

Social economy

Between common identity and accelerating social change

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The social economy: An unwieldy phenomenon

The social economy is home to a plethora of meanings and represents an umbrella concept that connects a variety of organizational phenomena. The social economy spans from classical forms of social and solidarity-based organizations (Nogales & Nyssens, this volume), to social-tech start-ups (Calderini, Gerli, Chiodo, & Pasi, this volume), to new forms of collective and participatory intelligence (Mulgan, this volume), to the whole field of social and impact-oriented investment (Nicholls & Ormiston, this volume). This richness in meaning is stimulating for what the social economy can be and achieve—and, in the same way, what social economy science can help scholars understand. However, the richness also presents a challenge to form and preserve a common identity within what we consider an organizational issue field, rather than a clear-cut industry or sector (Oberg, Lefsrud, Meyer, 2021).

At the same time, there is an intense debate on the transformative power of the social economy (Chaves-Avila & Soler, this volume). That debate comprises the social economy's important role in (re-)shaping society and economy in a way that includes the socially excluded, not only as target groups but as co-creators (Hueske, Willems, & Hockerts, this volume) or co-decision makers (Battilana, Krol, Sheppard-Jones, & Ubalijoro, this volume). It also covers how embracing social economy principles in new processes of organizing (Huysentruyt, this volume) or in field governance (Carter & Ball, this volume) may help us better meet societal challenges that are currently under-addressed by commercially driven enterprises or policy. In this regard the social economy is a driver of change, similar to how technological or scientific progress has produced profound social evolutions or revolutions (Geels, 2005b).

Due to their multiplicity and their orientation towards positive change, social economy organizations should be central in the growing body of academic work interested in understanding the characteristics, activities, and outcomes of

organizational activities that addresses social and environmental sustainability challenges (Hehenberger & Buckland, this volume). They should play important roles in research that investigates recent technological and social developments for promoting the scaling of social innovations (Brännvall, this volume). And they should be prominent in research that investigates how new governance arrangements can foster social value creation at different levels, including new collaborations at the local level (Sancino et al., this volume), shifts in the way public procurement is administered (Varga & Hayday, this volume), or changes in how national institutions are designed in support of worthy social outcomes (Miguel, this volume).

While there is some consensus on the role of the social economy as a mainstay of future social organization, conceptualizations of the social economy remain partial and blurry.

An empirical, phenomenon-grounded reason for the blur is that the social economy is subject to constant change: social enterprises have become an established organizational form and have strongly grown in number and visibility over the past decades (Battilana & Lee, 2014). New types of purpose and impact-oriented innovations (Krlev, Mildenerger, & Anheier, 2020) and prosocial business models as mechanisms to enhance the common good have gained prominence in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Scheidgen, Gümüşay, Günzel-Jensen, Krlev, & Wolf, 2021) or in the face of the growing urgency of counteracting climate change (Gismondi et al., 2016). Networks of diverse stakeholders to facilitate learning and exchange, private–public partnerships, and new forms of collaboration are changing the social economy landscape (Wruk, Oberg, Klutt, & Maurer, 2019). Current issues such as impact measurement (Barman, 2020) or new organizational fields such as impact investing (Hehenberger, Mair, & Metz, 2019) involve new actors in a debate about what the social economy even means and what role it has relative to the mainstream economy and within society.

However, we suggest there is a deeper-seated conceptual reason for why our understanding of the social economy is stymied at present. We argue it is because neither of the theoretical perspectives from above (the institutional theory perspective via DiMaggio & Powell, 1983 and the transitions theory perspective via Geels, 2005b) have established a clear presence in the academic discourse surrounding the social economy, not to mention that the perspectives have never been applied to the social economy in unison.

To address this blind spot, we are combining the conceptual lens of organizational issue fields with that of transitions theory. In what follows, we introduce both theoretical concepts and discuss how they apply in the context of the social economy. We then combine both perspectives in a multi-level model of change in and through the social economy. We propose three interrelated transformation pathways that social economy organizations use to enhance transitions of organizations, fields, and society as a whole. With this chapter we thus contribute to a better understanding of how the social economy navigates between ensuring a certain stability as a field, which enables its visibility and legitimacy, and its broader mission to initiate and promote social-ecological transitions.

Theorizing the social economy

The social economy is not a distinct industry or sector. It is rather an umbrella concept that stresses old and new forms of organizing *for* and *with* society, with the explicit aim of addressing societal challenges. One common denominator is that social economy organizations pursue a societal purpose of contributing to the common good by prioritizing social and ecological goals over economic ones, and have some shared organizational practices (for example, that practices are needs-based, participatory, or problem-oriented).

The challenges the social economy addresses are to be understood in the broadest sense, such as that inherent in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs span social and environmental goals just as they promote changes in organizations and in policy, and in particular prioritize connections between societal spheres and stakeholders so that solutions move beyond previous pillarization and isolated approaches to complex social challenges (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Umbrella concepts are subject to criticism, because they are often considered conceptually weak and fuzzy, and because they may mean nothing and everything (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). However, umbrella concepts also come with a number of affordances, most importantly that they can serve as the common ground to connect and cross-fertilize strands of research (and practice) that might otherwise remain detached.

The social economy is located at the crossroads of several organizational research streams. When it comes to organizational types, the social economy covers for example solidarity-based organizations, associations, or other non-profit and non-governmental organizations (Borzaga & Tortia, 2007); social movement organizations (Lee, Ramus, & Vaccaro, 2018); social businesses (Spieth, Schneider, Clauß, & Eichenberg, 2019); social enterprises (Defourny & Nyssens, 2021); and sustainable start-ups (Kim & Kim, 2021). At the level of organizational fields, the social economy overlaps with parts of the sharing economy or the circular economy (Henry et al., 2021), but also comprises the field of social investment (Nicholls & Daggers, 2017). As regards processes of change within society, the social economy is closely related to, for example, social innovations (Krlev, Anheier, & Mildemberger, 2019a) or to socio-ecological transitions (Pel et al., 2020).

These different perspectives on the social economy are furthermore characterized by transitory boundary areas to other fields of research. For example, public-private partnerships, or strategic corporate social or political responsibility activities (e.g., Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016), have at least some conceptual points of interlinkage with social economy organizations, and in particular the organizational structures, practices, and systems within which they are operating.

Of course, overlaps and separate research communities and conversations within a subject area exist for almost any field of research. However, the cross-cutting phenomenological character of the social economy makes grasping the field and building a common identity very difficult. This applies to finding commonalities between the various organizational forms that can be subsumed into the social

economy. But it applies also, and even more importantly, to the social economy's associated practices, such as co-engagement and participatory processes involving target groups (Noya & Clarence, 2007), the high relevance of community-based and bottom-up social value and impact creation (Lall & Park, 2022), or the development of new social accounting practices to capture such value (Busco & Quattrone, 2018).

Towards a social economy science

When scholars spot limitations, shortcomings, or confusion in a research field, almost by reflex, they tend to propose a new concept, analytical angle, or theoretical approach. Such a reaction may propel the diagnosed challenges rather than help to meet them. We might be criticized for being no exception to this pattern. And yet we believe the characteristics of the social economy we outlined make the phenomenological area different from others, in that it is essentially about overlaps, spill-overs, cross-cutting connections to other spheres of society, or a certain degree of fuzziness in the issues it wrestles with.

