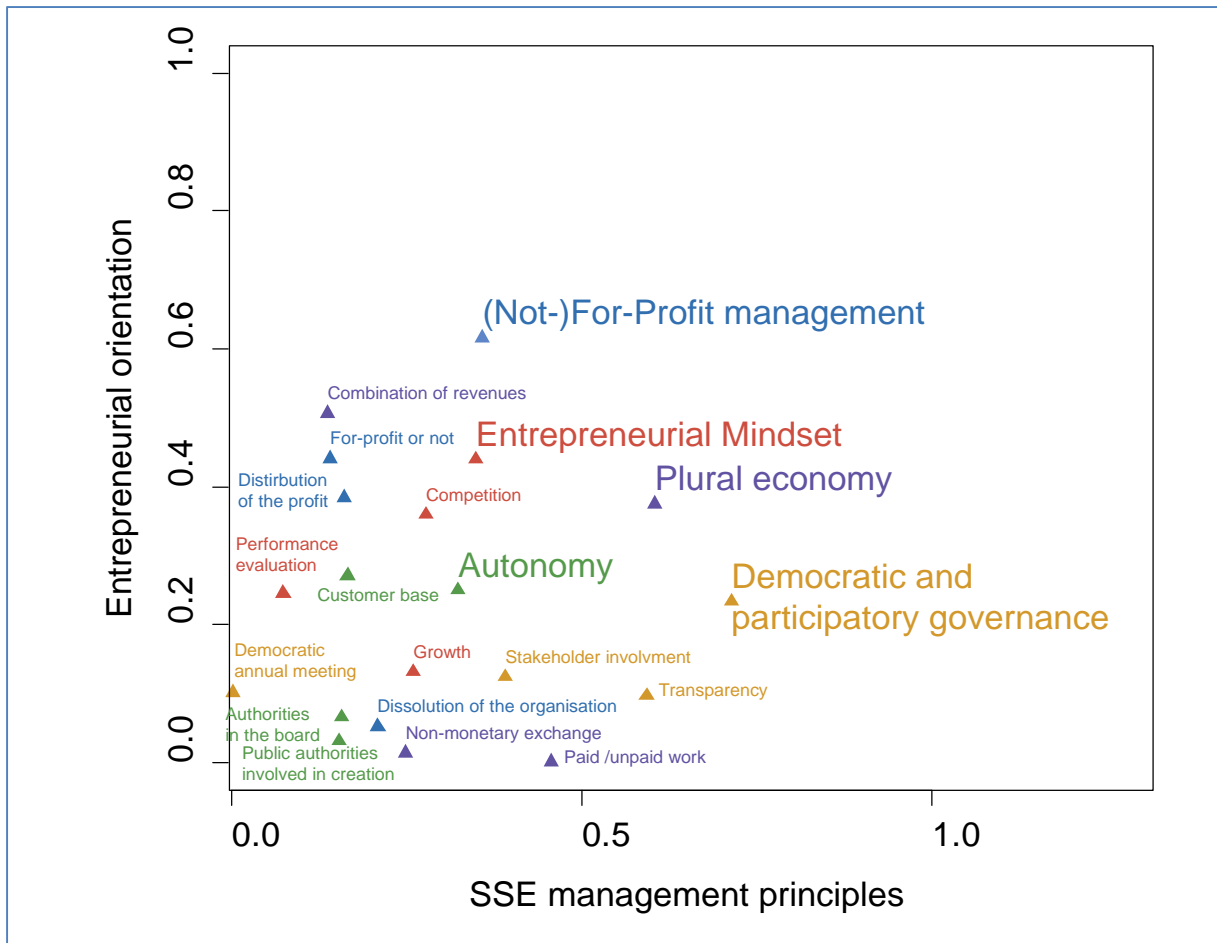


Figure 3: Representation of the dimensions on the axes

Note 1: Bigger text represents the dimensions used for the radar graph while smaller text represents the main indicators used in the construction of the five dimensions as well as other ones that play an important role in the construction of the axes

