



PLCs Internationalisation policies

Template for case study of good practices

Title: “International Social Economy” Service (Economía Social Internacional)

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1. Background: Social and Solidarity Economy sector, institutions and policy in region/State/country

Social economy has a strong tradition in Catalonia. Over the last 30 years, many foundations, associations, cooperatives and work integration social enterprises have been created in Catalonia. Today social economy accounts for 2.2% of the GDP of Catalonia and comprises almost 10,000 organisations, employs more than 180,000 people and has 2.1 million users. Social enterprises have played a vital role in the Catalan economy, working in partnership with the public sector in order to provide social services to vulnerable groups while also producing goods or services with a social objective. During Covid-19 pandemic this partnership with the public sector has been even more important.

The constant efforts to improve the rate of new social entrepreneurial activity have been unsuccessful: only 12.5% of the Catalan social enterprises were born in the last two years. Most social enterprises in Catalonia (more than 50%) are mature organisations operating for 10 years or more, which have proven resilient to the economic crisis. However, the new dynamics after the economic downturn have highlighted the need for accessing new markets and the revision of their business models in order to ensure sustainability. In fact, the main drawbacks that Catalan social enterprises identify are the harsh conditions of the market (45% of them state that) and competitiveness in the market (40%). To smooth these difficulties, it is important that the public sector offers tailored-made services to social enterprises to facilitate their creation, their growth and their internationalisation process. The Directorate-General for Social Economy and ACCIÓ are pioneer organisations in Europe offering these services.

The “promotion of social economy” is a competence assumed by all the Spanish Autonomous Communities (Comunidades Autónomas). In Catalonia, the basic institutional rule is the Statute of Autonomy (2006), which specifies in article 124.4 that it corresponds to the Government of Catalonia the exclusive competence for the promotion and planning of the social economy sector. In particular, the role of planning, managing and executing the policies related to social economy, cooperatives and third sector corresponds to the Directorate-General for the Social Economy of the Government of Catalonia.



The Directorate-General for Social Economy is currently boosting, in cooperation with the main stakeholders of the sector, a regulatory framework to recognise social and solidarity economy and its willingness to transform the economy. The [basis of the law](#) was made public in October 2020. This will be the first law on Social and Solidarity Economy in Catalonia and will contribute to the consolidation of the sector in Catalonia, as well as to its quantitative and qualitative growth.

Besides, to face all emerging social economy challenges there is a transversal collaboration agreement between the Government of Catalonia and the Catalan Third Social Sector entities. This is performed through the **Support Plan for the Third Social Sector**. In the framework plan there are 6 areas of action defined in 32 measures to contribute, improve, build up and strengthen social entities. This plan is renewed every 3-4 years.

In fact, one of the areas of activity is “support to innovation, internationalisation and competitiveness of third social sector entities”. **ACCIÓ** (the Catalan Agency for Business Competitiveness) **develops the 24th measure, “advice, train and support the third social sector entities for the internationalisation of their activities and services in other countries”**. The tool that ACCIÓ uses to reach this purpose are the 40 ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment worldwide offices, which help Catalan enterprises to do business in 110 countries. ACCIÓ carries out different services for social enterprises, such as prospective missions, capacity-building sessions and the service “International Social Economy”, which is the object of analysis in the SILK project.

2. Summary of main characteristics of good practice approach

The Catalan Agency for Business Competitiveness (ACCIÓ) is a public entity of the Government of Catalonia, the regional public administration of Catalonia (Spain) with 30 years of experience in the provision of support for innovation and internationalisation to Catalan Small and Medium Enterprises (SME). ACCIÓ also promotes the business competitiveness of SMEs by improving the business financing access, attracting foreign investment and promoting the clustering policies.

The programme “Economia Social” is a broad programme led by the Directorate-General for the Social Economy of the Government of Catalonia, which aims to enhance the sustainability of the social and cooperative economy. This is achieved through support actions in the definition of their strategic approach and the improvement of their growth and internationalisation potential.

In particular, the focus of this programme is to favour the growth of social enterprises, with expert advice and companionship in the different areas that contribute to enterprises competitiveness. The final goal is to have social enterprises that: are more professional in their management, are more innovative, start exporting their products or services and get better results in terms of invoicing, exportation and number of workers, all of them identified as challenges of the sector in SILK’s scoping paper (2021). Within the programme “Economia Social”, ACCIÓ is responsible of the internationalisation projects for social enterprises since November 2016, through the service “International Social Economy”, which has an annual call and has recently opened its fifth call.