What is more, it is exactly because of these qualities that the social economy is an exciting venue for scholarly inquiry, and one that outright demands to be studied as a field that is simultaneously unsettled (see 'Struggles for a common identity in the social economy' below) and unsettling (see 'Societal transformations through the social economy' below). Ultimately, this makes the social economy a pole as well as a jolt for organizations in general—and capitalism overall—to become more social, democratic, and sustainable.

By advocating for a *social economy science*, we thus do not want to create a new and siloed field of research that feels artificial, or that could be perceived as a pointless (re-)branding exercise. Instead, we seek to establish a connecting device across the different perspectives, organizational forms, and practices which we laid out above and which to date rarely connect with each other. We do so in order to unleash what a social economy science perspective can teach us about how to transform the economy and make society more resilient.

The theoretical anchors from which we could pick are almost as manifold as the social economy's forms and practices. This book contains a striking variety of theoretical approaches to studying the social economy. One example is exploratory, prescriptive, and imaginative social science to understand not only what the social economy is, but also what it could be (Mulgan, this volume; also Mulgan, 2020). Another contribution uses post-colonial theory to uncover whether social economy organizations revert, or propel deep-seated structures that cause social inequalities (Brännvall, this volume).

Within all available options we have selected two theoretical anchors: organization theory and transitions theory. Organization theory, in particular a neo-institutional lens, can help us conceptualize the building blocks of stability and a common identity within the social economy, on the one side, whereas transitions theory helps

us conceptually unpack the transformative power that lies within social economy organizations and their practices.

The social economy as an organizational issue field: Struggling for a common identity

The organizational field subsumes all organizations that ‘constitute a recognized area of institutional life’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). This includes producers of products and services of a certain type, their suppliers and customers, but also meta-organizations, regulatory bodies and media that contribute to shaping institutions that influence what organizations in the field look like and behave. Introducing this meso level of analysis, between individual organizations on the micro level and economy and society on the macro level, has proven to be valuable for understanding and shaping networks, mechanisms, and outcomes in fields. Organizational fields are characterized by two major elements: field members interact more frequently and faithfully with each other than with other organizations in order to jointly provide a societal product (e.g. healthcare or social care) and they have a common meaning system characterized by a shared set of values, norms, and language (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). Field members engage in a common discourse on shared issues that are relevant for the field (Hoffman, 1999).

The relational and discursive elements have been combined into a broader, more encompassing understanding of what holds organizations together, so-called organizational issue fields, that seek to unpack a potential perpetuation of relational and discursive dynamics (Oberg et al., 2021). In this section, we argue that the organizational issue field concept can be fruitfully applied to the social economy. We define the network of organizations that make the social economy and discuss their common practices. We describe the social economy’s shared meaning system and refer to issues and debates currently shaping the field. We thereby emphasize how these definitional elements form a common identity for the social economy that makes it radiate beyond the sum of its organizations.

Networks and meta-organizations

Traditionally, the social economy has been conceptualized as consisting of a set of organizational forms: mutuals, associations, cooperatives, non-profit organizations, (welfare) associations and, more broadly, voluntary or community organizations (Borzaga & Tortia, 2007). More recently, the idea of mission-driven organizations has prevailed that broadens the understanding of which organizational forms can be considered to be part of the social economy (Mair et al., 2012). In particular, social enterprises have been recognized as a relevant new organizational form shaping the social economy within the past decade. The field developing around social enterprises (consisting of, among others, universities offering dedicated programmes for social entrepreneurs; incubators for social start-ups; accelerator grants to support ideas that, rather than pursuing a business case, challenge existing social systems;

foundation programmes to build network structures between social entrepreneurs globally, and so on) 'encroached' on the existing overlapping fields shaping the social economy (see Spicer et al., 2019, who provide a critical assessment of this trend). Social economy organizations providing products and services also have intense relations to organizations that are not part of the social economy. Due to the broad nature of services provided, they are also members of other fields. However, they increasingly also build relations within the social economy to organize their supply chains and to exchange knowledge and experience.

Meta-organizations have evolved that play an important role in strengthening such relations between social economy actors. On the demand or delivery side this includes networks such as Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation, Social Economy Europe, or Euclid Network that not only support entrepreneurs but also seek to shape institutions and policy in favour of advancing unconventional solutions to social problems. On the supply side the European Venture Philanthropy Association (EVPA) and the Global Steering Group for Impact Investing (GSG) fulfil similar functions in the goal to improve resource mobilization in the field. Meta-organizations are acknowledged for spurring mutual awareness and recognition within fields, enhancing visibility and legitimacy of fields in society, and organizing collective action, which is particularly imperative when it comes to addressing social and ecological challenges such as human rights, social inclusion, or climate change (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). These diverse organizational forms perceive themselves as part of a social economy that provides 'alternative' forms of social and economic organization. Central social economy actors (e.g. large welfare organizations and cooperatives, or big foundations) mutually recognize each other and thus form an organizational field of the social economy, although within-field relations are far from free of conflict (Ayob, Teasdale, & Fagan, 2016).

Common organizational practices and missions

What social economy organizations have in common is that they provide socially useful products and services that meet an unsatisfied social need (Krlev, Bund, & Mildemberger, 2014). Oftentimes they thereby fulfil demands of disadvantaged communities thus enhancing their social and economic inclusion (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014). As such, the social economy has a redistributive, regulatory function on economic life. Products and services provided by social economy actors can also be alternatives to existing ones but are produced in a more socially and ecologically friendly way and thereby contribute to the common good (Carini et al., 2020).

Besides the provision of certain products and despite the large diversity of organizational forms, social economy organizations also share organizational practices such as participatory decision-making. This holds in particular for 'older' forms in the social economy such as cooperatives or community organizations. Aiming at promoting social goals with their activities, social enterprises and other newer forms however tend to emphasize social values internally as well. Participatory

decision-making, inclusivity, fair payment, high transparency (e.g., public provision of financial statements), embracing a diverse workforce, and establishing close relationships with suppliers to secure a sustainable supply chain, are some examples or structural elements and organizational practices that characterize various organizational forms in the social economy (e.g., Amin et al., 2002).

Shared purpose and meaning structure

With their offerings and models, social economy organizations aim to pursue a dual objective of achieving both economic (e.g., becoming financially self-sustaining) and social goals. In various countries, dedicated legal forms have been created that were explicitly designed for such organizations (Ebrahim et al., 2014). In other countries where dedicated legal forms are lacking, social movements urge policy to close this gap (for example, the so-called Purpose Economy movement in Germany). Such new legal forms not only show the will to recognize particular challenges of social enterprises and to create legal solutions that fit their needs, but also emphasize shared elements and thus a common identity of organizations of similar forms. This contributes to enhancing the public visibility and legitimacy of social economy organizations.

