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Background paper: Internationalisation of SSE Organisations

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Aim of this Background paper is to develop a basis for comparison of cases, present and assess their main characteristics; and set the framework for discussions about their utility and transferability (by raising key points and issues for discussion).

Length: 12-15 pages max

1. Introduction: contextualizing different cases of good practices

This is the definitive version of the Background paper. Here we have tried to provide a contextualization by highlighting some key point:

The examples analysed in the cases are originally based in the EU (three), USA (one), Canada (one) and India (one). However, in some cases the cases include share ownership, stake or direct involvement from third countries from an early stage (such as the Coopcycle or Equal Exchange example show).

In the case of the three examples coming from the EU, all of them are coming from very developed SSE ecosystems (Spain, France and Scotland/UK). However, Mondragon Corporation started several decades ago, when Spain could not be considered such a friendly environment for SSE, while in the case of Coopcycle and SEA we are dealing with much younger examples.

All EU examples have developed an internationalisation process which includes a presence (in different ways) in countries outside the EU. However, one has focused mostly on the intangible assets' flow (Coopcycle), other (Mondragon corporation) provides an example utilizing the three flows but with a strong presence of Foreign direct investment and a more straight-forward institutional/organisational reality and SEA shows the role, potential and limitations of one interesting tool such as (social) franchising.

In relation to the three non-EU examples, the first one (MCE) shows the intersection between playing a key role in the development of its own ecosystem and it work as a driver for the internationalisation (be it by the request coming from external actors or the demands to participate in international activities of local organisations or public agencies), the second one (Equal Exchange) is an example of fair trade with an “extra” SSE twist (such as being a worker cooperative) and with links” on both Canada and USA (as well as the UK) and the third one we are dealing with a “counter-intuitive” example (both for the



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size of Development Alternative group and longstanding experience of this internationalisation example born on 1982).

Thus we also have a variety of sizes (from very big such as Mondragon Corporation), to medium ones (Development Alternatives group or to a certain extent Equal Exchange), to finally smaller ones such as SEA, Coopcycle France and MCE (for their number of employees but not for their impact and scope).

Also in terms of structures, the cases offer a wide variety, from Mondragon Corporation, which is comprised of several cooperatives and other types of organisational units or Development Alternatives (two not-profit societies and five for-profit ones) to SEA with its international hubs or Equal Exchange with constellation of partners and subsidiaries (La Siembra, Equal Exchange Wholesale UK, and Oke USA) to finally Coopcycle which consists of a Federation of more loosely-linked cooperative actors.

The only exception to this is MCE which shows a different internationalisation process in which they engage as providers of international services (subcontractors for public actors or international organisation) and they do not internationalise by “shares” but by “stakes” (or as they put it involving “ourselves in many non economic activities”).

Finally, in some cases we see that the above-mentioned international structures lead to both, local and international “parts” of the international structure, have a SSE form, while in others (Mondragon Corporation and Development Alternative Group), many of the units are not using such legal forms.

Finally, the process in most of the cases (Mondragon, Equal Exchange, MCE or SEA) initially addressed countries that were linked by linguistic and cultural ties, while in the case of Coopcycle it was initially an intra-EU process, followed by early developments in Canada. In the case of Development Alternatives it was connected to cooperation for development links.

The six case studies: relevance to policy and practices

In reference to the relevance of Mondragon we could mention the following:

- Mondragon seems to be counter-intuitive to two of preconceived ideas most people have of SSE as small organisations and that internationalisation impacts negatively on initial communities where SSE is born.
- It also underscores the importance of “intangible assets” with one out of the four units being “Knowledge” and with 14 R&D centers acting as pillars of the corporations development strategy.
- However, its internationalisation is more “traditional”: “opting to compete in international markets using structures of conventional capital to ensure its global competitiveness (Urdangarin,1999: 254 and Clamp, 2003: 29)”. Nevertheless, this



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shows how SSE can follow such traditional internationalisation strategies and be competitive with traditional business in this field.

- It shows a successful example of a “reactive” strategy to defend “cooperative’s employment”
- Factors supporting successes of Mondragon seem to be its robust financial and governance models.
- Another interesting characteristic is their ability to successfully integrate horizontal governance elements within a complex international structure and develop this structure despite legal hurdles or the absence of a clear legal framework for internationalisation of SSE.