The purpose of the service “International Social Economy” is to carry out an internationalisation project for a social enterprise in a specific market (outward way of internationalising). In the frame of the service, internationalisation is understood in three ways:

- Internationalisation of product: introduce the product in a new market or in a known market where the social enterprise wants to increase its sales.
- Internationalisation of service: introduce the service in a new market or in a known market where the social enterprise wants to increase its sales.
- Assessment to access European funds and programmes that help the social enterprise to be more competitive in the global market, thanks to the special services that ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment Office in Brussels provides.

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The intervention logic works this way: when a social enterprise shows an interest for internationalising, ACCIÓ’s Senior Consultant on International Social Economy meets the manager and the export manager (if it exists) of the social enterprise to talk about the internationalisation strategy, to identify the best foreign markets for the company and to help them to prioritise markets. Sometimes, if the social enterprise already has in mind a specific market, the manager of the ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment office in that market joins the meeting (via videoconference). Otherwise, the social enterprise has a virtual meeting afterwards with the selected ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment office, to talk about a potential internationalisation project.

The internationalisation project is materialised in an Action Plan, that normally lasts 4 months and that may include one or more of the following services:

- Identification and selection of the most appropriate commercialisation channels.
- Elaboration of market studies.
- Research of distributors and partners in the new market.
- Detection of final customers.
- Staff selection in the chosen market.
- Enterprise implementation abroad.
- Access to EU funding and multilateral funding.

The following examples illustrate different kinds of internationalisation projects that can be carried out in the frame of the service “International Social Economy”:

L’Olivera in the United Kingdom: “L’Olivera” is a social enterprise that produces wine and employs people at risk of social exclusion. The social enterprise wanted to expand its presence in the British market. In the frame of an International Social Economy project, ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment office in London identified potential distributors (importers of Spanish or Catalan wines, ecological wines and quality wines), contacted them and organised a work agenda for “L’Olivera” with the distributors



that had shown interest in the wines. Thanks to ACCIÓ's support, "L'Olivera" has a distributor in the United Kingdom who appreciates both the quality of the wines and the social project behind them.

Plataforma Educativa in Colombia: The social enterprise "Plataforma Educativa" used the service "International Social Economy" to introduce in Colombia the project "Orientapro", a technological solution to foster and promote career guidance based on skills. ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment office in Bogotá identified and contacted potential local partners and governmental institutions and arranged a schedule of visits in Colombia. Thanks to ACCIÓ's work, the project "Orientapro" has achieved two pilot tests in Colombia, that may finish with a business contract. A second phase of the International Social Economy project is in progress now, to help "Plataforma Educativa" close these deals.

ABD in Brussels (EU funds and programmes): "ABD Associació Benestar i Desenvolupament" is a social enterprise that helps people in situation of social fragility. ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment office in Brussels helped ABD to boost their internationalisation process through access to EU funds and programmes, basically through the identification of interesting calls, potential partners and networks, and also organising a working agenda in Brussels with the officers in charge of the selected EU funds and programmes. In the frame of this International Social Economy project, ACCIÓ was able to organise a meeting in January 2020 between ABD and the officers in charge of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) programme, which was very useful for ABD to rewrite the proposal that they submitted in the previous call (which was not approved) and to receive additional inputs. ABD recently informed ACCIÓ that the REC project that they submitted this year has been approved.

Besides the individual internationalisation projects, ACCIÓ organises capacity-building seminars on internationalisation for social enterprises (2-3 per year) and, since 2014, a prospective mission in countries where cooperation opportunities have been detected for the Catalan SE. The mission is targeted at consolidated SE that have potential and proven interest in internationalising their services or social inclusion models. Six social economy missions have been organised so far:

- 2014: Brussels (EU funding for social enterprises – 11 participants)
- 2014 and 2015: Colombia (models of social and labour market inclusion – 14 and 11 participants)
- 2016: Chile (elder and disabled people – 5 participants)
- 2018: Argentina (childhood and youth, women and gender, disabled people, addictions and mental health, elder people – 7 participants)
- 2019: Brussels (EU funding for social enterprises - 21 participants)
- 2020: ACCIÓ scheduled a mission to Washington DC in October about opportunities in multilateral funding for SE (World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank), but it had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19.