Another way of emphasizing commonalities between diverse social economy organizations is the proliferation of standards and certificates that ascribe certain characteristics to organizations following these standards. One example is the B Corp Certification that aims at transforming the economic system towards a more sustainable one by promoting social purpose-driven organizations. To become a B Corp certified organization, applicants have to demonstrate high social and environmental performance, establish a governance structure to be accountable to all stakeholders, and commit to a high level of transparency of their social and environmental impact (Gehman, Grimes, & Cao, 2019). Other efforts promote the spread of reporting standards among organizations that account for how social goals such as solidarity and social justice as well as environmental sustainability are achieved.¹ These practices inform a broader quest of what kind of value and impact are material to stakeholders, including the environment (Nicholls, 2018).

While such initiatives contribute to enhancing visibility of the social economy, as many certified organizations or organizations applying these standards are in fact social economy organizations, they may also further blur the formation of a common identity of the social economy, as certification organizations promote their own labels and do not establish connections between initiatives. However, all such initiatives contribute to strengthening the legitimacy of organizations whose purpose it is to achieve social and ecological goals—an objective that an increasing number of organizations across the global economy pursue (Mayer & Roche, 2021) in a similar, but supposedly much less pronounced, way than the social economy.

¹ See for example <https://www.ecogood.org>.

Finally, it is also governments and international bodies that not only shape the institutional infrastructure that guides the decisions and behaviour of social economy actors but also contribute to defining shared characteristics and meanings of social economy organizations. Most recently, the European Commission has published the Social Economy Action Plan that brings forward concrete measures to strengthen social economy organizations (European Commission, 2021). Promoting one plan for diverse organizational forms with a shared overall purpose and meaning structure contributes to forming the very identity of the supported field.

Shared issues and debates

Various issues currently shape debates within and on the social economy and involve new actors that encounter social economy organizations. For instance, the proliferation of new investment principles that can be subsumed under the issue of impact investing have introduced new financial actors to interact with social economy organizations (such as venture philanthropists, impact-first investors, and so on: Hehenberger et al., 2019). This development has made the social economy more visible to (institutional) investors who have traditionally not focused on this sector when making their investment decisions. It has further contributed to shedding light on the shared problem of most social economy actors to gain access to financial resources and the perceived growing need—of both investors and social economy organizations—to change this situation (Hockerts, Hehenberger, Schaltegger, & Farber, 2022; Nicholls & Ormiston, this volume).

Debates and developments related to impact measurement provide another example of how current issues shape the social economy and its identity. New impact measurement standards have amplified the public image of social economy organizations' experience in measuring effects of their activities beyond economic terms and have made practices and methods to measure social and ecological impact more relevant to actors outside the social economy (Lall, 2019). Similarly, but less clearly, debates around a set of technologies typically subsumed under labels such as the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' or the 'Internet of Things' have opened space for social economy organizations to envision their shared role in shaping the direction of current technological developments, thereby stressing socially inclusive rather than merely technocratic ways of dealing with new technologies (Mulgan, 2018).

Taking stock: The social economy and its struggle for a common identity

Taken together, the networks of diverse but in many ways similar social economy organizations, a shared purpose of these organizations of contributing to the common good, a set of organizational structures and practices, shared meanings and values, and shared issues such as impact measurement or impact-first investment, represent the major building blocks of a common identity within the social economy. While a common identity and boundaries of the social economy might still be blurry, there are diverse efforts on different levels (for example, meta-organizations promoting values, legal recognition through new legal forms, and so on) that foster both the

public understanding of what constitutes the social economy and the self-recognition of its members within the field.

The social economy as a driver of institutional change and societal transitions

Institutional theory's focus on the field's composition and outfit within a larger societal context is particularly strong at explaining what holds fields together and grants them stability, or, as we just worked out, a common identity. Institutional theory also does move some way towards establishing a systems perspective of structures, actors, and processes and how they affect the economy and society. However, its treatment of economic and political processes and the dynamic change in social structures and practices that make a system is more limited (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017). Scholars have argued that such a systems perspective, although a classic of the social sciences (see Giddens, 1984; Parsons, 1991), is needed now more than ever to master the complex issues, societal challenges, and problems that characterize contemporary societies (Mair & Seelos, 2021). Transitions theory has a rich legacy of grasping not only systems, but in particular streams of change within and across systems (Westley, McGowan, & Tjörnbo, 2017). It tends to provide us with an image of change spanning multiple levels as well as change that may stretch over long periods of time (Pel et al., 2020).

Multi-level change

The so-called multi-level perspective has become a classic of transitions theory (Geels, 2005a). In this concept, Geels connects three different levels: (1) niches, that is, sources of novelty, or abnormal or unusual practices that exist outside the mainstream; (2) socio-technical regimes, that is, a cohesive set of actors, processes, and structures, supposedly much like the organizational issue fields we just discussed, as well as further elements such as culture or technology; and (3) landscapes, that is, the composition of societies, including regulatory and normative institutions, which consist of and are influenced by the individual regimes. The main point that Geels' and subsequent work makes is that once market or social pressures for a niche solution grow big enough—for example, old technology becomes too slow or too costly or cannot provide the demanded quality any more—niche solutions break through and become the new mainstream. The multi-level perspective has been used to explain and conceptualize the historical transition from sailing boats to steam ships (Geels, 2002), or the modern rise of low-carbon electricity transitions (Geels et al., 2016).

We argue here that social economy organizations do not only pioneer and propel the niche solutions, but also actively work towards being the jolt or disruption to the existing economic or social system that opens a space for their approaches to become mainstream. This is made possible by the 'persistent fragile action' that many social economy organizations pursue (Krlev, 2022b). For example, as Krlev analyses, renewable energy cooperatives have worked tirelessly towards promoting

decentralized, green energy since the late 1980s and continued this work until the breakthrough of a political prioritization of renewable energy production in many countries globally. Similar arguments can be made for the vanguards of organic agriculture, which were often organized as regional cooperatives, or early promoters of fair-trade, typically small, associations or social enterprises (Nicholls & Opal, 2005). While previously marginal phenomena, taken seriously only by a small group of converted and ethically motivated customers, these social economy movements and corresponding transitions have led to a redesign of entire industries. However, not only small enterprises or social movements, but also established, large-scale social economy actors such as faith-based organizations, can promote fundamental change across levels. One example is the establishment of hospices as a major new institution within the Western healthcare system that was initiated by those traditional actors (e.g., Bridge, Murtagh, & O'Neill, 2014). Without the active change agency of these actors, there would not have been any external factor enabling the breakthrough of their very own solutions to existing social problems.

Challengers and first movers

Most kinds of societal change processes are characterized by struggles between incumbents and contenders, whereby a new status quo is often marked by a transition to a new steady state (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015). Social economy organizations, in contrast to many other organizations, however, keep the level of contestation constantly high, because they are driven by virtues and values and typically fight for a good cause rather than their competitive advantage (Anheier, 2014). Take the current paradigm shift in organizational performance towards assessing social value creation or social impact, for instance. The current discourse and practice (note the link back to the organizational issue field) is currently dominated by Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria, which do not only have their origin in the finance industry but are also primarily promoted by it. The proliferation of weak ESG standards continues, because they are the lowest common denominator for many powerful market actors, although we are well aware of their many limitations (Berg, Koelbel, & Rigobon, 2022). Social economy organizations, by contrast, have always advocated a different understanding of impact, namely one that explicitly stresses active value creation rather than, for example, the avoidance of harm (Barman, 2020). The same applies to impact investing, which—as opposed to, for instance, responsible investment—(Yan, Ferraro, & Almandoz, 2018), favours financing underfunded industries and organizations that may offer limited financial returns and is clearly driven by actors within the social economy ecosystem (Mair & Hehenberger, 2014).

