# Implementation of Social Entrepreneurship Projects
# The path to Communities of Practice

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**Abstract.** In Portugal, Social Entrepreneurship is evolving. New projects/initiatives or organizations are created everyday focused on the positive impact they can achieve. It is important to understand who the target population of these projects is and what their major intervention areas are. This goal seeks a wider one which is to understand the rise of Communities of Practice (CoP) in the specific context of Social Entrepreneurship, specifically how social entrepreneurs beneficiate from CoP to solve the problems they encounter and how Social Entrepreneurship Institute-Social Business School (IES-SBS) can be a catalyst of those CoP. Since social entrepreneurs develop their work apart in Portuguese territory, communication skills and tools are also very important variables to analyze, in order to understand Community Learning Networks.

**Keywords:** Social Entrepreneurship; Communities of Practice; Communication; Community Learning Networks.

## 1 Introduction

In Portugal, we are witnessing the increase interest in Social Entrepreneurship (SE). Different variables contribute for this trend: high unemployment rates which makes people feel the need to develop their own business; the increasing need of people feeling they are creating social value; the awareness of social problems frequently discussed in mass media; the possibility of doing something innovative, with a social and/or environmental mission and which allows to make some money; the opportunity Portuguese social entrepreneurs seek to make changes in the society.

Santos (2012) defines Social Entrepreneurship as follows,

"[…] the process of social entrepreneurship enables the second invisible hand of the economic system, this one based on other-regarding rather than self-interest. By pursuing their regard for others and addressing opportunities for value creation in a distributed way, social entrepreneurs drive the economy closer to an efficient outcome by systematically identifying neglected problems with positive externalities and developing mechanisms to incorporate these externalities into the economic system."[1]

SE and commercial entrepreneurship are two different concepts to describe a common reality: the willingness to develop a project. But the first one aims to create value and to impact positively people's lives and the latter aims to capture value.

Other common aspect in SE and commercial entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurs often walk through a lonely path. Specifically, social entrepreneurs often work alone. First of all, in Portugal there are not so many projects or people with that purpose. Not everyone share the same social interests and don't see the potential of creating SE projects. And also because they often develop initiatives for the minorities (homeless, victims of abuse, drug addicts, etc.), which may mean it isn't an appealing work to the majority, that provides instant profits.

And lastly, because there is an absence of communication and sharing culture and also of communication platforms in national and international levels, enablers of good practices sharing and mutual support among social entrepreneurs.

This paper is a first approach to social entrepreneurs' work practices. The way we see it, communication processes are developed if common interests are perceived (for example, similar target populations or intervention areas) and/or if there is a problem during the project implementation that others can help solve. We intend to analyze what motivates social entrepreneurs to build Communities of Practice (CoP).

According to Wenger (2008) "The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice."[2]. Because of that it would be interesting to understand how CoP can provide social entrepreneurs the perfect context to share their learnings, problems and solutions; but also one where synergies are found and convergences occur.

Always considering the contribution of CoP and SE projects for smart cities and Community Learning Networks (CLN) development, having as important links well defined communication processes and consistent ICT tools.

This paper is part of a post-doctoral research which aims to:

1) Promote fluid interactions among social entrepreneurs, and between them and Social Entrepreneurship Institute (IES-SBS[1]);
2) Understand the role of networked ICT in the previous dynamics;
3) Understand the importance of information and training for social entrepreneurs;
4) Analyze how that information and training may lead to the rise of CoP dynamics among social entrepreneurs.

In this paper we analyze some variables of the projects that became part of IES-SBS network in 2015: their target population, intervention areas, and life cycle. And identify the potentiality of CoP to rise according to the concept definition and the dimensions of social entrepreneurs' projects (identified previously).

Therefore, the questions this paper tries to answer are: how those three variables (target population, intervention areas, and life cycle) justify the emergence of CoP among social entrepreneurs as an answer to their specific needs (problems and

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[1] IES-SBS stands for Social Entrepreneurship Institute and Social Business School. It is a Portuguese non-profit association, with the mission to inspire and empower for a better world through Social Entrepreneurship. It offers training according to the projects' life cycle and knowledge in SE.

learnings)? How ICT enhance those CoP? And how SE and CoP may contribute for smart environments?

