



Inter-Agency Task Force on  
**Social and Solidarity Economy**

## **Ecosocial Innovations in Europe**

*How Social and Solidarity Economy Actors Can Promote  
the Sustainable Development Goals*

*Ingo Stamm*

*Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius/University of Jyväskylä  
Finland*

*Tuuli Hirvilammi*

*Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius/University of Jyväskylä  
Finland*

*Aila-Leena Matthies*

*Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius/University of Jyväskylä  
Finland*

*Kati Närhi*

*University of Jyväskylä  
Finland*

04.05.2019

Draft paper prepared in response to the  
UNTFSSSE Call for Papers 2018

**Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals:  
What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?**

Presented at UNTFSSSE International Conference in Geneva, 25-26 June 2019

The responsibility for opinions expressed in this document rests solely with their author(s), and availability on the SSE Knowledge Hub for the SDGs ([unsse.org](https://unsse.org)) does not constitute endorsement by the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE), or its institutional members, partners or observers, of the opinions expressed in it. No publication or distribution of this document is permitted without the prior authorization of the author(s), except for personal use.

This document is made available on the SSE Knowledge Hub for the SDGs in the form and language in which it was received.

## Abstract

This paper focuses on small-scale social and solidarity economy (SSE) actors for a transformation towards sustainable societies. These actors' ecosocial innovations (ESIs)—for example, food cooperatives, reuse centres, and alternative mobility projects—successfully combine all dimensions of sustainability in new ecosocial practices. By inventing and establishing these practices on the local level, the ESIs promote Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on employment and decent work, and also strengthen the implementation of other goals. The empirical part of this paper is based on a Finnish social work research project that examines multiple ESIs in four different European countries. The main hypothesis is that these innovations and their successfully implemented ecosocial practices as part of SSE are undervalued actors regarding the promotion and implementation of SDG 8 and sustainable development in general. The study shows the high potential of ESIs on the local level, as well as the obstacles and limitations that should be overcome to improve the transformative power of ESIs.

## Keywords

Ecosocial innovations, social and solidarity economy, Sustainable Development Goals, social work, cross-national research

## Bios

Ingo Stamm (PhD, MSW) is a postdoctoral researcher in the social science department of the Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He is currently working on a research project funded by the Finnish Academy that examines the ecosocial transformation of society and his further research interests are social protection and poverty, as well as human rights and social work ethics.

Tuuli Hirvilampi (PhD) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, University of Jyväskylä. Her research topics include sustainable well-being, the eco-welfare state, ecosocial policies, and alternative economies.

Aila-Leena Matthies (PhD) is a professor of social work at the Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, University of Jyväskylä, where she heads the social science department. Her research interests address the contribution of social work to sustainability, citizens' participation and user involvement in social services, and civil society.

Kati Närhi (PhD) is a professor of social work at the University of Jyväskylä. Her research interests focus on ecosocial transitions in social work, user participation, and structural social work.

# 1. Introduction: ecosocial innovations as small-scale pioneers for realizing the Sustainable Development Goals?

What is the common ground between a mobile bicycle repair station in Flanders, Belgium, a field of organic vegetables up in the mountains of South Tyrol, Italy, and an old storage building packed with used materials for artists in a district of Berlin, Germany? They are all part of a phenomenon that can be called ecosocial innovation (ESI). Such innovations are developing and spreading throughout European societies at the present time (Stamm et al. 2017, 202). They bring sustainability into the world (Howaldt, Kopp, and Schwarz 2015); in other words, these innovations operationalize sustainable development, addressing several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) simultaneously (cf. Mehmood and Parra 2013; Utting 2018). The projects, associations, and cooperatives behind the concrete actions are part of a social and solidarity economy (SSE) that contributes to a change in the currently dominant system of economic growth (Wallimann 2014; Utting 2015; Elsen 2017, 2019). They produce goods such as organic vegetables, or artworks made from waste materials, and they provide services such as vocational training for young migrants or metal workshops for school students. The innovations are deeply embedded in their localities or communities, but with their goals and activities they also manifest what some identify as glocal action (cf. Lyons and May-Chahal 2017; Harrikari and Rauhala 2019).