The fact that social economy organizations go where it hurts and enter territory that others avoid, because they may face fewer regulatory restrictions and have broader mandates from stakeholders, makes them vanguards of social change (Anheier, 2014). For example, we have recent evidence that social economy organizations are more likely to take action when other actors are hesitant, for instance when faced with 'moral crises' in situations where organizations are only indirectly affected by the crises and have some discretion on whether to act or not. Krlev (2022a) for

instance shows how social economy organizations initiated multi-stakeholder partnerships in the context of the economic crisis of 2008 and the refugee crisis of 2015. Scheidgen et al. (2021) unpack how values-oriented entrepreneurial action, which worked largely according to social economy principles, was key to developing innovative solutions to the challenges caused by COVID-19. These instances underpin that the social economy is likely to play a lead role in driving sustainability transitions within established welfare systems (Frantzeskaki & Wittmayer, 2019).

So, no wonder is the social economy so high on the political agenda of recovery plans for the post-COVID era, such as on international action plans by the European Commission, the OECD, the ILO, or the World Economic Forum (for more on international policy activities see Bonnici & Klijn, this volume). However, the social economy's first mover feature also increases its vulnerability up to a point where scholars have called some of its members permanently failing organizations (Seibel, 2022). This is why the social economy may be more dependent than other organizational fields on institutional protection, on close integration with the regulatory and normative institutions surrounding it, and on collaboration across sector borders.

Boundary spanners and connectors

Social economy organizations typically seek to have impact beyond their service, product, or other core activities. An inherent trait of the social economy is that it almost never operates without also promoting a certain advocacy effort. This can for instance concern the promotion of democratic or participatory principles (Defourny & Nyssens, 2021). So what others—for instance, universities—consider a ‘third mission’, namely the transfer of practices and knowledge or wider positive influence on social practices, represents a core mission to the social economy. Social economy organizations promote this mission through leading by example as to what organizations can stand for, what they can be, and what they can do. There is increasing debate regarding the hybridization of the business world, for instance, whereby hybridization refers to relative shifts in the priority of environmental and social goals relative to commercial goals and skilful management of the paradoxes that might occur when different goal sets clash (Smith & Besharov, 2017). Social enterprises have been known to operate on such principles for decades and therefore serve as beacons of how positive social change can be achieved (Nicholls, 2006). While this does not mean that social economy organizations are free from falling into reductive thinking that propels rather than solves so-called wicked social problems (Gras, Conger, Jenkins, & Gras, 2019), it shows that social economy organizations’ activities typically radiate far beyond the boundaries of their own field.

Social economy organizations also push for social change via the processes they engage in and which they drive, such as the one of social innovations. Research has found that social economy organizations are critical for social innovation, especially in the early stages of its evolution, due to a number of organizational traits: they tend to be well embedded locally; they are proximate to target groups; and they know vulnerable, marginalized, or excluded target groups well, have access to them, and

understand their needs (Krlev, Anheier, & Mildenerberger, 2019b). What is more, they are able to exert a function of connectivity between a wide range of diverse actors and act as brokers of joint action (Bouchard, 2012). Through this capacity social economy organizations are able to draw other actors in and influence them not only in direct interaction but also through joint social innovation processes, which typically do not rest on providing a neat solution to a clear problem, but aim to reconfigure social structures and practices and thereby push for large-scale, systemic transitions (Pel et al., 2020). Boundary-spanning effects may for instance include making other organizations act more entrepreneurially in addressing social problems, whereby social innovations can be seen as a method or process of extra-preneurship (Tracey & Stott, 2017).

Taking stock: The social economy as a force for change

These traits of the social economy taken together suggest it will become ever more important in driving change vertically, that is, across levels, spanning from micro-interactions with target groups to promoting shifts in policy agendas, while also driving change horizontally, that is, producing spill-overs, forging alliances, and pushing for action early on across organizations and organizational fields.

A multi-level model of change in and through the social economy

The two perspectives we have just established are not mutually exclusive, but synergistic. A common identity of the social economy enhances the recognition and visibility of the field and its values, practices, and purpose. An important part of its identity is thereby to initiate and promote change in other fields and thus to serve as a driver of change or a disruptive field (Wruk, Schöllhorn, Oberg, 2020). In combination, institutional theory and transitions theory help us paint the big picture and conceptualize different transformation pathways promoted by the social economy. In this section we bring all the elements together and develop a multi-level model of change in and through the social economy.

Zooming into the social economy

We start with a more detailed conceptualization of the organizational issue field of the social economy. Figure 3.1 zooms in on the organizational issue field level. As described above, the field consists not only of a set of diverse social economy organizations, but also of meta-organizations, universities/research centres, government agencies and regulators, target groups, and so on. These actors collaborate with each other and with organizations outside the social economy—such as traditional businesses—to provide socially useful products and services. In contrast to many other fields, the social economy is characterized by high permeability and

inclusiveness. It is also marked by interlinkages to other fields and organizations, for instance as mentioned previously to strategic corporate activities on social or political responsibility. These traits are marked in Figure 3.1 by a fluid shape and a transitory border of the field, which reflects a network or actor-centred perspective on the social economy (dashed line and what it encompasses).

The social economy, however, also moves beyond those relations in that it shapes societal debates on relevant issues such as impact measurement or responsible investment. These issues not only have an influence on social economy organizations themselves and their interaction partners, but may also affect organizations and fields that are not in direct contact with the social economy. The wide boundary areas (shaded circle surrounding the social economy shape) are representative of the issue field perspective on the social economy, which highlights that there can be many spillover effects, especially on the level of discourse, and that borderlines are at best transitory.

Figure 3.1 furthermore introduces three characteristics of the social economy that bridge stability and change in the field and hold it together: (1) value creation in ecosystems; (2) positive social change orientation; (3) principles of inclusion and participation.

Value creation in ecosystems

First, the social economy is dominated by shared value creation in ecosystems. Research on ecosystems has generally seen a surge in attention over the past years. The wider organizational issue field of the social economy mainly derives from a shared mission and meaning and provides an institutional setting for a multitude of actors to operate in. The ecosystem by contrast has a narrower and more functional orientation, which derives from shared value creation processes, and may either focus on a local context or on cohesive actor constellations within a global setting, where aspects of meta-organizing and coordinated joint strategies and practices play a major role. Some have suggested that ecosystems are a new and more meaningful level of analysis than industry, exactly because of the qualities just mentioned (Teece, 2014). However, ecosystems in the classical sense, despite embracing some diversity and multitude in the actors they comprise, are marked by a relatively high actor proximity and similarity. For instance, ecosystems as typically investigated cover value chains that span from suppliers, to firms, to distributors—all of which have contractual relations between each other and work on the same or very similar products or services (Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018).