## 2  Social Entrepreneurship and Communities of Practice

The main concepts in evidence in this paper are Social Entrepreneurship (SE) and Communities of Practice (CoP). And in order to understand the interest in gather them it is important to understand their meaning.

According to Dees (1998)

"Social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector, by:
• Adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value),
• Recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission,
• Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning,
• Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand, and
• Exhibiting a heightened sense of accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created."[3]

And also as Dees (2001) claims, social entrepreneurs

"[…] make fundamental changes in the way things are done in the social sector. Their visions are bold. They attack the underlying causes of problems, rather than simply treating symptoms. They often reduce needs rather than just meeting them. They seek to create systemic changes and sustainable improvements. Though they may act locally, their actions have the potential to stimulate global improvements in their chosen arenas, whether that is education, health care, economic development, the environment, the arts, or any other social field." [4][3].

Some authors highlight the purpose of SE[5], while others focus on the transformation social entrepreneurs want to achieve: "social entrepreneur aims for value in the form of large-scale, transformational benefit that accrues either to a significant segment of society or to society at large."[6]

The concept this paper suggests is that SE is the path a person follows to change their society or community, increasing the positive impact of his/her actions by solving a societal problem. It is important that the project has a concrete and sustainable business model, be as much extended in time as possible (considering the possibility of replication), but also seeking its own extinction (it means the problem is solved). Furthermore it should enable its target population to continue that positive path (and this includes: being consulted; being part of the solution and aim to end the problem they are facing), in an innovative way (different from the main alternative solution)[2].

In Europe there are around 7 million social entrepreneurs (2011)[7]. In 2013, in Portugal there were 55.000 third sector organizations (foundations, mutual organizations, social associations). Which does not give us the exact number of Portuguese SE projects or social entrepreneurs, but it helps us to know how many people is interested or develops work in the third sector (226.047 workers in social economy) (INE, 2013)[8].

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[2] This definition is a first approach of the authors. Any suggestion is highly welcome.

There is lack of information on SE development in Portugal: how many social entrepreneurs; how many projects; how many and of which kind SE incubators; how many and of which type training programs… And for social entrepreneurs themselves, it is important to know they are not alone and who can they seek to find a solution for the problems they encounter while developing their projects.

Social Entrepreneurship Institute (IES) is a social business school, which offers social entrepreneurs (or people interested in acquiring knowledge on the subject) training programs according to the life cycle of their projects.

It was founded in 2007, but started its education programs in 2011 and its certification programs started in 2009. In 2015 it had trained more than a thousand social entrepreneurs. Those training programs have the scientific support of INSEAD, the business school for the world.

For several years now IES-SBS noticed social entrepreneurs' needed to share their experiences, difficulties and solutions. That was the starting point for Communities of Practice to rise among these agents of change. But also for the Community Learning Networks (CLN) to take place (instead of an individual and self-oriented way of learning).

As defined by Wenger, "A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."[4]. On the other hand, CLN describe the ties that individuals create and orchestrate, as well as the way those ties gather – by using technology for example –, "to effectively support learning needs"[9].

In both definitions, four keywords excel: learning, communication, community and practice. Even if the need to learn is not the driver for the meetings, it exists and people like to know they are going to find that component. The feeling must be of a community, with a high sense of share. And it must bring something able to put into practice, even if after-meetings.

Incubators or physical/virtual platforms where people meet occasionally or in a daily basis, to work and/or share experiences are examples of CoP. In Portugal, there are several dedicated to social innovation: Porto Design Factory (part of the Design Factory Global Network), Social Hub EDP Foundation, 4iS - Platform for Social Innovation (University of Aveiro), Porto Operations Platform (Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Lisboa, Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Porto).

But one can also find those kind of places around the world: Social Innovation Exchange, Social Innovation Europe, Impact Hub, EUCLID Network, Social Innovation Safari. Which reminds us of the importance of solving societal problems in an innovative way – even using strategies and tools mostly frequent in technological companies – and combining the expertise of a wider community of people.

