



**YEPA Workshop 3**  
**Social entrepreneurship by young entrepreneurs**  
**Discussion Note**

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# Social entrepreneurship by young entrepreneurs

## Why is social entrepreneurship by young entrepreneurs a priority policy issue?

**In many European Union countries, young people are increasingly turning to entrepreneurial careers where they can make a difference.** The 2023 Eurobarometer report on social entrepreneurship and youth finds that a majority of young people in the European Union (EU) find it 'very' or 'fairly important' that a potential employer has defined social goals (75%) or environmental goals (73%) for the company (European Commission, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>). Worldwide, nearly 41% of 18-35 year olds see a sense of purpose or an impact on society as one of the most important criteria when considering job opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2017<sup>[2]</sup>). In a recent survey, 80% of young people reported the COVID-19 pandemic had increased their wish to make a change in the world (Ioan, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Many of these young people also have strong entrepreneurial ambitions: more than 40% of university graduates in EU and OECD countries aspire to become entrepreneurs (OECD/European Commission, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>) and at least two in five aspiring social entrepreneurs are below the age of 34 (Bosma et al., 2016<sup>[5]</sup>).

**Social enterprises have grown in prominence and expanded their reach across the EU** (see Box 1). In the EU, based on national-level data, there are roughly 397 000 social enterprises with variation among member states<sup>1</sup> (European Commission, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). For example, Belgium, Hungary, Italy and Luxembourg have over 1 500 social enterprises per million inhabitants, whereas Estonia, Greece and Malta have less than 500 (European Commission, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>).

**Social enterprises are well-positioned to support the entrepreneurial ambitions of young people in the EU.**

- *They promote economic resilience and recovery after crises* (Jiménez and Strano, 2018<sup>[7]</sup>; Cooperatives Europe, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>). In some countries, employment in social enterprises grew during the 2008 global financial crisis. For example, employment in social enterprises grew by about 20% in Belgium and 12% in Italy between 2008 and 2010 (OECD, 2018<sup>[9]</sup>). More recently, social enterprises showed similar resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, with only 1% of social enterprises surveyed across 38 countries forced to close due to disruptions caused by the crisis (British Council, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>).
- *They are increasingly recognised as viable business models through specific legislation.* In the EU, 16 countries have adopted some form of legislation that is specific to social enterprises over the past two decades. Countries have pursued a variety of approaches tailored to their specific domestic conditions and needs of social enterprises. While some countries have adopted legislation creating specific legal forms for social enterprises (e.g. Italy), others have created legal statuses available to one or several legal forms that meet specific criteria (e.g. Denmark, Luxembourg, Slovenia). Likewise, countries have also utilised fiscal frameworks for social enterprises with some awarding tax exemptions to specific legal forms or creating fiscal incentives for individuals to donate or invest in social enterprises (OECD, 2022<sup>[11]</sup>).
- *They are important drivers for economic activity and job creation.* For example, they account for annual economic turnover of EUR 2.3 billion in Hungary, EUR 37.3 billion in Italy, EUR 3.5 billion in the Netherlands and EUR 3.3 billion in Portugal (European Commission, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). Between 2013 and 2016, employment in the social economy, including in entities considered as social enterprises in Portugal increased by nearly 9% compared to about 6% increase in total employment in the wider economy (CASES/Statistics Portugal, 2019<sup>[12]</sup>). These evolutions are further boosted by increases in global impact investing, with assets under management reaching USD 1.164 trillion as of December 2021 (GIIN, 2022<sup>[13]</sup>) from USD 715 billion in 2018 (GIIN, 2020<sup>[14]</sup>). Like other social economy organisations, social enterprises utilise innovative approaches to achieve certain social objectives more effectively than purely public or private sector actors thanks to their pioneering business models and local orientation and knowledge (OECD, 2013<sup>[15]</sup>).

### Box 1. Defining youth-led social enterprises

**Social enterprises belong to the social economy.** In Europe, based on estimates, there are 2.8 million social economy entities (associations, co-operatives, mutual organisations, foundations, including social enterprises), equivalent to 10% of all businesses. They employ almost 13.6 million people, about 6% of European employees (Monzón and Chaves, 2016<sup>[16]</sup>). Yet the true scale may be higher (Dupain et al., 2021<sup>[17]</sup>) given the different legal forms and definitions used for social economy entities.