Note 2: Points with the same color are related to the same theoretical indicator

3.3.1 Analysis of the internal consistency of the dimensions

For the first dimension, an analysis of the graph shows that Democratic and participatory governance dimension is close to two of its indicators, namely transparency and stakeholder involvement. The indicator 'democratic annual meeting' is however close to the origin (coordinates 0, 0), indicating that it is only marginally connected with any of the axes. This can be explained by the fact that indicator depends on both constraints due to the legal form and a true commitment to the SSE values for those who have no legal constraints. Finally, a closer look at the numbers reveals that for the 'stakeholders involvement indicator', only the variable 'involvement of the employee in the decision making process' is strongly linked with the first axis, leading to a link of the entire indicator 'stakeholder involvement' with this axis.

The dimension 'autonomy' combines two distinct aspects. The indicators 'external organization on the board' and 'Governments involved in the establishment process' are very close to each other, illustrating a temporal logic, where institutions that have supported the launch of such organizations tend to maintain a rightful place in the management bodies. The third indicator, related to the dependence on a small number of customers, is distinct and is more in line with the management of the risk. It is thus linked with the entrepreneurial orientation axis.

The dimension 'entrepreneurial mindset' covers three indicators relatively distant from each other. Being located close to the diagonal, the 'competition' indicator is almost equally linked with either of the two axes. This is due to the fact that this indicator is composed of several variables (not shown in this graph) including the competition for the customers, which is strongly linked with the axis

'entrepreneurial orientation'. In contrast, the competition for funding is more strongly associated with the 'SSE management principles' axis. The indicators related to past and future growth is also linked to the two axes. This is probably the result of the strong growth in social action, which had the effect of increasing the volume of public service mandates granted to organizations of the social economy.

The dimension 'plural economy' is also split between, on the one hand, the indicators 'non-monetary exchange' and 'paid and unpaid work' and, on the other hand, the indicator 'Combination of revenues'. However, this difference needs to be put into perspective with the wide variety of sources of income (sales, grants, contributions, bequests, etc.), some of which depend more upon the history of the organization and its legal status than a fundamental difference in the distribution of sources of income. In this analysis, we chose to retain all the details. This had the effect of strongly emphasizing the variable "sales to private" (very strongly linked to the axis 'Entrepreneurial orientation'); the other types of income are too disparate to have a strong weight in such an analysis. Using a more synthetic variable, opposing income from sales (to the private or to the public sector) to income coming from transfers in any form (donations, contributions, bequests, grants, etc..) would likely result in moving this indicator closer to the center of the graph.

The last dimension, namely 'Not-for-profit management', highlights one of the paradoxes of the social economy and the difficulty of defining a reasonable limit on the profit orientation. This dimension strongly depends on the legal form, where necessary workers' compensation income is in one form or another. This is particularly the case with legal forms coming from the world of business for profit (PLC, LLC, self-employed, etc.) or with cooperatives. The companies declaring a "for-profit" orientation have generally strong scores on the axis 'Entrepreneurial orientation', which is apparently inconsistent with the SSE philosophy. Organizations declaring a limited profit status are in a middle position. However, there are very few of these types organizations, probably due to the fact that the concept of limited profit is well known in Switzerland meaning that organizations actually aiming at a limited profit identify themselves as for-profit organizations. This also occurs in the indicator on the redistribution of profits. In the context of this analysis, we took into account modes of distribution of profits other than the remuneration of capital (distribution to employees, customers and allocation to reserves) only if the organization indicated it did not pay any remuneration to capital. This distinction was made to prevent organizations donating only a minor part of their benefits (e.g. end of year bonus) from falling within the category of organization affecting their profits to social goals. Organizations distributing their profits to their employees or customers have significant scores on the axis of entrepreneurship, while the allocation to reserves can be found everywhere.