## 3  Communities of Practice in Social Entrepreneurship – Pilot

IES-SBS recognized the importance of social entrepreneurs' CoP since its *alumni* network started to grow. Only in 2015 597 trainees attended the programs, from different geographic places (even from other countries) that created or worked in 184

projects. What bonds them is their willingness to develop a project with a social purpose, but other variables may be analyzed from the common interests' point of view, that may lead to CoP.

This research project aims to start a CoP pilot among IES-SBS network. For that we analyze the life cycle, intervention area, and target population of SE projects, which attended training programs.

Life cycle was defined according to IES-SBS training programs offer. Bootcamp in Social Entrepreneurship for Idea and Pilot stages; Scaling for Impact for Implementation and Growing and ISEP Portugal for the Institutionalization stage.

Intervention areas and target population were already defined by Ashoka Foundation, Skoll Foundation and Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. We use the same terminology, but try to adapt some variables to the Portuguese context, by eliminating or adding some.

Table 1 shows how SE projects are distributed in the mentioned variables. Variables definition is explained below.

**Table 1.** Distribution of SE projects (N and %) (Source: IES-SBS data base[3])

| Life cycle | N | % |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Idea | 122 | 66.3 |
| Pilot | 10 | 5.4 |
| Implementation | 16 | 8.7 |
| Growing | 32 | 17.4 |
| Institutionalization | 4 | 2.2 |
| Total | 184 | 100.0 |
| Intervention area | | |
| Environment & Territory | 16 | 8.7 |
| Science & Technology | 2 | 1.2 |
| Culture & Sports | 9 | 4.9 |
| Education | 57 | 31.0 |
| Employment | 20 | 10.9 |
| Companies | 6 | 3.3 |
| Housing & Comfort | 6 | 3.3 |
| Population | 2 | 1.1 |
| Social Protection | 18 | 9.8 |
| Health | 28 | 15.2 |
| No information available | 20 | 10.9 |
| Total | 184 | 100.0 |
| Target population | | |
| Environment | 4 | 2.2 |
| Animals | 2 | 1.1 |
| Children | 21 | 11.4 |
| Caregivers / Health care professionals | 5 | 2.7 |
| Culture / Traditions | 4 | 2.2 |
| Disabled (physical/mental) | 18 | 9.8 |
| Unemployed / Working poor | 8 | 4.3 |

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[3] IES-SBS data base is a private data base, where information regarding all SE projects that ever contacted IES-SBS since 2009 is gathered.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Displaced people / Refugees | 2 | 1.1 |
| Mentally ill | 2 | 1.1 |
| Self-employed | 1 | 0.5 |
| Students | 4 | 2.2 |
| Families | 10 | 5.4 |
| Third aged groups | 15 | 8.2 |
| Migrants | 3 | 1.6 |
| Education institutions | 1 | 0.5 |
| Youth | 21 | 11.4 |
| Women | 6 | 3.3 |
| Business | 6 | 3.3 |
| Citizen sector organizations | 5 | 2.7 |
| Fishermen/Farmers | 3 | 1.6 |
| Teachers / Educators | 1 | 0.5 |
| Inmates | 6 | 3.3 |
| Homeless | 3 | 1.6 |
| Other | 12 | 6.5 |
| No information available | 21 | 11.4 |
| Total | 184 | 100.0 |

**Fig. 1.** IES-SBS Social Entrepreneurship projects' life cycle (%) (Source: IES-SBS data base)
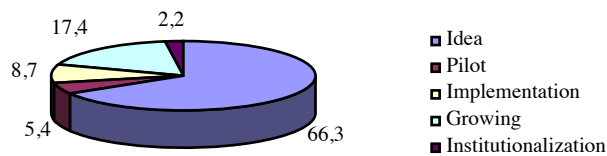


We intend to analyze the potentiality of CoP' rise among social entrepreneurs and evaluate what should be the role of IES-SBS in their boost and also in promoting CLN.