This paper is based on a cross-national, multi-case study that examines existing ESIs and their challenges in four different European countries (see also Stamm et al. 2017; Matthies et al. 2019).<sup>1</sup> The paper situates itself in current debates on SSE and its potential to contribute to a sustainable future. The background of the project is social work and its nascent debates on the ecological imperatives of the profession (cf. Kemp 2011; Coates and Gray 2012; McKinnon and Alston 2016; Matthies and Närhi 2017). The bedrock of a new ecosocial paradigm in social work and social policy is to consider environmental problems as social problems, the environmental crisis as a social crisis, and therefore environmental policies as social policies (cf. Wallimann 2013; Cook, Smith, and Utting 2012). In many studies on SSE, its potential to combine social and environmental goals is underrated or neglected. The identification of this missing link was the starting point for this study, which consolidates SSE and inclusive and sustainable development into the concept of ESI. This is done by assessing ESIs' potential contribution to realizing the SDGs, in particular SDG 8. The paper contributes to interdisciplinary research on the overall potential of SSE for sustainable development. Its main questions are: what role can ESIs play in realizing the SDGs on the local level? What is ESIs' potential for promoting SDG 8, and what limitations can be identified?

The paper first introduces the concept of ESI in the context of SSE. It aims to provide knowledge about the social practices involved and the significance of ESIs. In brief, ESIs take a clear and consistent environmental approach, which improves both social and ecological sustainability (cf. Stamm et al. 2017). At the same time, as with social innovations in general, ESIs are crucial for empowering people in various ways on the local level, as well as for bringing about social change on a macro level (cf. Moulaert et al. 2013; Mehmood and Parra 2013; Defourny and Nyssens 2013). The empirical part of the paper is based on six in-depth case studies of ESIs in four

---

<sup>1</sup> The case study is part of ECOSOS (Contribution of Social Work and Systems of Income Security to the Ecosocial Transformation of Society), a four-year research project funded by the Academy of Finland.

European countries. For the case studies, semi-structured interviews serve as the main data source. The paper outlines the main results of the thematic analysis of the interview material into seven themes (see also Stamm et al. 2017), followed by a discussion of how the cases support the realization of the SDGs.

## 2. The concept of ESI within the SSE framework

The concept of ESI is based on theories and concepts regarding social innovations and SSE actors, linked to a comprehensive understanding of sustainable development (cf. Gough 2017; Raworth 2017). The starting point is the need to develop a concept that can integrate different kinds of organizations, projects, groups, or enterprises committed to the main principles of SSE that are also connected to the main traits of a bottom-up understanding of social innovations and place a clear emphasis on environmental problems. Even though the link between the social and environmental realms is often marginal, other authors have adopted concepts quite similar to that of ESI. Examples are innovations for sustainability (cf. Hargreaves, Longhurst, and Seyfang 2013), sustainable innovations, and grassroots or niche innovations (for sustainable development) (Seyfang and Smith 2007). For more technology-oriented innovations in the context of sustainability, the terms green innovations, eco-innovations, or environmental innovations seem to dominate (cf. Schiederig, Tietze, and Herstatt, 2012; van Kemenade and Teixeira 2017).

Three main criteria for ESIs were defined in the initial phase of the research. The aim was to use these for a mapping phase, which led to the final selection of certain ESIs for the case studies (see Matthies et al. 2019). The organizations, associations, cooperatives, or projects had to fulfil the following three criteria:

- They had to be innovative in making a significant contribution to a transition towards a more sustainable society. They had to be part of an SSE at the local or grassroots level, and they had to not (or at least not only) aim to make a profit.
- The innovations had to realize new ideas for, by, and with young unemployed people. They had to enable participation and respect the views and needs of young people.
- The innovations had to improve environmental sustainability. They had to enhance the fair distribution of material resources and reduce environmental impacts, both in their own activities and in the communities in which they were situated.

These criteria defined ideal cases and were therefore partly changed in the course of the mapping phase. In particular, the second criterion was modified, because not enough innovations could be identified that focused only on young unemployed people. Thereafter, the activities of the ESIs did not have to target a certain age group (Stamm et al. 2017, 204).