In contrast to this, we have seen that the social economy is far more fluid and more encompassing, and not only tolerates but rests on the complementary value that is created when social economy organizations, firms, or state actors act together, or at least in mutual dependence. The ecosystem concept has therefore recently been applied to capture the social value creation processes that become possible at the nexus of these actors (Audretsch, Eichler, & Schwarz, 2022), and scholars have studied how ecosystems may manifest in sub-phenomena of our umbrella of the social economy, for instance in the sharing economy (Laamanen, Pfeffer, Rong, & van de

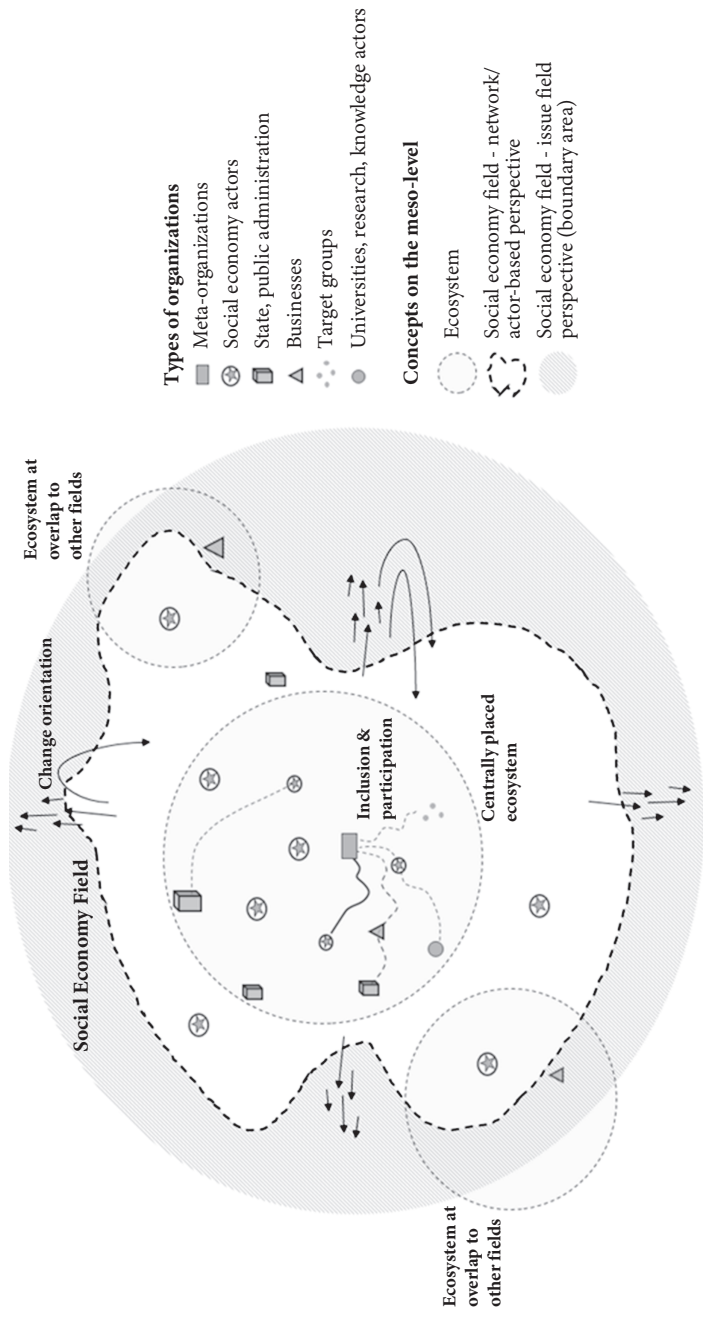


Figure 3.1 Organizational issue field of the social economy

Ven, 2018). We argue therefore not only that the social economy can benefit from the ecosystems concept, but also that the social economy is a prime setting to study ecosystems. This is because the organizational population is diverse, multi-faceted, and complex enough to benefit from the multi-layered anchorage of ecosystems and vice versa. With the ecosystem concept, we thereby take an ego-network perspective. The structure and composition of ecosystems that radiate around individual social economy organizations or groups of organizations with similar offerings depend on their value creation processes and are embedded in the wider organizational issue field.

Ecosystems may be centrally placed within the organizational issue field of the social economy. This is for instance the case when social economy organizations focus their value chain activities on the social economy, for example when social economy actors form a new meta-organization that is supposed to represent them as a whole 'to the outside world'. However, more often than not, value chains of social economy organizations involve actors from outside the social economy. As such, ecosystems cut across field borders and contribute to creating field overlaps. One example is social economy organizations in the healthcare sector whose ecosystem includes hospitals, pharmaceutical producers, and other organizations outside of the social economy. Figure 3.1 underpins that many different types of ecosystems exist within the social economy, which may vary by issue areas, geographic areas, regulatory fields, or cross-cutting processes in which actors in an ecosystem are engaged, such as that of social innovation.

Positive social change orientation

Second, both social innovation and other change processes, such as institutional innovation driven by social economy organizations—for instance, the promotion of (social) housing for local communities against dominant trends of privatization (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005)—are representative of the social economy's orientation at effectuating positive social change. This is symbolized in Figure 3.1 by the cloud of arrows heading out from the social economy field. Circular arrows indicate that change processes may affect the realm within the social economy itself. For instance, existing work has evidenced how social enterprises have transformed the more traditional landscape of the social economy, especially in country contexts that are highly regulated (Lindsay & Hems, 2004). At the same time, social economy organizations may also nudge, push, or force other actors into engaging in new types of action. For instance, social movement organizations may directly or indirectly promote social innovation activities in corporates that they are targeting through activism (Carberry, Bharati, Levy, & Chaudhury, 2017).

Many other types of actors have been characterized as engaging in institutional entrepreneurship (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2016), for example not only in disrupting markets with new products, but in creating a market environment that is receptive to new regulative, normative, and cognitive orders (see e.g. Child, Lu, & Tsai, 2007 on the emergence of the environmental protection system in China). However, one might argue that social economy organizations are the prototypical institutional entrepreneurs, since there is hardly any social economy organization

that does not carry an advocacy mandate in its mission. Just think about the protected spaces the social economy has built, safeguarded, or promoted when it comes to women's rights or pacifism (Pauly, Verschuere, Rynck, & Voets, 2021), or an inclusive model of health and disability (see e.g., Bauer, Wistow, Hyaneck, & Figueroa, 2019). Social economy activities often involve bridging gaps among actors, and acts of political brokerage rather than merely relational brokerage (Stovel & Shaw, 2012); that is, a clear mission to change established institutional practices by means of establishing mutual connections across diverse actors.

Inclusion and participation

Third, principles of inclusion, participation, and interaction characterize the social economy field. Social economy organizations involve partners across sectors, actors within and outside of their ecosystems. These relations and interactions are often a *sine qua non* for the social economy's change orientation. For example, although, as mentioned before, social economy organizations are often at the vanguard in entering areas from which others shy away, they often require buy-in, support, and even shifts in leadership from other organizations, for instance as social innovations mature and scale (Krlev et al., 2019b), or in situations of crisis when other types of actors may have more resources or power to act (Krlev, 2022a).