**The social economy and social entrepreneurship have been receiving significant global policy traction.** As the EU Council Recommendation on Developing Social Economy Framework Conditions [C/2023/1344] and the OECD Recommendation on

<sup>1</sup> Due to multiple definitions and varying degrees of legal recognition for social enterprises, the quality of data on social enterprises differs between countries and even sub-national regions.

the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation [OECD/LEGAL/0472] put forward, the social economy refers to a set of organisations such as associations, co-operatives, foundations, mutual organisations and social enterprises whose activity is driven by the values of solidarity, people over capital and democratic and participatory governance (European Union, 2023<sup>[18]</sup>; OECD, 2018<sup>[9]</sup>). Organisations within the social economy use business models based on collaboration and mutual support as they seek to resolve social and environmental problems.

### Defining social enterprise

In line with the growing traction, recognition of social enterprises and efforts to define them also increased at the international level:

- Social enterprises include any private entrepreneurial activity that strives to benefit the general interest by pursuing specific social, environmental and economic goals rather than the maximisation of profit for personal gain (OECD, 1999<sup>[19]</sup>). Social enterprises often leverage innovative business solutions to address social problems, such as unemployment and social exclusion. More recent OECD analysis suggests that social enterprises are characterised by an entrepreneurial approach, with their income primarily generated through commercial activities, rather than grants and donations. Social enterprises may emerge from within the social economy or as spinouts from broader private sector activity (OECD, 2022<sup>[11]</sup>).
- According to the Social Business Initiative, a social enterprise is an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders; operates by providing goods and services for the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion; and, uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives. It is managed in an open and responsible manner and, in particular, involves employees, consumers and stakeholders affected by its commercial activities (European Commission, 2011<sup>[20]</sup>). The social purpose of a social enterprise may also include environmental goals (European Union, 2021<sup>[21]</sup>).
- Relying on the EMES International Research Network approach to social enterprises (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001<sup>[22]</sup>) and building on the OECD definition, the European Commission recognises that social enterprises “run commercial activities (entrepreneurial/economic dimension) in order to achieve a social or societal common good (social dimension) and have an organisation or ownership system that reflects their mission (inclusive governance-ownership dimension)” (European Commission, 2011<sup>[20]</sup>). As presented in the table below, these dimensions have been further operationalised in the framework of the European Commission mapping study on the social enterprise ecosystems in Europe.

Main dimension	General definition	Minimum requirements
Entrepreneurial/economic dimension	<p>Stable and continuous production of goods and services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revenues are generated mainly from both the direct sale of goods and services to private users or members and public contracts. (At least partial) use of production factors functioning in the monetary economy (paid labour, capital, assets).</li> <li>• Although relying on both volunteers (especially in the start-up phase) and non-commercial resources to become sustainable, social enterprises also normally use production factors that typically function in the monetary economy.</li> </ul>	Social enterprises must be market-oriented (incidence of trading should be ideally above 25%).
Social dimension	<p>The aim pursued is explicitly social. The product supplied/activities run have a social/general interest connotation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The types of services offered or activities run can vary significantly from place to place, depending on unmet needs arising at the local level or in some cases even in a global context.</li> </ul>	Primacy of social aim must be clearly established by national legislations, the statutes of social enterprises or other relevant documents.
Inclusive governance-ownership dimension	<p>Inclusive and participatory governance model.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All concerned stakeholders are involved, regardless of the legal form.</li> <li>• The profit distribution constraint (especially on assets) guarantees that the enterprise’s social purpose is safeguarded.</li> </ul>	The governance and/or organisational structure of social enterprises must ensure that the interests of all concerned stakeholders are duly represented in decision-making processes.

**Young people are defined as 15-29 year old for the purposes of this note.** This definition is in line with the definition of young-people included in the Updated OECD Youth Action Plan [C/MIN(2021)3] and the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People [OECD/LEGAL/0474]. Youth-led social enterprises are defined as social enterprises that were founded or are led by young people, i.e. at least one young person holds an executive position in the organisation.