## 3. Cross-national case study of ESIs: implementing the SDGs on the local level

For the mapping phase, the researchers systematically used the Internet, email, and social media; activists, researchers from various academic disciplines, social work practitioners, and students were contacted and asked for ideas and contact persons. Using the snowball method, information about 50 ESIs in five countries—Finland, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and the UK—was collected

(for more information on the mapping data, see Matthies et al. 2019, 12). During this phase, the researchers conducted preliminary interviews with several coordinators and participants. Finally, six cases were selected for in-depth study: three cases in Finland, and one each in Germany, Italy, and Belgium, based on their strong correspondence with the criteria and in order to show the broad diversity of the ESIs found (Stamm et al. 2017, 205–6).

Altogether, 28 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, as well as two group interviews with narrative elements. The interviewees were founders, coordinators, participants, and users of the services. Altogether, 17 female and 18 male adults from various age groups were interviewed: 28 persons were interviewed individually, and seven took part in group interviews. In addition to the interview data, the researchers used documents that were mainly available on the webpages of the ESIs in question. They were self-descriptions of the history and activities of the ESIs, sometimes titled with the mission and vision or guiding principles, and also annual reports or funding applications. To complete the array of methods, the researchers made field visits, partly in the course of conducting the interviews.

As a first step, the transcribed interview material was open-coded, using mostly descriptive and conceptual coding (cf. Saldana 2016). As a second step, the data was organized into categories and subcategories in a code and category list, which was structured against the backdrop of the research questions. This list served as a basis for the thematic analysis (cf. Bazeley 2013; Kuckartz 2013). The themes were related to the research focus and provided a basis for a theoretical understanding of the data (cf. Bryman 2007). Themes were generated, for example, by identifying patterns or trends in the data: repetitions, transitions, similarities, and differences regarding certain topics or questions in the interviews (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Bazeley 2013).

### 3.1. Introduction to the cases

The following six ESIs were selected for the case studies (cf. Stamm et al. 2017, 206–7).

#### Hirvitalo (Tampere, Finland)

Hirvitalo (Centre of Contemporary Art Pispala) is a non-profit and open cultural space. It was founded in 2006 by young local artists. Nowadays, it is a registered association supported by the municipality of Tampere. Its aim is to stimulate local activities and enrich the artistic and cultural life of the community. It offers a range of activities, from an open café and social kitchen, to art exhibitions and gardening projects. All projects are based on voluntary work by students, artists, or unemployed people.

#### Oma maa (Helsinki area, Finland)

Oma maa is an organic food cooperative founded in 2010. It is inspired by the concept of community-supported agriculture. The food is grown in the fields of an old farm outside Helsinki. The cooperative has approximately 90 members. Most of the work in Oma maa is done voluntarily by the members; only during the summer months can the cooperative provide gainful employment for some farmers.

#### Lapinlahden Lähde (Helsinki, Finland)

Lapinlahden Lähde was initiated in 2013 and is located in an old hospital building in Helsinki. Now the building offers space for sustainable well-being and cultural events. The activities range from a vegetarian lunch café and art galleries, to an old sauna, and a small upcycling and second-

hand shop. Lapinlahden Lähde also hosts seminars and workshops. The association has four full-time employees, and a number of trainees and volunteers.

#### Kunst-Stoffe (Berlin, Germany)

Kunst-Stoffe is a registered association which works in the field of waste prevention and reduction combined with arts and education. Its main activity is to receive, organize, and store waste and second-hand material, and to pass it on to individuals or groups for further use. In addition, Kunst-Stoffe offers repair cafés, a cycle workshop, and a wood workshop. There are approximately 15 active people running the organization: unemployed people, volunteers, self-employed people, and one part-time employee.

#### VELO (Leuven, Belgium)

VELO has been established in the city of Leuven (in the Flanders region) for more than 20 years. As a social enterprise, it promotes cycle mobility combined with the concepts of reuse and recycling. The main activities are repairing and renting out bicycles. This is connected to mobile repair shops and further cycling projects. It also offers professional training for marginalized people. VELO has around 100 employees and workers, including volunteers and trainees.