The so-called relational imperative, supposedly in marked contrast to more mainstream modes of entrepreneurship, has also been highlighted as an inherent trait of social enterprise, whereby these relations may range from relatively few connections to webs and wide networks (Phillips, Alexander, & Lee, 2017). Interactions may occur with involvement of organizations from all sectors and several fields, but can also be dyadic. Cooperative relations may furthermore be formalized, or they may be based on loose arrangements and sporadic interactions. Such interactions may have a strong participatory character and actively include target groups or other societal stakeholders that are typically not part of an ecosystem. Participation and inclusion are a prerequisite for creating value in social economy ecosystems. Therefore, in Figure 3.1 these principles are indicated as part of the ecosystems, whereby the different qualities of relationships (strong or loose ties) are nuanced by solid or transitory lines.

Zooming out towards the big picture: Three transformation pathways of the social economy

Now, the elements that grant the social economy stability and guarantee its continuous renewal give rise to three transformation pathways that the social economy uses to effectuate change in the wider economy and society. Along these pathways social economy organizations: promote *innovation for impact* (black arrows); act as *agents of change* (light grey arrows); or engage in and through *partnerships* (dotted grey arrows).

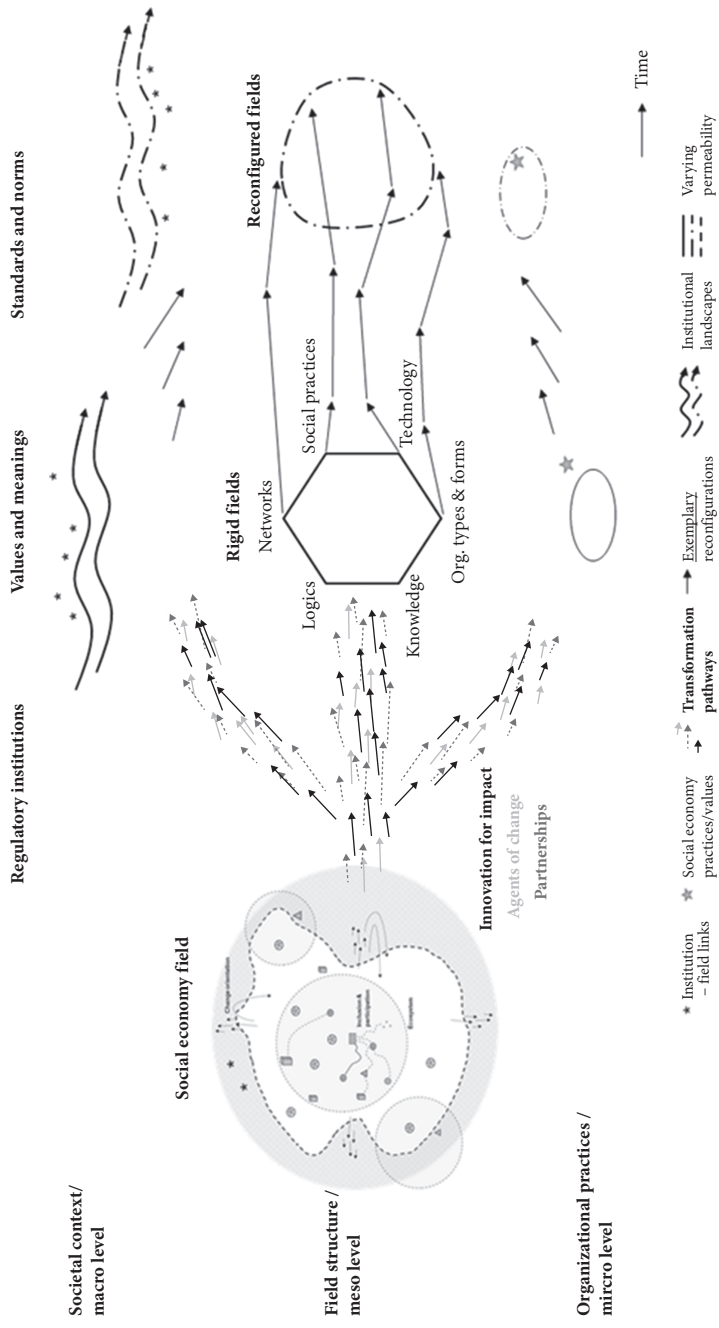


Figure 3.2 Multi-level model of dynamic change in and through the social economy

Each of the pathways can occur and provoke reconfigurations in other organizational environments at three levels of analysis (focus on the middle part of Figure 3.2), namely as regards: (1) their manifested decoupling of organizational practices from social economy values such as solidarity or participation (micro level, oval with excluded star); (2) their rigid field structures (meso level, diamond shape with solid lines); or (3) their regulatory and normative institutions that are at a far distance to the field level (macro level, solid and curved arrows with distant starred institutional links). Figure 3.2 captures the pathways by the three streams of arrows that tackle existing structures in other fields in the form of a trident, which pierces and pushes those established structures towards new reconfigurations. The reconfiguration process is designated in Figure 3.2 by solid black arrows pointing to the right, which mark the effectuated shifts.

Reconfigured fields are then less rigid and more permeable (irregular, rounded shape with dash-dotted lines). Permeability increases for the incorporation of new organizational practices that embed rather than exclude social economy values (enclosed star in oval in the lower part of the figure). It also increases as regards the incorporation of field–institution links, thereby becoming more similar to the close interconnection between the social economy and its regulatory and normative institutions (asterisks in the upper part of the figure located at closer proximity to field). The individual transformation pathways can be characterized as follows.

Specifying the pathways

In the following we only briefly characterize each of the pathways, because they are elaborated in more detail relative to the presentation of contributions to *Social Economy Science* in the next section. Although analytically separating the pathways makes sense to increase precision, as we have also done to structure the contributions to this book, actions along one pathway are often combined with actions on another pathway so that these co-occur. To capture this, Figure 3.2 draws out not separate, but instead multi-pronged streams of arrows.

Innovation for impact

Innovation for impact can be new technologies, new organizational practices or values, and logics manipulating organizational decision-making, fields, or institutions in favour of social and ecological impact. More specifically, social economy organizations may develop standards (e.g., for impact measurement; see Hehenberger & Buckland, this volume), strategies (e.g., for spurring social innovation; see Huysen-truyt, this volume), action principles (e.g., designing inclusive digital technologies; see Mulgan, this volume), or decision logics (e.g., investing socially; see Nicholls & Ormiston, this volume).