Source: (OECD, 2022<sup>[23]</sup>; European Union, 2023<sup>[18]</sup>), (European Commission, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>)

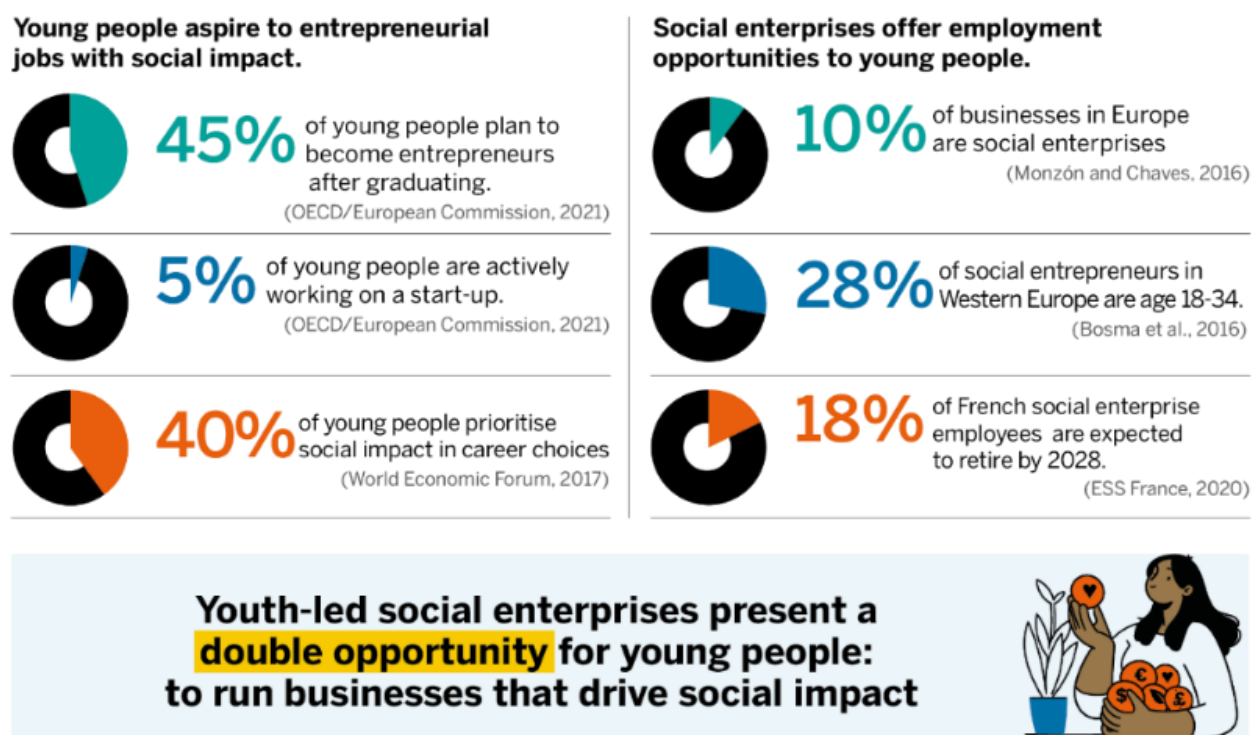
## Young people are already leading social enterprises in many EU countries

For example, up to 20% of leadership positions in social enterprises in France and Spain are filled by young people, and more than one in four social entrepreneurs and almost two in five aspiring social entrepreneurs in Western Europe are below the age

of 34 (Figure 1). In some EU countries, older cohorts of social enterprise leaders and workers are likely to retire in the coming decade. For example, in France more than 750 000 social enterprise employees are expected to retire by 2028. Such demographic shifts could create opportunities.