#### Vinterra (Mals, Italy)

Vinterra is a social cooperative founded in 2014. The main goal of the cooperative is to combine organic vegetable farming with a social work background. Its fields for growing organic vegetables are located in the region of South Tyrol, northern Italy. In addition to farming, Vinterra has also run a street kitchen, and it produces desserts. It provides around 12 persons with gainful employment, supported by a group of volunteers.

### 3.2. Understanding the work of ESIs

The short introductions to the six cases already give evidence of the great variety within the selected ESIs. Based on the thematic analysis of interview material from all six cases, we categorized seven themes as results of the open coding process (see the following table). The aim of the themes identified in the data is to provide a better understanding of the nature of ESIs in general, and of the strengths and challenges of the selected cases in particular (see also Stamm et al. 2017, 208–13).

Theme:	Short description:
1. From informal to formal	All cases are organized in a specific legal form, even though some started as an informal group or project.
2. Creative mix of work, employment, and engagement	The ESIs use a variety of forms of work. Since new concepts of work are decisive for social sustainability, this is a crucial aspect of understanding the functioning of ESIs.
3. Innovative due to the great diversity of social practices	The innovative potential of all the cases cannot be demonstrated by just one idea or solution to an ecological

	and social problem; instead, it is demonstrated by the great variety of ideas and solutions.
4. Balancing all dimensions of sustainability	On an organizational level, all innovations combine social and ecological sustainability in their missions and social practices, even though the people involved might only focus on one aspect.
5. Precarious existence as daily routine	The burden of a precarious existence affects all ESIs. This has different dimensions, such as a lack of funding, insecure locations, or bureaucratic obstacles.
6. Established relationships keep the innovations running	External relationships with other civil society actors or networks, public institutions, or market actors are vital for all the ESIs.
7. Recognition, money, and time as main resources	This theme lists three important resources for developing the work of ESIs further. It delineates how the allocation of these resources could be improved.

The first theme (from informal to formal) refers to the fact that all the ESIs were developed as citizen initiatives but sooner or later became organized in a legal form. They are now all registered associations, social cooperatives, or social enterprises. Some (e.g. Hirvitalo) started as informal groups with spontaneous initiatives. This is a well-known development in the field of SSE. Nevertheless, ESIs such as Hirvitalo still retain the identity of an informal group. They emphasize their open character and see this as a form of collective power. In many ways it is necessary to take a legal form—e.g. in order to receive certain benefits and public support—but sometimes this is also considered a potential constraint, because it might exclude people from getting involved or joining the decision-making processes.

The second theme (creative mix of work, employment, and engagement) is key to understanding the functioning of ESIs. In practice, the creative—and sometimes chaotic and fragile—mix means that part-time and full-time employees, trainees, freelancers, or volunteers often work together. Many of the people involved are also officially unemployed. Either they receive unemployment allowance and volunteer in the ESI at the same time, or they are officially part of an employment promotion programme (based on subsidized work), or their position has only been created on the basis of an employment programme (cf. Stamm et al. 2019). Long-term full- or part-time employment can only be financed from their own profits by some of the ESIs, particularly VELO and Vinterra, which are the closest to social economy actors. In some cases, the people involved also work for their own subsistence. This could be observed in the two food-related cooperatives, Oma maa and Vinterra. In addition, in the other cases the people involved could use the products or resources generated by the ESI for their own lives (for example, for their mobility, their own art projects, or their leisure time) (Stamm et al. 2017, 210). Overall, all the ESIs had strong relations with public institutions such as unemployment offices or local social services. Often this resulted in an interdependency, since public institutions also relied on the ESIs to provide training and meaningful work opportunities. Individuals were provided with an income, and the ESIs with a labour force (cf. Stamm et al. 2019). From the perspective of the ESIs, the relationship was often ambivalent. They could not survive financially without it, but they also criticized the unemployment offices, and certain employment programmes for being too short and too



repressive for unemployed people. Some programmes, such as the German volunteering programme Green Ecological Year, could be extended to other groups and adapted by further European countries.