In the second case and in reference to the relevance of Coopcycle we could mention the following:

- It is an interesting example of a fast growing new business model: Platform Cooperativism.
- Moreover it includes key issues why this new model could be highly relevant for SSE:

It addresses widely disseminated social problems

It offers alternative means way to integrate new technologies in a way that is fundamentally different from big actors of the gig economy

It relies on a set of intangible assets which can be the subject of international collaboration / mutualisation

- The example of Coopcycle also shows the potential of coordinated efforts from key actors (public bodies, international organisations and SSE networks).
- It shows the complementarities and synergies between inward and outward internationalisation
- It is an example of a successful Worker Buyout.
- It is an example of a born global.

In the third case and in reference to the relevance of Equal Exchange we could mention the following:

- It has a long successful history.
- It is an SSE born global.
- It combines several strategies (shared certification system, FDI, Import/Export and identity sharing).
- It is an example of one key international strategy (shared certification system) but with another SSE twist (it is done under the form of a worker cooperative).
- Its constellation of SSE organisations is also an interesting example on how to internationalize through strategic agreements with other SSE organisations (coops).
- Such strategic agreements were also supported by Foreign Direct Investments but such Investment took different forms (in one case it led to ownership due to



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- economic difficulties, while in the case of Canada it kept its cooperative status and therefore its independence).
- They practice bi-directional knowledge transfer with producers and partner groups
- It is also relevant due to its North-South links and the flows of investment going in both directions.

In the fourth case and in reference to the relevance of MCE we could mention the following:

- It is an example of reactive internationalisation although not as a “need” to respond to a crisis but as an answer to government calls for tender/proposals.
- This process was in line with the growing relevance of MCE in Quebec’s ecosystem which facilitated its internationalisation strategy linked to services and cooperation for development projects.
- The role of key partners such as Trade Unions, Social Economy Credit Union and Venture Funds is also a highly relevant example of strategic partnerships for internationalisation.
- Its “third wave” also shows how some SSE organisations engage in building the international ecosystem as a way to improve “intangible assets” flows. The building of international SSE structures has an impact also on the local level, showing another benefit to support a different type of internationalisation.
- It is also an example that internationalisation does not always equal scaling up but it can be relevant in small enterprises.

In the fifth case and in reference to the relevance of Development Alternatives we could mention the following:

- It has a long successful story of internationalisation
- Its focus on technology and knowledge transfer highlight the potential of the “intangible assets” flow.
- This flow is also done without following a for-profit approach, facilitating that the adoption of best practices were more affordable and fair.
- It is a relevant example of South-South and North-South collaboration.
- It is also an example of two-directions internationalisation (outward and inward) by participating in inward flows with Norway, Spain, Switzerland, UK etc. and by engaging in outward flows with developing countries (transferring also technology and knowledge).
- It is also worth mentioning the role of collaboration and alliance in its internationalisation process.



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In the sixth case and in reference to the relevance of Social Enterprise Strategy we could mention the following:

- Despite starting its internationalisation process somehow recently, it has attained a sufficiently relevant presence in multiple continents.
- It is an interesting example of a SSE enterprise whose internationalisation process has been supported by specific policies aimed at SSE.
- It is an example of an interesting internationalisation strategy: Franchising (or more specifically Social Licensing). This shows how “traditional” strategies can be adapted to better suit SSE organizations, values and principles.
- It has expanded to both developed and less developed countries.
- It shows the relevance of cultural links (in this case the commonwealth) as well as the role of international events such as the SEWF.
- The role of “maintaining” its social enterprise “ethos” throughout its internationalisation process can be highly relevant in the exchange with SSE peers.
- It also shows how internationalisation can also have an impact on local SSE organisations (for example through “enhanced learning products and experiences as well as global connection. They are exposed to new models, insights and perspectives, and peers on five continents. Collaborative learning programmes create opportunities for international skills and methodologies to be introduced to Scotland”).

2. Summary of main points from the cases

Here we will try to summarize all the cases.