**There are examples of successful youth-led social enterprises in EU countries.** In France, Enercoop is a co-operative energy provider founded by young social entrepreneurs, focusing on providing 100% renewable energy to private households and businesses. In Italy, Quid, a social enterprise founded in 2013 by young social entrepreneurs in Verona produces ethical clothing from recovered surplus fabrics, employing 140 staff from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2012, two young social entrepreneurs founded SINGA to connect refugees with their new communities, find employment and engage in social activities. Today, SINGA has over 50 000 members and 90 full-time employees including in Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Spain. (OECD, 2022<sub>[23]</sub>). In Germany, Ecosia – one the world’s largest not-for-profit search engine – aims to combat deforestation by planting trees from the profits generated through the search engine activity. Based in Berlin, Ecosia was founded in 2009 by Christian Kroll at age 26. The organisation describes their business model as being hybrid and focuses on a profitable business activity to finance their social impact through the planting of trees. The business promotes transparency by publishing its financial reports as well as regular updates on the number of trees it has planted. The search engine is available in 47 languages (OECD, 2022<sub>[23]</sub>).

Figure 1. Young people are increasingly engaging with social enterprises



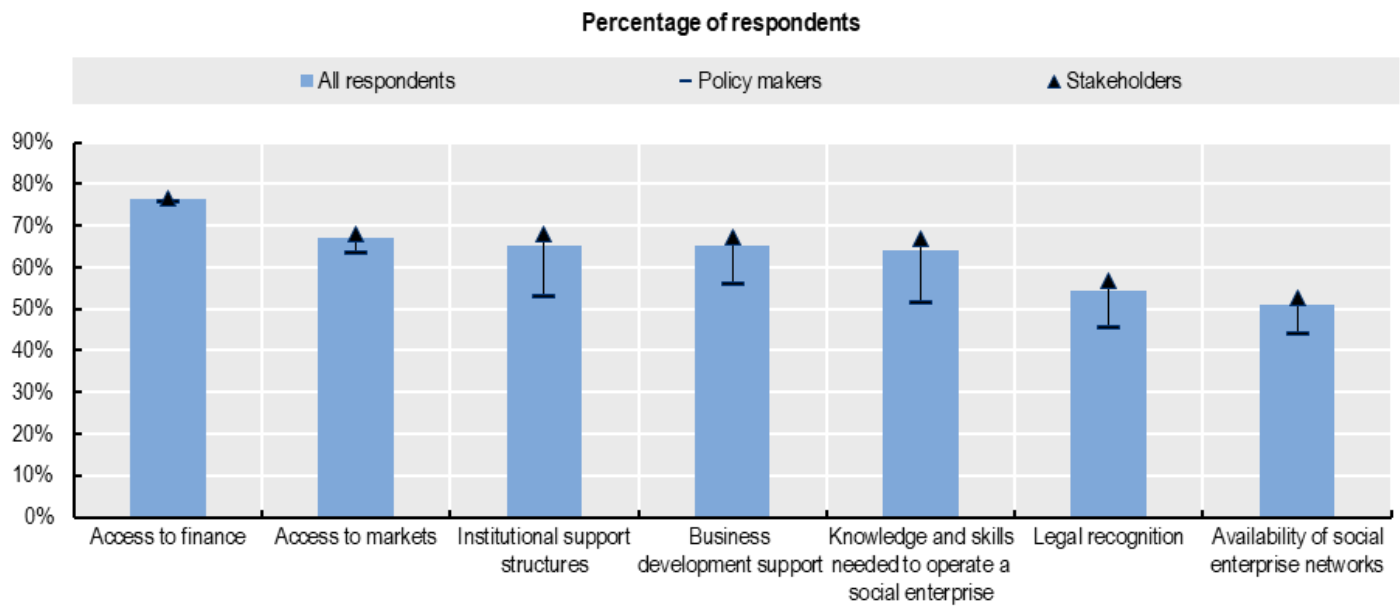
Source: (OECD, 2022<sub>[23]</sub>)

### However, they face a double bind: age and challenges specific to social entrepreneurship

Young people are affected by many of the same issues as social entrepreneurs more generally, such as a lack of visibility and understanding of what social entrepreneurship and social enterprise are. Their age reinforces these effects in addition to other related challenges, such as the lack of credit history. This creates notable challenges to starting and scaling social enterprises.