The cost of the service "International Social Economy" is estimated at 9.600 € per project: the labour cost per hour in ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment offices is 80 €; and the total number of hours dedicated to each "International Social Economy" project is 120 hours during 4 months. Social enterprises don't pay anything for this service: ACCIÓ subsidises the 75% of the total amount of each



internationalisation project (7.200 €) and the Directorate-General for the Social Economy subsidises the 25% (2.400 €), with funds received from the Spanish Ministry of Labour and Social Security. The maximum annual total cost of the service is 192.000 €. Besides, ACCIÓ employs a full-time Senior Consultant on International Social Economy to lead and manage the service, the capacity-building sessions and the prospective missions. To put this service in context inside ACCIÓ's budget, ACCIÓ's total annual budget for the Internationalisation Programme is 18 million € (2020).

The service is for enterprises of the social economy based in Catalonia: cooperatives, foundations and associations with economic activity, labour societies, mutual societies, insertion companies, special employment centres and agricultural transformation societies. It is necessary that the applicant company has its product or service consolidated in the market and in a position to start an internationalisation project. Also, since 2020, except for cooperatives, it is necessary that the social enterprise has a Plan for democratic governance. This definition is aligned with the concept of social and solidarity economy used in SILK's scoping paper (2021): enterprises and organizations, cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which specifically produce goods, services and knowledge while pursuing economic and social aims and fostering solidarity.

3. Evidence/Justification for Good Practice

Soft evidence

The programme "Economia Social" of the Government of Catalonia positions social and cooperative economy as a cornerstone for the construction of a more social, democratic and inclusive economic model, through different tools, one of which is the service "International Social Economy", a pioneer service in helping social enterprises to open to the world.

The inclusion of this service inside ACCIÓ's services in 2016 was clearly a revolution, in two ways:

- Until then, social enterprises didn't receive special attention when they asked ACCIÓ for assistance in internationalising their products or services: they had to pay for the internationalization projects as mainstream SMEs did, and besides, they didn't receive specific capacity-building support. Thanks to the creation of the service, social enterprises don't have to pay for internationalising their product or service, and a Senior Consultant on International Social Economy accompanies them in the process, taking into account their special handicaps and needs.
- Another element to consider is that ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment offices, and ACCIÓ's headquarters in Barcelona, were not used to work with social enterprises, and big efforts have been put from the Senior Consultant on International Social Economy in teaching them how to deal with this kind of enterprises. After 5 years of implementation of the service, ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment offices take special care when they have to carry out a project for social enterprises.

Hard evidence

From November 2016 until June 2021, ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment offices carried out four editions of the service "International Social Economy":

- 205 individual assessments to social enterprises to evaluate their internationalisation potential.
- 86 individual internationalisation projects for 57 social enterprises.
- 49 projects have been focused in European markets (58%) and 25 in South and Central America (30%).
- ACCIÓ's offices with more projects are Brussels with 33 projects (40%), Bogotá with 7 projects (10%) and Buenos Aires with 5 projects (7%).
- Half of the projects (40) have been about the identification and selection of commercialisation channels (48%) and 28 have been about assessment to access EU funds and programmes (33%). In 2020's edition the demand for the EU funds and programmes projects has increased, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the need of social enterprises to access to finance to ensure sustainability.
- The kind of social enterprises that request the service the most are cooperatives (37 projects – 44%), followed by foundations (26 projects – 31%) and associations (11%).
- Classified by sectors, 32 projects have been for social enterprises that provide services to people (27%), 10 projects have been for social enterprises devoted to consultancy and human resources (8%) and 10 projects have been for social enterprises that elaborate food or beverage (8%).
- The average mark that participating social enterprises give to the service is 8,7/10.

We include below several examples of projects that illustrate the success of the service:

Vitivin in Chile: "Vitivin" is a social enterprise that has created a professional online community for winemakers. The International Social Economy project carried out by ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment office in Santiago de Chile had the objective of expanding Vitivin's presence in Chile, by preparing a market study about oenology and viticulture in Chile, identifying and contacting the profiles selected by the enterprise and organising a work agenda for Vitivin to visit the most interesting contacts. The social enterprise had to travel to Chile in Spring 2020 to attend a wine fair and the work agenda would have taken place then, but finally it was replaced by an online agenda due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the online meetings went very well and Vitivin has now more clients in Chile thanks to ACCIÓ's support. Another International Social Economy project is about to start for them in Argentina, with the same goals than Chile's project.

Ampans in Colombia: The social enterprise "Ampans", that helps people with intellectual disabilities, participated in ACCIÓ's missions to Colombia and afterwards benefited from an International Social Economy project too. Thanks to the support of ACCIÓ's Trade & Investment office in Bogotá, "Ampans" could find a local partner to start social projects. The social enterprise and its Colombian partner "Crear Unidos" have already opened two residencies for people with intellectual disabilities in Medellín. "Ampans" has stated that "Colombia is growing and boosting social and universal



policies. Our expertise and knowledge can help them, and at the same time this experience gives us the opportunity to work in a totally different environment, which helps us to grow more and better as an organisation”.