Agents of change

The role of agents of change assumed by the social economy can be more or less direct. Social economy organizations may act indirectly by serving as prototypes

or role models showcasing that alternative business models and practices that are more sustainable work and thereby exert influence on mainstream organizations (e.g., by showing how organizations can become more inclusive and participatory; see Battilana et al., this volume). Or they may prompt evolution and change within the social economy itself by introducing new twists and turns in how it operates (e.g., by harnessing technology more proactively in promoting the common good; see Calderini et al., this volume). They may act directly by sparking the diffusion of alternative ways of organizing within their ecosystems through interactions with and through other actors (e.g., by knowledge transfer via educational institutions; see Nogales & Nyssens, this volume). Or they may contribute to stabilizing systems in turmoil by means of their organizational resilience (e.g., the turmoil caused by COVID-19; see Chaves-Avila & Soler, this volume). Of course, they may also fail to act as agents of change (e.g., when they are ignorant of local stakeholders' needs; see Brännvall, this volume).

Partnerships

Partnerships are the third transformation pathway. Social economy organizations may make target groups and citizens at large their core stakeholders (e.g., by engaging them more actively in their innovation process; see Hueske, Willems, & Hockerts, this volume). They may work at the intersection of and alongside other sectors to advance joint leadership (e.g., in civic leadership constellations within a local context; see Sancino et al., this volume). They may become receiving favoured partners of governments (e.g., through gaining unconditional priority and support within a socially oriented public procurement system; see Varga & Hayday, this volume). Or they may become delivering favoured partners of public administration (e.g., when relational contracting between the social economy and governments stimulates service delivery with worthy social outcomes; see Carter & Ball, this volume). Finally, the social economy may become co-shaper of new institutions together with government (e.g., in designing new institutional infrastructures for social innovation; see Miguel, this volume).

Levels of change

Figure 3.2 furthermore highlights that the change effectuated by the social economy can span from the organizational, to the organizational issue field, to the societal level.

Organizational-level change

At the organizational level, for example, participatory decision-making and shared ownership have spread to actors that have not been associated with the social economy so far. Organizations applying such organizational practices and principles are populating the platform economy (Scholz, 2016), although their visibility and influence within that field are surely very limited at the moment.

Field-level change

With a growing number of adopters within a field over time (moving from bottom to top in Figure 3.2), change occurs at the level of organizational issue fields. So, the jolt of and impetus for change does not come from some external factor that is hard to control, as supposed by the classical multi-level perspective of transitions theory (e.g., market pressures, crises, etc.; see Geels, 2005b), but is proactively created by social economy organizations. A striking example is the unprecedented levels of collective action mobilized by social economy actors such as those witnessed in the large-scale hackathons to address challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bertello, Bogers, & Bernardi, 2021; Gegenhuber, 2020). Such increased interactions with social economy organizations may lead to changes in the positions organizations have in their respective fields, eventually creating more overlaps between the social economy and other fields that may spur further cross-diffusion of practices or values.

Societal-level change

Change also occurs independent of individual fields, on the societal level—especially through changes of regulatory institutions, but also in broader societal standards and norms as well as values and meaning structures shaping the decisions and behaviour of individuals and organizations. The social economy field is marked by a strong embedding of regulatory institutions. Of course, any organizational issue field is interlinked with and influenced by regulatory institutions, but the social economy puts a particularly strong emphasis on shaping laws and regulations. For instance, due to perpetual institutional work (Arenas, Strumińska-Kutra, & Landoni, 2020; Gond & Boxenbaum, 2013; Lowe, Kimmitt, Wilson, Martin, & Gibbon, 2019), social economy organizations are typically proximate to policy and at the same time strive to make it more receptive for the social economy's needs, but in particular its target groups' needs. You could say that the social economy *governs with* regulatory institutions, whereas other fields are often *governed by* regulatory institutions.

Think of the influence of dynamics between the impact investing field, the Impact Management Project, or the International Sustainability Standards Board on ESG criteria and reporting. Although dynamics are hard to disentangle and causality hard to establish, it is because of the constant challenging of ESG standards by more radical social economy groups and advocates that these are being critically discussed. In the future this may lead to an upward movement as regards the meaning of standards, for example when a positive ESG score actually means that positive societal impact is created, which may be codified in regulatory institutions that in consequence effectively sanction green-, white-, or impact-washing (Krlev, 2019).

Characterizing the contributions to *Social Economy Science*

As described above, this book is organized around the three transformation pathways we worked out in our multi-level model of change in and through the social economy. However, there is more to each chapter than being a manifestation of one of the

pathways. Table 3.1 provides an overview that demonstrates how the chapters contribute to strengthening the common identity of the social economy's organizational issue field and how the chapters simultaneously emphasize the social economy's role for initiating and promoting social-ecological transitions.

Table 3.1 also displays the range of original theoretical and empirical angles taken by the chapters, which add to the richness of social economy science. While, due to the origins of this book, some chapters have an explicit focus on Europe, many have a more universal character or international focus (especially the global policy chapter by Bonnici & Klijn, this volume, which belongs to the introductory part that sets the scene and connects the contributions). The chapters thereby showcase in an impressive way not only what social economy as a field achieves, but also what studying it can contribute to knowledge in the social sciences.

Part I: Innovation for impact

Huysentruyt applies a behavioural economics perspective in discussing how innovations can be promoted that are driven not by economic goals but by the desire to contribute to the public good. She emphasizes how shaping debates on innovation—for instance, by choosing frames that promote appropriate mental models and prosocial preferences that are embodied by the social economy—can help to raise awareness of the benefits such innovations can bring. She also introduces mechanisms—such as licensing schemes, empowerment of meta-organizations, or building appropriate technological infrastructures—that can be applied to promote innovation in favour of transitions towards a more sustainable future.

Mulgan focuses on technological innovations such as artificial intelligence and applies prescriptive social science to outline how the social economy can embrace such new technologies as part of their models and identity. He suggests that to serve the public good, we need a profound reorientation of (investment) decisions towards applications that stress the inclusiveness of technology. What is more, he shows how new models, programmes, and standards are needed—be they new or updated education programmes or standards for sharing knowledge and data within and beyond the social economy—that embrace social and ecological values more deeply than existing ones.

Nicholls and Ormiston engage in the sociology of markets and deal with new investment practices and principles, how they shape the social economy, and how they initiate change in the finance industry. When investment decisions are increasingly driven by social and ecological aspects, as promoted by social economy actors, this should have implications for most other organizational fields, eventually leading to profound changes of their institutional infrastructures. This is reflected in the multiplicity of drivers stemming from the public and private sector as well as the social economy for diffusing such practices and principles across the financial industries.