Regarding Mondragon’s Internationalisation Strategy:

It has 143 production plants in 37 countries, 7 international services entities with commercial business in 53 countries, and sales in more than 150 with a global business of 11,280 Million Euros. A third of the Group's sales are produced abroad as a result of its internationalisation policy, where 14,455 people work in 143 production centers

The strategy “contributed positively to increase not only the global competitiveness, but it also better defended the employment and the stability of the local community”

It can be read as an “unprecedented international industrial migration process from North to South and from West to East”

It is a reactive strategy to the threat posed by globalization but in line with its SSE principles (not to make more profit but to defend employment and wellbeing of local communities). From this point, it is a paradigmatic example of a large, diversified company



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that finds in internationalisation an appropriate response to sustain the competitiveness of its member cooperatives in terms of sales and production figures as well as employment. It has successfully developed a defensive, market-oriented, diversified, gradual and multiple global strategy based on cooperative autonomy and inter-cooperation for the generation of competitive capacities and the reinforcement of opportunities.

Due to its structure (made up of several cooperatives and other economic units) it exemplifies various internationalisation strategies/approaches.

Language/cultural ties played a key role at the beginning

The internationalisation process shares similarities with the innovation process and in the case of the Mondragon Corporation they go hand in hand with its commitment to developing the capacity to look to the future by placing value on cooperation as a principle. The case could be seen as a process of cooperative business innovation towards human-centred globalisation (as they define it).

The internationalisation strategy is gradual and is articulated around an industrial export network alliance with key clients, with a technological differential value superior to local competitors and the reproduction of the inter-cooperation mechanisms that exist at the origin. Subsequent to business implementation, other instruments such as the University and Consultancy are added to the global strategy.

Regarding COOPCYCLE's Internationalisation Strategy:

An interesting case of internationalisation of a process of generating innovative and transformative initiatives with an SSE model in response to the need to fight precariousness, exploitation and informality within the new gig/platform economy in sectors such as the bicycle courier sector in urban areas.

CoopCycle was founded by former workers of a private food delivery platform after its closure in 2016.

On the one hand, Coopcycle, a cooperative born in France in 2017 with an economic model of federated growth and progressively decentralised governance consistent with the principles of democracy, participation and collaboration, whose internationalisation strategy from its origin is outward or "outwards" with a fundamental flow of intangible assets (brand, software, management models, international support networks, etc.) with the capacity to adapt to other socio-economic and cultural contexts. It can be considered a born global.

It is present in 12 European countries and is currently developing new nodes in Eastern Europe, North America (Canada, United States, and Mexico), Latin America (Argentina) and Australia.

It is based on a model where 2% of its income is mutualised in exchange for a series of services:



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1. A platform software
2. A smartphone application
3. Commercial prospecting
4. Visibility and branding;
5. Consolidated purchasing;
6. Legal assistance and accounting services; and
7. Incubation of nascent local delivery cooperatives, among others

Its internationalisation process is the natural extension of the reason why they were born: to fight precariousness, exploitation and informality within the new gig/platform economy.

In the case of international members they are required to adopt a cooperative model and employ their workers, while aligning with values and principles of cooperatives in particular and SSE in general.

In Mexico, the group of bike messenger that it is creating a cooperative has been supported by the Rodando Juntas pilot action from INAES (Mexican Government)¹. It was a response to the highly precarious reality of the sector in Mexico, and it consists of a pilot project is generated through internationalisation strategies called Rodando Juntas, a multilateral alliance with a wide range of national actors (government led by the Ministry of Labour and Employment Promotion and INAES, universities, cooperatives and collectives) and international actors (Coopcycle, ITDP, IDB and IDB LAB). Rodando Juntas is the genesis of CoopCycle Mexico.

We see the confluence and synergies of an "inward" approach of the bicycle courier collective and CoopCycle's "outward" internationalisation strategy. As part of CoopCycle's requirements, there are two objectives for the transfer of knowledge and skills: those aimed at managing the technological platform in a self-managed way(1) and training cooperative members as the basis for the sustainability of a model that aspires to transform the social and working conditions of workers in this sector (2).