Aiguasol and Azimut in Ghana: “Aiguasol” and “Azimut” are two social enterprises that cooperate in bidding for international tenders in Africa: “Aiguasol” has expertise in building and energy efficiency, while “Azimut” has expertise in photovoltaic energy and rural electrification. ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment office in Ghana carried out two International Social Economy projects to help both social enterprises to find potential clients and funding in Ghana. Thanks to ACCIÓ’s support, they have recently won together two big projects in Ghana: an INNOWWIDE project and a project of Ghana’s Ministry of Energy. ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment offices in Nairobi and Johannesburg will help now both social enterprises to find new opportunities, in the frame of two new International Social Economy projects.

4. Context and history of how it developed

The service “International Social Economy” was born in 2016 thanks to the need of coordination among the Directorate-General for the Social Economy and ACCIÓ, who realised that they would duplicate their services if they didn’t work together: in the frame of the programme “Aracoop” of the Government of Catalonia (the one that existed before the current “Economia Social” programme), the Directorate-General for the Social Economy wanted to include an internationalisation line, that at first had to be boosted from private consultancy services. At the same time, ACCIÓ was receiving more and more demands of individual internationalisation assessment from social enterprises and had already organised two pilot missions for Catalan social enterprises in Colombia in 2014 and 2015. Considering all this, it made sense to profit ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment offices, a public resource from the Government of Catalonia, to boost the internationalisation of social enterprises, and not private consultancy services. It is important to highlight as well that a political change in the Government of Catalonia in 2016 facilitated this process, as internationalisation was a priority for the new Director for Social Economy.

5. Outcomes (for different stakeholders)

An important outcome of this good practice is better governance, as the programme “Economia Social” engages multiple stakeholders in policy development and implementation, exists thanks to the support and collaborative work of the main stakeholders of the social and cooperative economy in Catalonia and has more than one hundred collaborating entities: for example, local authorities, universities and business schools and chambers of commerce.

Thanks to the service “International Social Economy”, the Directorate-General for Social Economy and ACCIÓ are efficiently working together and engaging in European projects like the Interreg Europe project RaiSE - *Enhancing social enterprises competitiveness through improved business support policies*, with SILK partners ART-ER, Region Örebro County and Centre for Social Innovation.

The social and solidarity sector in Catalonia has received very positively the service and regularly invites ACCIÓ to deliver presentations and capacity-building sessions in the frame of events were targeted social enterprises (with internationalisation potential) will be present (for instance, the service has been presented in the “Ateneus Cooperatius” network, or training sessions on internationalisation have been organised with the Catalan Federation of Work Cooperatives or the Catalan Third Sector Platform). The sector already considers ACCIÓ as the reference in internationalisation in Catalonia.

6. Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths ¹	Weaknesses ²
Social enterprises are more resilient and motivated than mainstream SMEs	Difficult market/trading conditions for social enterprises
Social enterprises products and/or services have an intangible added value that is appreciated abroad	Competition within the market
	Insecure or declining grant funding
	Lack of time/capacity to develop trading potential

7. Comparisons with other experiences (alternatives or complementary - in same territory or elsewhere)

No data available, as far as ACCIÓ is concerned, this service is pioneer in Europe.

8. Overall assessment

Transferability is one of the main assets of the service “International Social Economy” and it should be understood in two different ways: the transferability of the actions implemented by social enterprises and the transferability of the service itself. This twofold perspective adds value to the measures taken.

- Transferability of the actions implemented by the organizations: the idea behind the service goes beyond the mere export of products or services. The internationalisation process also

¹ Identified comparing the results of the International Social Economy projects with the results of the projects that ACCIÓ’s Trade & Investment offices carry out for mainstream SMEs.

² Identified in the study “[The Social Enterprises Ecosystem in Catalonia](#)” (project Interreg Europe RaiSE, 2018).



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encompasses the reproduction internationally of successful social intervention models, knowledge transfer to foreign organisations and even the provision of services internationally in collaboration with local partners.

- Transferability of the service “International Social Economy”: it could be easily transferred to regions dealing with internationalisation of social enterprises, if they have worldwide offices like ACCIÓ has. However, even if regions don’t have this network of offices, the service could be boosted from external consultancy services.