It is visible that most of IES-SBS SE projects from 2015 are situated in the beginning of the life cycle (Idea or Pilot) (71.7%) that is explained by the program that had more editions during 2015, and more participants, which was the Bootcamp. Followed by the Scaling for Impact, which is relevant for the projects situated in the Growing stage (17.4%).

Regarding SE projects' intervention areas it is also visible the interest in developing projects in Education (31.0%), Health (15.2%) and Employment (10.9%). Which may be related to the target population, where Children (11.4%) and Youth (11.4%) present the highest percentages, followed by the Disabled (9.8%) and Third aged groups (8.2%).

**Fig. 2.** IES-SBS Social Entrepreneurship projects' intervention areas (%) (Source: IES-SBS data base)
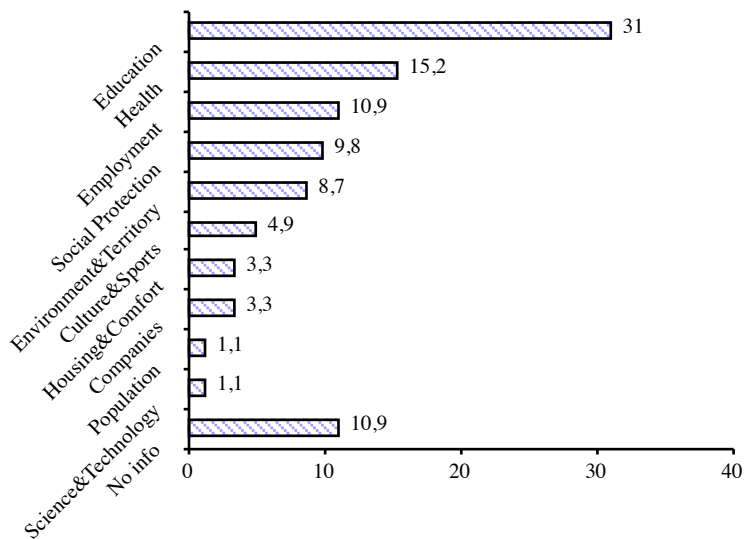


Regarding the pilot we intend to develop with social entrepreneurs, and since some variables have been explored, the question 'how ICT and smart environments contribute to the development of the Communities of Practice?' needs to be answered.

CoP are defined as places where learnings are generated and shared; that are open to this sharing and interaction; that promote the development of people and the territory; as a way to create value to the society.

As tools serving CoP, ICT can be perceived as mediators in this processes of learning and social interaction; enhancers of knowledge sharing; places where this knowledge can be accessed; and the awareness of territorial development (linked to the smart environments' concept) is made public.

## 4 Conclusions

As said at the beginning, this paper is the first theoretical and empirical approach to the post-doctoral research subject, which intended t: (1) analyze how CoP may lead to more sustainable SE projects; (2) understand the role of ICT and communication processes for the achievement of that first goal; and (3) contribute for the development of smart environments as a result of the convergence of all that dynamics.

At this point, this first approach was important because it allowed us to see the similarities and the potentiality of gathering both concepts: Social Entrepreneurship

and Communities of Practice. And to get a general idea of IES-SBS network since 2009. That will enable the pilot conceptualization, i.e., ground it from the theoretical point of view and from the acquired knowledge regarding social entrepreneurs' characteristics that are part of IES-SBS network.

It is the intention of this project to develop a pilot that will be a reference for other institutions aiming to apply CoP in their networks. A lot of work needs to be done, this is its first approach to the subject.

It is important to add new variables to the analysis (social entrepreneur geographic location, age group, gender…) and even to cross some variables. Which is not done at this point because some information needs to be collected through the implementation of focus groups with social entrepreneurs and specialists' interviews. Which are the next project steps.

The two most important conclusions at this stage are the contribution of ICT to the development of CoP considering they allow CoP to be places of communication, sharing and learning, in a wider sense. But also that smart environments are promoted by and promote CoP, especially in the case of Social Entrepreneurship projects, since it is their main goal to solve social problems and consequently contribute to the development of the territory as a smart environment.

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