In summary, most dimensions include both indicators that are clearly associated with an axis and indicators that are close to the origin, that is, having weak structuring effect. Those close to the origin are often aspects that are legally required for specific forms and can be regarded as necessary, but not sufficient conditions for showing a SSE mindset. It will therefore be necessary to distinguish between these two types of indicators. In addition, the axis of entrepreneurial orientation highlights the paradoxical position of SSE in terms of profit, requiring a more sophisticated approach in order to assess to what extent profit orientation contributes – or does not – to the achievement of social goals.

3.3.2 Description of the axes

The first axis is mainly determined by the participatory and democratic governance, and especially its employee participation variable and transparency indicator. The fact that organizations have a democratic decision mode (general assembly following the 1 person, 1 vote rule) is not substantially related to either of the axes. This can be interpreted by the fact that the type of governance is more determined by regulatory and legal aspects than a real social vision. The reliance on plural economy, and especially the mix of paid and unpaid workers in the organization, also impacts the first axis.

The second axis is strongly linked to the commercial aspects and entrepreneurship. Thus, the relative share of revenue from the sale of goods and services in the total income of the organization is higher. In the field of entrepreneurship, competition over customer is strongly related to this axis, while that related to financing is more aligned with the axis 1. Using tools to measure the economic performance is associated with the axis 1 nearly as closely as with axis 2. Axis 1 is however strongly linked to profit.

The dimension of autonomy is not specifically associated with any of the axes. Regarding the diversity of clientele, having a diverse clientele is more associated with axis 1, while having a few large customers is more associated with axis 2, and having only zero to three clients is associated with negative scores for both axes simultaneously. Having seats reserved by statutes to private or public institutions or having the government involved in the creation of the organization has almost no relation with either of the two axes.

3.3.3 Distribution of organizations along the two axes

The analysis of the density distribution of organizations on the plane formed by the two main axes shows three places with higher density (Figure 4). These have been used as input for a cluster analysis in order to classify organizations having similar internal functioning and/or output orientations. On Figure 5, a first group (cluster 3) represents organizations with generally negative scores on both axes. They correspond very little to the SSE criteria. The other two groups aggregate organizations usually with strong scores on one axis and lower scores on the other axis. The first one (cluster 2) brings together organizations that have a strong entrepreneurial orientation, without having a strong implementation of the management principles of the SSE. The second one (cluster 1) brings together organizations that have consistently implemented most of the management principles of the SES. Organizations with significant scores on both axes simultaneously (which would be ideal) remain the exception not identified by the cluster analysis.