**Running successful social enterprises involves balancing both financial sustainability and social impact.** Areas such as access to markets, business development support, knowledge and skills, institutional support structures and legal recognition hold important challenges for young social entrepreneurs. In the OECD YSE Survey, more than three quarters of respondents agreed that youth-led social enterprises are particularly concerned by at least one of these challenges (Figure 2). The most frequently reported challenges were access to finance (76%), access to markets (67%) and institutional support structures (65%). However, in terms of knowledge and skills needed to operate a social enterprise, lack of institutional support structures and business development support, stakeholders and policy makers seem to diverge in their assessment of the gravity of these challenges. Across all three areas, a higher share of stakeholders considers these to be a challenge relative to policy makers. This may be due to a lack of awareness of youth-led social enterprises by policy makers and of opportunities to engage with them directly.

Figure 2. Challenges faced by youth-led social enterprises



Note: Selection of multiple answers possible. Results for all respondents based on all viable responses to this question (n=353). Unweighted average of all responses.

Source: OECD YSE Survey

### Social enterprises require a unique set of skills to maintain an economically viable business while upholding a social mission.

Social entrepreneurship differs from conventional entrepreneurship primarily in the pursuit of a social mission (Åstebro and Hoos, 2021<sup>[24]</sup>; Dees, 1998<sup>[25]</sup>). While conceptualisations of necessary skills vary, they commonly include more conventional entrepreneurship competencies such as opportunity recognition, innovation, and business and management (Brock and Steiner, 2009<sup>[26]</sup>; Orhei, Nandram and Vinke, 2015<sup>[27]</sup>; Bilbao Sáenz and López Vélez, 2015<sup>[28]</sup>). They also extend to competencies to address social problems, hybrid resource mobilisation, developing, maintaining and scaling a sustainable business model, and measuring social outcomes and impacts (Kraemer, 2016<sup>[29]</sup>; Dickel and Eckardt, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>; Vázquez-Parra, García-González and Ramírez-Montoya, 2021<sup>[31]</sup>). In terms of management, based on the European Social Entrepreneurship Monitor (ESEM), 75% of social enterprises report high or very high involvement of staff in decision-making (Dupain et al., 2021<sup>[17]</sup>). Social enterprises also include stakeholders and beneficiaries. Appropriately addressing their needs can be particularly challenging in typical democratic governance models. Work on measures of students' social entrepreneurship skills is advancing but has yet to produce internationally comparable results (Capella-Peris et al., 2019<sup>[32]</sup>; Åstebro and Hoos, 2021<sup>[24]</sup>). Programmes that address these gaps can help young people to develop transferable skills that will be valuable in their careers and more broadly. For example, social entrepreneurship training has been proven to enhance disadvantaged young people's sense of self-worth and career competence (Tam, Asamoah and Chan, 2021<sup>[33]</sup>).

**Teaching "social problem solving" skills is still advancing.** While not all of the skills needed to be (come) a successful social entrepreneur can be learned in primary and secondary education, some relevant skills such as social problem solving, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity and innovation are increasingly included in school programmes. OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results from 2018 have found that around four in five students in OECD countries and beyond are in schools that teach global issues, such as climate change, equality between men and women and global health (OECD, 2020<sup>[34]</sup>). In many EU countries and beyond, the key issues around the above skills and other so-called "21<sup>st</sup> century competencies" are a lack of common understanding and proven ways to teach these competencies successfully (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019<sup>[35]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[36]</sup>). Assessments of creative thinking, collaborative problem solving and social and emotional skills more broadly are beginning to fill these gaps in understanding (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019<sup>[35]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[37]</sup>; OECD, 2017<sup>[38]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[39]</sup>).

**Digitalisation increases the need for young social entrepreneurs to develop digital skills.** For almost half of European Social Enterprise Monitor respondents, digital technology is relevant for their business or impact model, 32% cite mobile apps, 15% AI and machine learning and 14% the Internet of Things as relevant technologies (Dupain et al., 2021<sup>[17]</sup>). For example, the development of Italian co-operatives is hindered by a shortage of digital skills (OECD, 2021<sup>[40]</sup>). While many young people are leading the digitalisation of social enterprises, not all of them are technologically savvy and a significant share of young people are affected by digital skills gaps.