The internationalisation of Coopcycle has faced different challenges, on the one hand the legislative difference in relation to cooperatives in comparison with France, however, here the close collaboration of INAES has been relevant to clarify and guide the best ways of adapting the model; the informal nature of the bicycle messaging sector in Mexico, which required the search for more complex and transversal practices; the lack of knowledge of economic issues in an organisation and of financial education of the people involved; and finally, sustainability over time, which implies developing the self-management capacity of the bicycle messaging collectives so as not to depend on government support.

Regarding Equal Exchange (EE) Internationalisation Strategy:

¹To know more about this, please take a look at the cases submitted in the Internationalisation Policies PLC



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Equal Exchange (EE) is a worker cooperative that was born global in Massachusetts, USA, in 1983, with the founding purpose of being a social change organisation that would help farmers and their families gain more control over their economic future, guided by values such as honesty, respect and mutual benefit. Since its inception, EE

EE provides leadership and support to its constellation of partner companies (La Siembra, Equal Exchange Wholesale UK and Oke USA) which together employ nearly 180 people, generate an annual turnover of \$79 million and support nearly 100,000 families and smallholders in more than 20 countries.

His initial strategy was to facilitate the internal flow of goods and the external flow of capital to agricultural producer cooperatives to support them. In 2002, an agreement was signed with the La Siembra cooperative in Canada based on a risk-sharing strategy, acting on the principle of "cooperative-to-cooperative" support. This model prioritises solidarity over profit, but the situation has yielded positive financial results for all involved. Over the years, EE has expanded its constellation of "sister entities"; it owns 91% of Equal Exchange Wholesale UK, a fair trade coffee distribution company in the UK which it helped to re-launch as a worker cooperative after difficult times. He also owns 90% of the shares of Oke USA, a private company that has enshrined social values in its structure in the sale of organic fruit and supports more than 1,500 farms in Ecuador, Peru and Mexico.

Since 2003 more and more farm cooperatives have used their profits to provide capital investment for EE's growth. In turn, EE has been able to provide low-interest pre-harvest credit to farmer cooperatives. This has enabled a long-term financing model consistent with its "cooperative-to-cooperative" values and relationship model, which prioritises sustainability over rapid growth.

EE has also been supported by the Cooperative Development Programme (CDP) of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to improve the profitability and preserve the SSE structure of its sister organisations in developing economies.

To bring its first product, Café Nica, to market, EE also used the collaborative approach through multinational networks for internationalisation (e.g. the European Fair Trade network). As EE grew to partner with more producers and create market awareness of Fair Trade as a concept, it contributed to the creation of the Fair Trade seal shared certification system for the US market. Throughout its life, EE has worked with agricultural producer cooperatives to improve the quality of their products, using knowledge dissemination and best practices along with management training.

Regarding "MCE Conseils" Internationalisation Strategy:

MCE Conseils has four essential characteristics:

1.- It is a non-profit organisation, and as such, it is a social economy enterprise. Its mission is to promote the creation and preservation of jobs in all types of economic



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structures and to support the achievement of the best sustainable social and economic working conditions through management and consultancy services.

2.- Founded on the initiative of a trade union confederation in order to contribute to its response to companies in difficulty and operations of economic transparency prior to collective bargaining. Trade union activities represent about 35% of our activities and income.

3.- It is a consultancy (still a small entity) offering technical services, but with a strong cultural adaptation to our core positioning. MCE Conseils has specialised resources to support organisations carrying out technical assignments (financial analysis and forecasts, business plans, strategic planning, market research, organisational development, governance, etc.). MCE Conseils specialises in supporting both private sector and social economy enterprises with the permanent objective of maximising social impact under conditions of economic sustainability.

4.- The business model is financially very traditional. 100% of revenues come from the sale of services (40% from tenders, 40% from networks and 20% of long-term contracts).

They are part of a close network of institutions founded with the support of trade unions (a credit cooperative; a complementary pension fund system; venture capital fund). This value and operational alliance is one of the main export strategies of international projects.

MCE Conseils developed its internationalisation process with three different waves in a logic of intangible assets, knowledge sharing with the main objective of contributing to the growth and recognition of the SSE in other countries and using the Quebec experience as an example (11,200 social and solidarity economy enterprises, composed of 2,700 cooperatives and 8,400 non-profit organisations with market activity and self-employed income, around 5% of total employment in Quebec and an annual turnover in 2016 of \$47 billion):

First wave: as subcontractors to government agencies and international cooperation institutions.