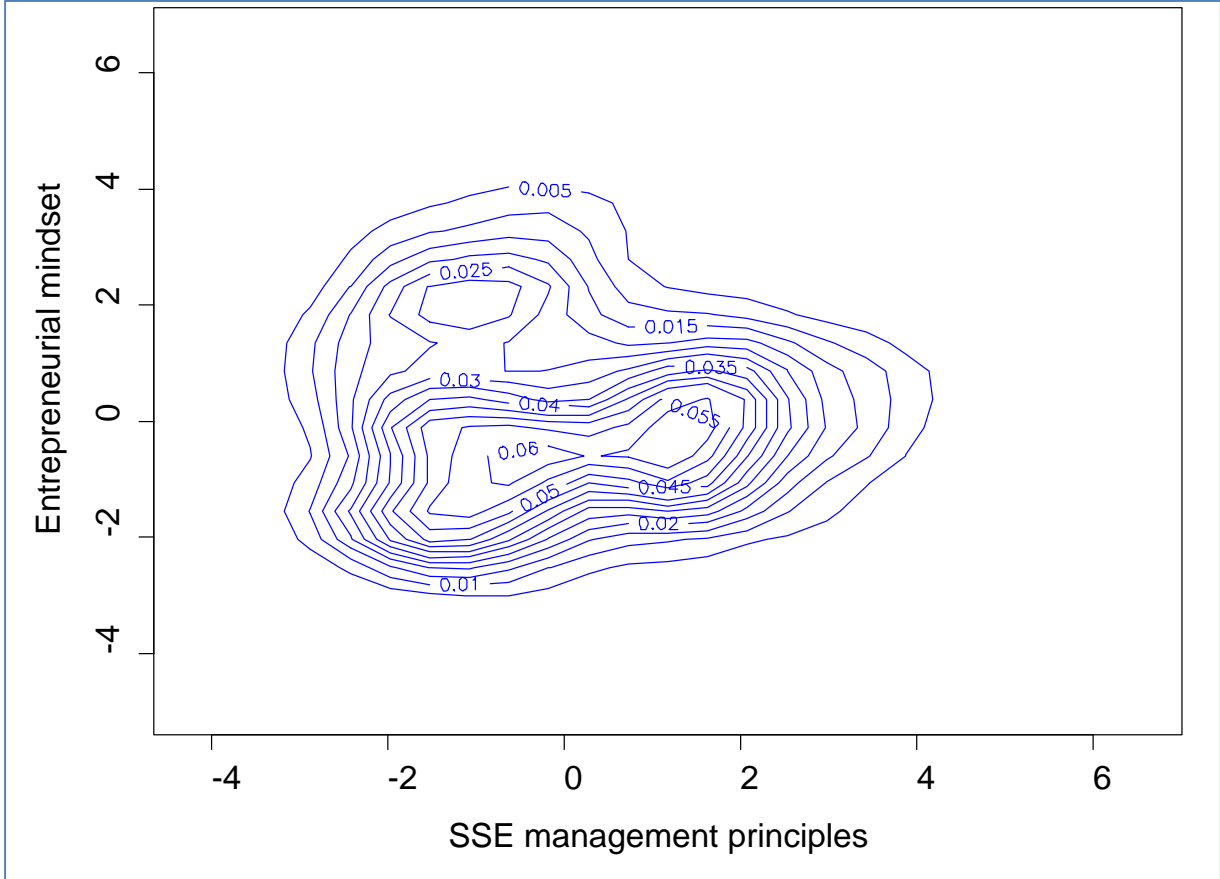


Figure 4: Density curbs of the organizations projected on the two axes

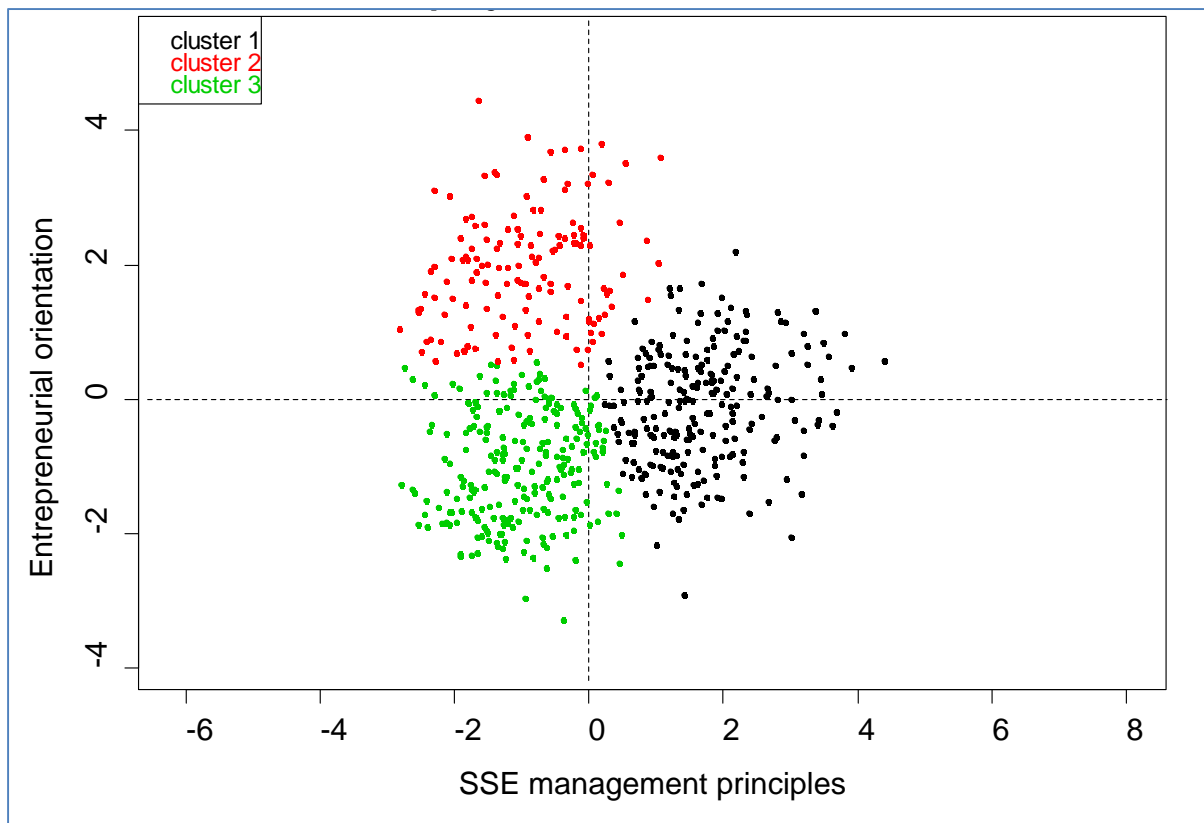


Figure 5: Cluster of organizations projected on the two axes

3.4 Comparison between sub-samples and legal forms

3.4.1 Comparison based on legal form

As discussed in the previous chapter, legal forms strongly impact the implementation of SSE principles, especially for legal forms that require processes in line with SSE management principles. Surprisingly, some of organizations with these legal forms did not report having implemented these processes even though they would be legally required. Conversely, some organizations that are not forced by their legal form to implement SSE management principles do it anyway, demonstrating a strong and freely chosen commitment to SSE philosophy. Overall however, associations have the highest scores on the first axis. Conversely, PLC, LLC, and self-employed have significantly higher scores on the second axis, while foundations and associations have significantly lower scores on the second axis. Cooperatives are in the middle position.

3.4.2 Comparison based on sub-sample

Our sample is actually composed of three sub-samples that were constituted differently. As explained in Section 3.1 three different methodologies were used to identify organizations. This has resulted in selecting organizations with different characteristics. The snowball methodology identifies organizations engaged in SSE movement. The sample of the Canton of Fribourg includes organizations having, for most the most part, service contracts with public authorities. The third sample is based solely on the legal form and includes those who had not previously been identified through the snowball sample.

Probably due to the strong links with local authorities and the average size of the organizations, the sample for the canton of Fribourg has significantly higher scores on the first axis. In the canton de Vaud, the snowball sample has significantly higher scores on the second axis, probably due to the greater diversity of legal forms and industries represented. The third sample, based solely on the legal

form in the canton de Vaud, has significantly lower scores on both axes, thus showing the lowest correspondence between legal forms and SSE principles.

4 Discussion

The results of the two statistical methodologies allow for multiple conclusions and point toward the need for further research and theoretical development in various areas. Among others, the results highlight the sometimes important gap between the discourse about SSE values and their practical implementation – questioning the reliance on legal forms to define the SSE. Further, the existence of a grey zone and the wide disparity of practices across samples and legal forms call for additional studies both among traditional SSE actors and among other actors revolving around the SSE cloud, and especially among traditional SMEs and family businesses. These first two points finally imply that each actor's positioning as regards the application of the various principles needs to be evaluated and communicated and cannot be deduced from the legal form. This raises questions about the statistical methods to be used and the number of dimensions to be displayed.