Hehenberger and Buckland use an accountability perspective to show how new impact measurement approaches, consisting of a set of processes, indicators, and

Table 3.1 Overview of contributions along the three transformation pathways: innovation for impact, agents of change, partnerships

Transformation pathways	Authors	Original angle	Organizational issue field perspective What is part of the collective identity?	Transitions perspective How can change be initiated/promoted?
Innovation for impact	Huysentruyt	Behavioural economics	Innovation for the public good as part of the shared identity of the social economy	Mechanisms and strategies to promote innovation for the public good, which use new and more appropriate frames to shape debates on innovation
	Mulgan	Exploratory and prescriptive social science	Pro-active embracement and shaping of the technological revolution by social economy actors	Participatory action and collective intelligence for just and equitable digitization
	Nicholls & Ormiston	Sociology of markets	Establishing a new market category at the intersection of the social economy and the field of finance	Mobilization of capital with purpose and impact orientation that changes logics of financial markets
	Hehenberger & Buckland	Accountability and evaluation	Impact measurement as shared practice and principle in the social economy	Diffusion of impact measurement approaches into other fields and shaping of societal discourse on managing for impact
Agents of change	Battilana et al.	Democratic organization	Shared and participatory organizational models as characteristic of the social economy	Diffusion of alternative, co-operative, and democratized practices to change the dominant corporate model
	Nogales & Nyssens	Education and knowledge transfer	Networks between higher education institutions and social economy organizations	Transversal knowledge transfer between universities and social economy for greater social value creation
	Chaves-Avila & Soler	Organizational/field resilience	Social economy performance and relationships relative to the mainstream economy	Resilience as an outcome of cooperation-based rather than competition-based organizing
	Calderini et al. Brännvall	Entrepreneurship Post-colonial theory	Social-tech ventures (re-)defining new uses of technology Local and non-local interaction in ecosystems for social innovation	Inclusive and green growth as opposed to the general growth agenda Non-participatory dynamics inhibiting the scaling process and thus preventing wider social change

Partnerships	Hueske, Willems, & Hockerts	Citizen engagement in science	Target group participation along the social value creation process of social enterprises (in parallel to citizen participation in science)	More tailored interventions corresponding with the needs of vulnerable or excluded groups
	Sancino et al.	Leadership	Arenas in the local/city context that influence civic leadership and involvement of the social economy in them	Opportunities (or lack of) transversal collaboration and visibility of genuinely civic actors in leadership
	Miguel	Institutional design	Continuity in the identity of Portugal Social Innovation as a new institution (the institution as a durable asset for the social economy)	New institutional outfit and process as a blueprint for the redesign of other institutions
	Varga & Hayday	Public management	Responsible and values-oriented buying practices of the public sector towards the social economy	Impact maximization rather than cost minimization as a governance principle
	Carter & Ball	Contract theory	Contracting as a relational (instead of transactional) device between government, business, and the social economy	More effective service provision and prevention through cross-sectoral collaboration

principles, spread within and beyond the social economy. They emphasize how the impact logic and the tradition of measuring impact shapes the identity of the social economy, and thereby help it gain visibility and legitimacy beyond its own realm. They do not only discuss organic processes of cross-diffusion between fields, but also highlight the role of regulators and how these can contribute to foster such processes through creating a supportive regulatory framework.

Part II: Agents of change

Battilana et al. scrutinize social businesses under the lens of democratic and participatory organizing. They outline the core affordances of hybrid organizational structures and practices or those of co-decision-making by employees relative to the current, substantial societal crises. They then build a bridge to the institutional context and show how, for example, legal shifts or financial strategies that foster such new organizational types may propel change across wider organizational populations.

Nogales and Nyssens analyse the social economy from an education and knowledge exchange perspective. They discuss the possibilities that arise from a two-way transfer of knowledge as well as co-engagement between universities and other knowledge actors with social economy organizations within impact-oriented ecosystems. They also consider how educational activities in universities around social economy practices can level up values-oriented skills for future economy leaders.

Chaves-Avila and Soler investigate social economy resilience in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Thereby they advance two arguments. First, they highlight the importance of the social economy for the resilience of society by showing how social economy organizations are the first to react to crises. Second, they show that social economy organizations displayed remarkable resilience to the crisis relative to other actors. Thereby social economy organizations represent not only a tool to manage and address change but also a model for how to deal with disruptive change, for others to follow.

Calderini et al. consider a new evolution within the social economy, in which organizations heavily rely on technological innovation to advance social goals: so-called social-tech ventures. Thereby they do not only bridge a formerly perceived divide between the technological and the social; they also offer considerations on the effects this may have, including a wider acceptance and legitimacy of technology, or the emergence of an inclusive as opposed to a smart growth agenda.

Bräanvall studies the social start-ups of Western entrepreneurs in Africa under a post-colonial lens. She highlights how, despite ambitions to the contrary, Western entrepreneurs often fail to consider the local, native perspective or even do not properly involve local actors in the development of solutions that are supposedly meant for them. She outlines how this ignorance may stymie wider transformational effects by hampering the scaling of social innovation.

Part III: Partnerships

Hueske, Willems, and Hockerts draw a striking analogy between participatory processes in the social economy and the public engagement of citizens in science. They work out how, in particular, what they call *orgware*—that is, organizational structures and processes that facilitate engagement throughout the process, from identifying problems to developing solutions—are necessary to get to an adequate level of representation, voice, and influence by target groups. They thereby define which elements the organizational issue field would need to possess, but also project the kinds of transformations that would be possible if target groups had profound opportunities of involvement rather than being consulted at the very end of the process.

Sancino et al. focus on developing a civic leadership perspective in local settings, more particularly at the city level. They demonstrate that besides talk and convictions about the superiority of distributed approaches to leadership and collaborative, multi-stakeholder action, city leadership is clustered in the hands of a small number of leaders, often in formal positions of power. By contrast, the social economy is not very visible. The authors discuss what this implies for (the lack of) integrated approaches to local challenges and how the situation could be changed.

Miguel provides a compelling account centred on institutional design. Specifically, he discusses how the Portugal Social Innovation initiative, which is located at the intersection between the public, private, and social economy spheres, enables more effective resource mobilization to social economy organizations. He highlights how the identity of the initiative had to be established and safeguarded as a durable asset in order not to lose influence over shifts in the country's political leadership. At the same time, he outlines how Portugal Social Innovation may serve as a blueprint for institutional change in other existing institutions—both internally, within the Portuguese public administration, for example, but also in other countries as a new way of designing market environments in favour of social innovation.

Varga and Hayday start by analysing how established public management practices focus on optimization for lowest costs and expenditures and then contrast this situation with a newly emergent practice of reversed procurement practices, namely buying according to social or effectiveness criteria. They show how such new principles can establish a more level playing field between the public sector and the social economy, but also how such a new governance principle can be used strategically for maximizing social value creation and impact.

Carter and Ball offer a new version of contract theory, which they label relational contracting as opposed to transactional contracting. They highlight how the value of outcomes-based contracts, for example through setting up social impact bonds, radiates beyond the direct benefits generated by those funding partnerships. Contracting as a relational device instead enables the initiation of diverse actor constellations around societal challenges so that cross-sectoral combinations of competences and resources leads to more effective service provision and prevention, especially in the long run.

Summary: A better grasp over the social economy's traits and societal contributions

Organizational issue fields from institutional theory and social change dynamics from transitions theory are rarely considered in unison, and unfortunately, as a consequence, the different research communities do not speak much to each other. By bringing them together we contribute in two regards. First, our work combines an angle on field stability and common identity by which social economy organizations may fix cracks in society and bridge isolated organizational or issue areas, with a transitions angle that enables us to integrate dynamics across networks of actors, policies, and other forms of influence. Second, due to our previously limited ability to merge these aspects conceptually, the social economy has often been characterized as messy, disorganized, hard to grasp, and therefore potentially powerless compared to other actors and fields. Our conceptual reasoning suggests the opposite is true, and the chapters in *Social Economy Science* shall be testimony to this claim.

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