The third theme (innovative due to the great diversity of social practices) demonstrates that even though all the ESIs started with one main idea, their innovative potential only becomes visible when one acknowledges the great variety of innovations within each organization. For example, Kunst-Stoffe started with a basic idea inspired by a project in New York City: to collect, store, and categorize waste material, and hand it out to local artists. In general, innovations always depend on time and space, in other words on context. In the case of Kunst-Stoffe, their basic idea was and remains innovative for Berlin. In addition to receiving waste material, in subsequent years Kunst-Stoffe also introduced new concepts and ideas such as repair cafés, bicycle workshops, and several educational courses for school students. The same process of diversifying their activities could be observed in other ESIs as well.

The fourth theme (balancing all the dimensions of sustainability) is mostly self-explanatory, as the concept of ESI was built on the combination of various dimensions of sustainable development—ecological, social, economic, and (often) cultural—in the activities of an organization. This aspect was also emphasized in interviews, e.g. with members of Vinterra. They considered the combination of social, ecological, and economic goals in a local circuit to be the innovative feature of their cooperative. Despite the successful balancing of the dimensions in all the ESIs, not all of the interviewees considered the ecological side of the ESI the most important. Social issues played an equally important role, and were often also connected to a reorganization of work and the work atmosphere within the ESIs (Stamm et al. 2017, 211).

The fifth theme (precarious existence as daily routine) was clear in all six cases. The term precarious is nowadays mostly used in relation to income and work. Here the concept of precariousness was understood as insecurity more generally. It refers, for example, to certain locations and buildings the innovations use (Kunst-Stoffe, Hirvitalo). Moreover, this precariousness seems to hinder the development of organizations, or even to threaten the existence of an ESI as a whole. Some interviewees described the problem that they cannot be identified or categorized clearly because they are neither a nature conservation association, a social work organization, or a classical social enterprise. Even though local politicians recognized their activities in a positive way, continuous support was lacking. In general, no wider systematic public support for SSE actors could be identified in any of the cases.

The sixth theme (established relationships keep the innovations running) applies to all ESIs. They all use networks that enable their work, promote their development, or secure their existence. These networks include close relationships with administrations, authorities, and other SSE actors. In addition, relations with other like-minded individuals, groups, and organization were often mentioned in the interviews, which demonstrates that collective action can be empowering even if one is operating in a niche, as most of the ESIs are. Kunst-Stoffe, for example, is part of a German association of open workshops where members not only exchange information and ideas, but also support each other practically (by sharing open software for book-keeping) (Stamm et al. 2017, 212).

The seventh and last theme (recognition, money, and time as main resources) mostly shows what is missing in many cases. All three resources go hand in hand. They can affect not only the basic

resources of the ESIs—e.g. housing, materials, and people—but also the further development of the organizations. In many cases, interviewees expressed the wish to grow as an organization. The food cooperative Oma maa, for example, was trying to establish a restaurant in order to finance paid jobs, but the interviewees described a lack of financing and other obstacles to their plans. Members of Kunst-Stoffe talked about the idea of having waste material storage facilities all over Berlin, in every district. This might mean upscaling their own organization, or including other organizations providing similar services as part of SSE. In each case, neither public support nor the necessary resources for these plans were available.

In conclusion, successful concepts and ideas already existed, and the pioneering work had often already been done by the members of the ESIs. Yet, due to financial challenges and the lack of public support, the ESIs as SSE actors were still not sufficiently recognized and valued to really have a chance to contribute to transformative change and the implementation of the SDGs.

### 3.3. ESIs promoting the SDGs

In order to elaborate how ESIs could better promote the SDGs, this subsection gives an overview and discussion of the interlinkages between the activities of the ESIs and the realization of the SDGs. The main focus will be on SDG 8—to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Whenever possible, links to the previously listed themes will be shown. It is quite easy to identify numerous positive effects regarding several SDGs in the work of the selected ESIs. For example, the ESIs support the implementation of SDG 3—to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages—by shifting diets in a more plant-based direction, by providing open spaces to build strong communities, and by creating work opportunities for people in need of rehabilitation. They also meet SDG 4—to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – by creating courses in recycling, and by emphasizing personal growth. They work in many ways for SDG 11—to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. In practice, this is seen in democratic communities where all participants have a voice, and in food systems that are more resilient in the face of climate crisis, for example. They also ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns that establish sustainable communities, thus meeting SDG 12. Thus all the ESIs undoubtedly have the potential to demonstrate at the local level how communities could come closer to fully realizing the SDGs, and to prepare us for a sustainable future. They achieve this by balancing all the dimensions of sustainability successfully.