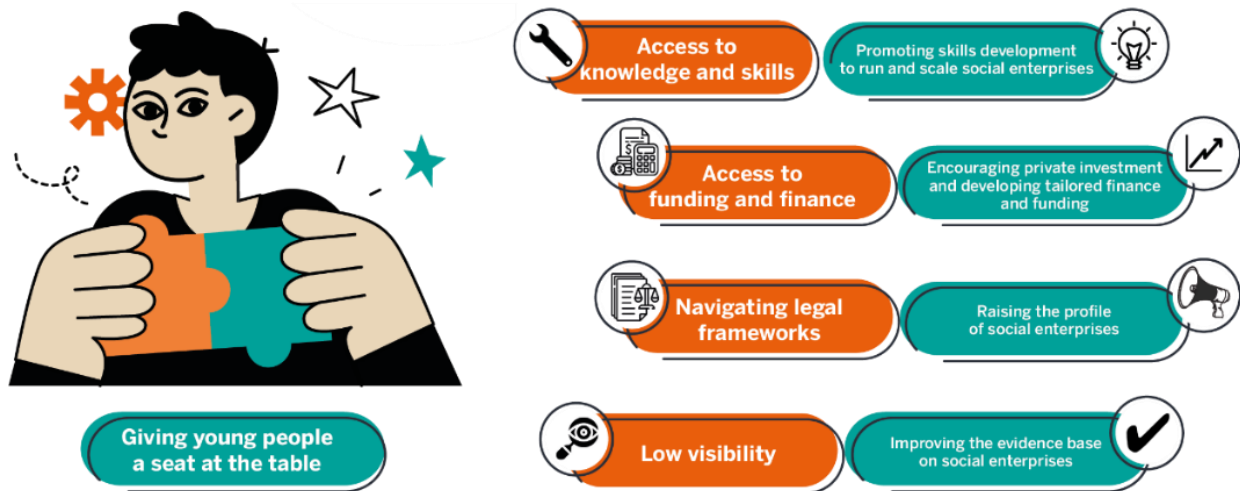
### What can EU governments do to further support young social entrepreneurs ?

**Building on the important policy momentum around the social economy and social enterprises in the EU, a range of actions can be implemented to address the specific challenges faced by youth-led social enterprises.** This has the double benefit of providing youth with jobs while allowing them to have positive social and societal impacts (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Policy actions to relieve the double bind

## Youth-led social enterprises face a **double bind** due to their nature and age...

This intensifies four main challenges: Policy makers can address them by:



Source: (OECD, 2022<sup>[23]</sup>)

***Include social entrepreneurship into primary, secondary and higher education curricula to develop interest as well as social and emotional skills of young people wishing to engage in social entrepreneurship***

For example, specialised higher education programmes in social entrepreneurship are increasing (e.g. Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship at the Hertie School of Governance (Germany), the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain)). Specialised training opportunities in secondary and higher education can further develop business competencies of young people wishing to engage in social entrepreneurship. The co-creation of learning opportunities can allow young people to take ownership of the process and develop solutions together with teachers and trainers (e.g. Enactus in 35 countries). This can complement higher education curricula and specialised training opportunities that are already accessible for aspiring social entrepreneurs.

***Further clarify available legal frameworks for young social entrepreneurs***

For example, in France, social enterprises were among the drivers of legal reforms that enabled the creation of a new cooperative legal form, a law on the social and solidarity economy to the creation of a larger legal status for social and solidarity economy organisations. Similar developments took place in other countries, such as Belgium, Luxembourg and Spain (OECD, 2022<sup>[11]</sup>). Outreach on legal frameworks that uses channels and language accessible to young people can further boost the visibility of social enterprises as a career opportunity. In the French case, the social enterprise network, Impact France helped to raise awareness about the different legal forms, support services and other available measures.