4.1 Theory-practice gap and limitations of legal forms

Both the approach based on fixed dimensions and the one based on the hierarchical multiple factorial analysis show that being a cooperative, foundation, or association does not guarantee that the SSE values are lived out in daily business. For instance, all legal forms show rather low scores on plural economy, and foundations further struggles with other core SSE principles such as democratic governance and autonomy. Their score on these two dimensions are even lower than the ones of actors with non-traditional SSE legal forms such as LLTs committed to the SSE philosophy. Overall, traditionally business-oriented legal forms that join the SSE movement show surprisingly high results on most core principles except plural economy.

The difficulty in clearly identify a 'SSE legal form cluster' raises questions regarding the definition of the SSE through legal forms. While foundations are especially challenged by the results presented, this also concerns, to some extent, the other SSE legal forms. For instance, associations, often considered as the ideal participative form, do not show very high scores on plural economy and do not obtain the maximum number of points on democratic governance.

SSE networks might therefore be in need of refining their principles and foremost the application of these principles. Reflection upon these issues is needed among their members to find innovative ways to better integrate key stakeholders in the governance and management processes, and to foster plural economy. Among others, information technology (IT) might contribute to facilitating the application of these two principles. The use of social media could complement traditional consultation and decisions processes related to democratic governance, and exchange platforms based on alternative currencies and barter might offer new trading opportunities for SSE actors.⁷ A closer look at our data interestingly shows for instance that those organizations with the smallest turnover are less involved in non-monetary trading than the middle-sized organizations – they might however be the ones that most urgently need such exchange as their budget is very limited. Easy access to such platforms might therefore be important for smaller structures to benefit from this type of trading.

4.2 Extension to other types of actors

The mixed results of the traditional SSE legal forms as well as the surprisingly good scores of non-traditional legal forms on many of the SSE principles further points toward the need to consider non-traditional SSE actors as part of the SSE field. While certainly not all corporations can be considered to be full SSE actors, it seems that some of them show practices that reflect the core SSE principles.

⁷ See for instance platforms such as <http://communityforge.net/> and <http://www.easyswap.org>

Consequently, reflections are needed with regard to how and under which conditions these actors could be integrated to SSE networks. The current SSE law project in France as well as the EU definitions of social enterprise⁸ already aim at going beyond a mere legal form approach of SSE to discuss criteria for being considered as a SSE actor or social enterprise. Additional work is however needed to clearly define discriminatory criteria that can be operationalized and verified. A clarification of the SSE core principles and their application to various types of actors further implies reviewing some other governmental processes such as calls for tenders and the attribution of subsidies currently reserved to specific legal forms. By setting clear and operational criteria for these, rather than discriminating based on legal forms, SSE organizations with non-traditional SSE forms might also participate in these programs – and perhaps associations, foundations, and cooperatives that do not fulfill the criteria despite their legal form might be excluded.

Furthermore, the relative closeness of some SMEs to the SSE field also opens to possibility of new synergies and collaborations ventures between actors that often tend to ignore or confront each other (see Huybrechts et al., 2006). While institutional barriers as well as legal frameworks tend to put traditional businesses on one side and SSE actors on the other, an approach based on the application of specific principles shows that some cross-boundaries collaborations based on common values can be imagined and fostered.

4.3 The need for representing each actor's score: Concepts and statistics

While a discrimination based on legal forms is easy to apply and to communicate, a practice-oriented evaluation of the actors requires more refined evaluation and communication. At the same time, such refined assessment allows stakeholders (customers, suppliers, government...) to more accurately evaluate the 'social quality' of their partners along specific variables. This is particularly important as not all stakeholders focus on the same principles. Some focus on fair trade, while others are more concerned with dimensions such as democratic governance. As a result, a representation of an organization's scores on each of the various dimensions helps the various stakeholders make more informed decisions as regards their consumptions, investment, and partnership with the various actors.