Second wave: development of own projects, attracting government funding for technical and value exchange projects in West Africa and Brazil.

Third wave: involvement in non-economic activities. MCE Conseils became an active member of the national federations.

Its international expansion follows a pattern:

(a) 75% (approximately) outward internationalisation by providing various non-profit organisations with business development support structures and services, offering strategic analysis and best practice planning and training activities (local development, SME financing, microfinance, integration of women in economic activities, etc.). Also, exporting lessons learned on trade union and cooperative development strategy and the adaptation of the network itself to different contexts of operation, mainly in sub-Saharan



West Africa and Brazil. We carry out or participate in about the same number of international non-economic events (conferences, presentations, seminars and so on).

b) But also 25% inwards, incorporating experience and learnings. Their import lessons learned from other organisations to improve operations and strategy, services, approach. International activity gives them an objective credibility advantage in competitive positioning in the Quebec market. A quality image because they work with many people in many different places.

The financial outcome of internationalisation is largely marginal for the organisation. The main impact is at the level of strategy and marketing. Today, despite its small size, MCE Conseils is well known in social economy networks all over the world.

The exchange of intangible assets between partners has always been complex (especially in different contexts and cultures) but this example, along other ones demonstrate this challenge is pursued by SSE organisations despite such complexity. It is a soft asset exchange that is difficult to realise and even more difficult to adapt to have a long-term impact.

Regarding “DA Group” Internationalisation Strategy:

In 1983, the DA Group was created, the first Indian social enterprise in a context where, despite its wealth of socio-economic empowerment initiatives based on principles of solidarity, these still play second fiddle to the hegemonic economic model.

DA Group is a unique collaboration of organisations with non-profit charitable and research objectives and social enterprise ambitions. It consists of the Society for Development Alternatives (DA), the Technology and Action for Rural Advancement (TARA) Society and its affiliated social enterprises that are committed to accelerated impact in the areas of entrepreneurship and job creation. With the capacity to work at local, sub-national, national and global levels, the DA Group designs systemic solutions to global poverty and environmental challenges, and implements them at the local level, through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

For the next 10 years, DA pioneered this model, incubating and applying innovative ideas, technological solutions and production systems in the resource-efficient building materials sector. By connecting the group with different service providers around the world, DA addressed needs in a local context. DA established its capacity and intention to bring and connect research to practice, large to small organisations, technology to human aspects, innovation to amplification with a social objective.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, DA began sharing this model to promote sustainable, innovative models in rural communities, social organisations and political conferences across India, and beyond. DA advised multiple commissions and over 45,000 civil society organisations to drive the movement towards a sustainable, equitable and just economic



transition beyond mere profit. It is a model that relies on deep ownership, mutual trust and accountability among the multiple stakeholders involved in developing an agenda, ultimately leading to a win-win situation through greater sharing of resources.

Under a social innovation approach, the model adopted by DA has three main components, as follows

- 1.- Transfer of innovative technological solutions to meet the basic needs of the communities from a human-centred co-design approach from the social and environmental angles beyond the economic aspects.
- 2.- Transfer of knowledge and experience with the aim of bringing about transformations in the economic and social norms of vulnerable communities. A commitment is made to work on awareness-raising, intensive training and long-term support, develop the capacities of entrepreneurs as well as the associated actors of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The DA approach of transferring technology and knowledge materials without licensing made the adoption of best practices affordable and fair. This approach generates a successful model and makes the DA's impact deep and broad, bringing resilience to underserved communities and scalability to business solutions.

- 3.- Collaboration and partnerships to maximise influence:

Over the past three decades, through platforms and partnerships, DA Group has been actively involved in promoting the adoption of sustainable practices in businesses, local public bodies, corporations and bilateral agencies. Transfers spanning 32 countries are given in the CSO to CSO (C2C) modality to accelerate the growth of micro-enterprises in the targeted geographies, ensure the sustainability of the ecosystem after the transfer through local agencies. Also, another phase adopts the CSO to Government approach, i.e. C2G, to accelerate adoption through the support of local government agencies.