***Develop tailored funding and financing opportunities for youth-led social enterprises with clear guidance***

Policy makers can improve access to funding (i.e. funds provided by government agencies) and financing (i.e. capital provided by lenders such as banks and private investors) for youth-led social enterprises in different ways. The InvestEU Fund, for example, supports private and public investments in dedicated policy areas, one of which is social investment and skills. In Portugal, the government initiative Portugal Social Innovation mobilises funds from the European Social Fund to stimulate the social investment market. Social enterprises are generally looking to achieve long-term social impact at the local level. These objectives and local scope of operation can constrain their growth prospects and require (often scarce) access to patient capital. Many countries provide tax incentives to individuals and/or firms who invest in or donate to social enterprises. Social enterprises that are eligible to benefit from such funding are required to meet specific criteria and are often subject to regular reporting requirements as well as monitoring (e.g. financial audits) by authorities to prevent potential abuse. In Italy, for example, individuals and firms that invest in social enterprises can obtain a deduction equal to 30% of the sum invested valued up to EUR 1 million and EUR 1.8 million respectively (OECD, 2022<sup>[41]</sup>).

**Youth-led social enterprises can represent an attractive investment opportunity for the growing impact investment market and other funders looking to promote environmental and social goals.** Starter grants for youth-led social enterprises covering the initial seed funding needs are becoming more common. To support their survival, policy makers can complement them with a mix of other tools such as dedicated financial intermediaries (i.e. specialised organisations or banks acting as a go-between for funders and social enterprises looking for a loan (such as the Financing Agency for Social Entrepreneurship (FASE) in Germany)), scale-up

grants (e.g. Young Social Entrepreneurs Global in Singapore) and publicly funded loans and loan guarantees. Together with the awareness and knowledge to navigate these measures, youth-led social enterprises can increase their access to finance.

### ***Further boost the recognition of youth-led social enterprises***

**Awareness raising campaigns can help educate both the public and policy makers about the positive social and environmental impacts generated by youth-led social enterprises.** Awards that recognise youth-led social enterprises also help to raise their profile and inspire others to use social entrepreneurship to address challenges in their own communities. For example, ADV Foundation in Romania runs a competition as part of their Social Enterprise Accelerator programme. La Social Cup in France is a 6-month programme for young social entrepreneurs competing for a prize. These competitions can be a useful tool to target specific groups such as university students, while providing young social entrepreneurs with important networking and skills development opportunities, even if they do not ultimately win the main prize. Specialised grants whose selection criteria focuses on social impact alongside the viability of their business model help ensure that selected applicants are both financially sustainable but also socially beneficial. Issuers of non-repayable grants cannot recoup their funds like lenders or investors, making them a relatively costly form of support.

### ***Improve the evidence base on such enterprises***

**Collecting data disaggregated by age (and gender) as well as evidence on the nature of skills needed, the success and performance of youth-led social enterprises and support programmes is an important step towards informing policies that effectively support them.** Together with clear definitions of social enterprises (e.g. in terms of legal definitions or statuses) that are recorded, existing business registries, labour force surveys and programme data can serve as an initial step in understanding the size and characteristics of the social enterprise labour market, its growth prospects and the effectiveness of programmes (such as the satellite accounts on social economy including in Luxembourg, Portugal, Poland or the baseline data collection exercise in Ireland).

### ***Give young people a seat at the table so that their perspectives and needs are considered***

**Countries, regions and local authorities can extend existing public engagement practices to specifically incorporate young social entrepreneurs into stakeholder consultation processes.** This can include ad hoc consultations of youth organisations as part of financial support schemes or infrastructure investments (e.g. for urban infrastructures, youth centres or business support services) or targeted outreach to young people on social economy employment through the creation of youth advisory bodies, as is done in France where one fifth of the members appointed to the National Council of the Social Economy (policy shaping body) in 2015 were youth.

## **Questions for discussion**

- How is social entrepreneurship different from conventional entrepreneurship?
- What entrepreneurial and “social economy” skills are needed to pursue social entrepreneurship?
- In what ways can governments actively support and promote the development of youth-led social enterprises?
- What financing options are available for young social entrepreneurs, and how can access to funding be improved?
- What strategies can young social entrepreneurs use to increase public awareness of their social initiatives?
- How can social entrepreneurs stay aligned with their social mission, especially when faced with challenges around financial viability and reporting requirements?
- How important is collaboration among youth-led social enterprises, and what mechanisms can facilitate meaningful partnerships?
- What innovative approaches can be useful for young entrepreneurs to maximise the social impact of their enterprises?
- How can social entrepreneurs “go international”? What mechanisms are there to support cross-border social entrepreneurship and social innovation?



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