For this reason, we propose to represent an organization's score with a radar graph, as in section 3.2 – and to keep all eight dimensions developed in chapter 2. While correlations suggest that these dimensions are statistically not fully independent, we believe that the information that an 8-dimensional radar graph offers remains central for the communication of an actor's position in the SSE movement. As stakeholders show various approaches and focus on various dimensions, a reduction of the number of dimension based on mere statistical observations might diminish the practical relevance of the model.

It should be noted that while this graph allows for discriminating between actors having a high score on all dimensions and actors with a low score on all dimensions, it does not help to rank order-two organizations with mixed results. For instance, two actors with similar results on 6 dimensions, but with different scores on the last two dimensions – one actor being better on one dimension and the other actor on the other – can only be ordered based on the value attributed to each dimensions.

From a theoretical perspective, the radar approach shows possible tensions between statistical constraints and possibilities on the one hand and practical relevance on the other. While the hierarchical multiple factorial analysis offers important insights to identify central variables as well as clusters of actors, it leads to the construction of dimensions that partly clash with lay people's conception of the issue. On the other hand, the radar methodology builds on dimensions that are in some cases highly interrelated, but offers results that can be grasped and interpreted by practitioners. As the aim of the radar methodology is not, in our case, to search for causal relations, the interaction issue can be neglected for this paper. The issue highlights however the need for scholars to refer to multiple lenses and approaches to gain as much insights as possible on specific issues and to communicate them in ways that are both scientifically correct and easy to access for lay persons.

⁸ See <http://recma.org/node/3357> as well as the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Social Business Initiative - Creating a favourable climate for social enterprises, key stakeholders in the social economy and innovation; COM(2011) 682; Brussels, 25.10.2011.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to operationalize principles that are widely shared among SSE scholars and practitioners, and empirically verified their application among various types of actors in Switzerland. To develop as broad a picture as possible of the situation, we did not set *ex ante* criteria such as legal form or affiliation to specific networks to build our sample, but sought to study as many types of relations to the SSE movement as possible. We further adopted, in addition to a radar graph analysis based on theoretically developed dimensions, a hierarchical multiple factorial analysis to identify the most discriminant variables.

Various limitations to our study can be noted and referred for further analyses. First, even though eight dimensions have been identified, only five have been empirically tested yet. Further studies are therefore needed to see whether the current conclusions remain valid if applied over all eight principles. Second, our sample has only a few organizations with traditional legal forms. This is due to the fact that a very limited number of such actors have been identified through the snowball approach – illustrating that these actors remain an exception in the SSE movement for the moment. An extension of the study among traditional SMEs might offer additional insights about the proportion of actors, among SMEs, that apply SSE principles without necessarily identifying themselves with the SSE movement. Finally, additional theoretical work is needed to relate the two statistical methodologies used in the paper, validate their constructs and results, and develop a tool that can be easily used by managers to position their organizations – or by consumers to evaluate their suppliers.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights that practices vary greatly from one actor to another, and that legal form does not represent a sufficient criterion to identify actors applying the SSE principles. While traditional SSE legal form might fail on some SSE principles, non-traditional legal forms sometimes show high scores. Finally, various principles such as plural economy and autonomy are applied only in a limited manner by many SSE actors.

In conclusion, this paper challenges both SSE scholars and practitioners. The former are called to pursue the discussions and studies as regards the definition and the measurement of the implementation of SSE principles in organizations, and practitioners are invited to revisit what they consider to be their core principles and the manner in which they translate these principles into practice. In our view, these reflections are essential for the SSE to keep its reputation of a strong contributor to social welfare and its specific positioning at the crossroad of business and social spheres – especially as the traditional boundaries around the SSE field are becoming even more blurred and many other actors claim to be socio-economic actors.

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