Regarding “Social Enterprise Academy” Internationalisation Strategy:

“Academia” is a social enterprise founded in 2004 that provides a highly valued response to the training and development needs of social entrepreneurs (accredited qualifications focused on leadership, social entrepreneurship and social impact measurement) that traditional provision often did not cater for due to its specificities.

Although the term did not become popular until the 1990s, there is a long history of social enterprise (SE) in Scotland dating back to the collective approaches to farming and fishing needed to sustain communities in difficult environments.

It is a reality of 5,199 social enterprises, with 112,409 employees, an annual turnover of £3.69 billion, 60% of these organisations are run by women and located largely in rural Scotland.



The social enterprise ecosystem in Scotland is mature and complex, there are a significant number of HE support organisations, partly or largely publicly funded, providing networking, representation, investment, impact measurement and sector specific support.

The Academy is a strategic partner of the Scottish Government, which has pooled funding from national and EU sources to make learning available and affordable in remote rural communities in the Highlands and Islands.

In 2012, with a proven hub model in the North of Scotland and a financially sustainable core business, the Academy began to be invited to export and replicate this 'hub' model. Internationalisation responded to a classic social enterprise action: going beyond its resources to take advantage of a market-based opportunity to achieve greater social impact.

The proposed model is a matrix structure that sought to create sustainable local businesses supported by a central team in Scotland. The Academy was not interested in growth for growth's sake, but in enabling local partners to make an impact in their realities. The long-term goals are to build an international network of partners, develop sustainable businesses adapted to each local cultural context, connect and develop skilled facilitators, and innovate and share new products to serve students around the world.

Sustainability of the process was considered from the beginning. An exit strategy was planned from the beginning. From a business point of view, the process has reduced the short-term profitability of the Academy; the surplus created by the Scottish business has been needed to support international expansion. However, the social impact of the Academy has increased enormously.

Having assessed the readiness phase to make the leap to replicating the model, it was decided to set up a joint venture in Africa with Imani, a like-minded international development organisation. A Hub model based on a social licensing approach was refined and deployed initially in Australia and then more widely in Asia and Africa. The "social licensing" approach, allowed experimentation with adaptations to franchising models, and avoided the legal implications of franchising that existed in some countries.

The internationalisation of the Academy is creating a global community of practice around peer learning. The flow of skills between social enterprise leaders is enhanced, both within and between organisations (the logic of learning programmes), and between countries (international replication model). The result is resilient social enterprise support ecosystems, better able to enhance the capacity of social enterprises, which in turn are empowered to "change the world".

Between 2016 and 2020, an international network of 12 Social Enterprise Academy "Hubs" was created by bringing together key local partners with shared values in learning and development and the capacity to market the product in their countries.

Long-term support of the Hub teams includes networking and more active support for Hub staff and facilitators. The Academy's international network should not be seen as a one-way flow of good practice, but as a multi-directional exchange of skills and knowledge.



3. Specification of issues for learning and discussion

In this case we would like to highlight the following issues for learning and discussion:

SSE organisations can internationalize using a great variety of strategies, even traditional ones but keeping their values as guiding principles.

internationalisation win-win processes and development vector for SSE organisations both in terms of balance between local and foreign stakeholders but also in terms of demonstrating that values, social aims and business success are not incompatible.

Furthermore SSE organisations show the potential for coordination between inward and outward internationalisation.

Understanding internationalisation as a long-term process with a learning curve that requires a firm commitment to a “culture of learning” on the part of actors.

The internationalisation process requires organisations to generate specific management and leadership capabilities, not only in strategic and technical aspects, but also in “soft” capabilities that involve developing more and better functional relationships in a context of greater complexity.

The potential for innovation and impact in the combination of the three flows.

The role of international projects and events. In the current context with the growing interest in SSE, we need to better understand how SSE organisations can improve the benefits of participating in such events and projects from the point of view of their economic results and their social impact.

In the same line, the role of international networks (be them formal or informal) in supporting or fostering the internationalisation of SSE organisations.

The exchange of intangible assets seems to play a more relevant role for SSE organisations. It is a process of increasing complexity that requires going through a learning process in which SSE enterprises are proving to have the ability to address such challenging complexity.

International activity gives SSE enterprises an objective credibility advantage in competitive positioning in the markets of origin. They get a “quality image” because they work with many people in many different places.



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