The ESIs aim to provide decent work for all, but they do so with various results. Some ESIs can pay decent salaries, while others are mainly based on unpaid voluntary work. The focus on SDG 8 can be directly linked to the results summarized under the theme of creative mix of work, employment, and engagement, and can be connected to the themes of precarious existence and main resources. The starting point for this study was the hypothesis that ESIs present new forms of work and employment beyond the dominant growth-driven regime of full employment in Europe. If this is correct, they will thereby also contribute to concepts and discussions regarding the future of work (cf. Littig and Spitzer 2011; Montt, Fraga, and Harsdorff 2018). When it comes to all the people involved—regardless of whether they are paid employees, self-employed, volunteers, or unemployed people—all the ESIs in one way or another are strongly connected to public services, mostly employment offices and social services related to minimum income and social assistance. Therefore, the creative mix is the innovative element, even though completely

new forms of work could be identified. However, the actors in the ESIs value inclusive forms of work, and they are creating a socially responsible culture of work which promotes solidarity and a broader notion of sustainable well-being than mere job creation (see Helne and Hirvilammi 2015; Utting 2018, 30). This decisive element was mentioned in several interviews with employees and workers, who described how important it was to be involved in a respectful work atmosphere with less pressure than is found in the competitive labour market. However, it cannot be denied that employment conditions were often insecure due to the precarious funding situation of the ESIs. The financial struggle often places employees or workers in the position of a forced precariat, which is in opposition to the aims of the cooperatives or enterprises. In the cases of Vinterra and Oma maa, which are relatively new social cooperatives that grow organic vegetables, one unsuccessful harvest can have devastating effects on the cooperatives, and therefore on the employment situation of their workers. These challenges become even harder to handle if founders and coordinators are self-taught in business management. In countries such Italy, the bureaucratic hurdles are also high, even though cooperatives receive a lot of public and political support (cf. Utting 2017; Elsen 2018).

SDG 8 has a structural problem of the SDGs in general, namely their strong dependence on economic growth (cf. Deacon 2016). For many critics, this is the Achilles heel of the whole scheme, especially if we acknowledge that the empirical evidence regarding the decoupling of carbon emissions from economic growth does not support the possibilities of green growth (Hickel and Kallis 2019). This conflict can also be broken down when one looks more closely at the situation of the ESIs. Do they support the dominant model of economic growth by focusing on jobs, and by mostly depending on public funding—such as unemployment allowances and subsidized work—that is only available in developed and high-income countries with an elaborated welfare system? All the ESIs involved in the case studies depend on various welfare policies, activation measures, or employment or volunteering programmes. In other words, there is an interdependence between public institutions and policies and all six ESIs. Nevertheless, at the grassroots and very practical level, all the ESIs promote the targets of SDG 8. They all contribute to target 8.4, by improving resource efficiency in consumption and production—especially the organic agriculture cooperatives Vinterra and Oma maa, Kunst-Stoffe with its diverse projects for waste material and reuse, and VELO with its general mission for alternative mobility in Leuven and its numerous programmes for reusing and sharing bicycles. Target 8.5 calls for decent work for all women and men, including people with disabilities. This is promoted by Vinterra, since most of the workers are men and women with mental impairments who have found a different kind of work atmosphere and mutual support in the social cooperative. Moreover, Hirvitalo and Lapinlahden Lähde support and offer work opportunities for unemployed people, and therefore promote target 8.5. VELO further contributes significantly to target 8.6 through its training programme and social support for young unemployed people. Many of the latter are former refugees, a group that often has special needs regarding family issues, language, and job-seeking. Target 8.9 on sustainable tourism is part of the Vinterra agenda. The small city of Mals is located in South Tyrol, an area that relies heavily on tourism. Vinterra contribute to alternative, more sustainable tourism in the area with their organic vegetables, with the street kitchen they ran at the beginning of the project, and by providing local restaurants with vegetables. VELO offers several bicycle rental outlets in the city of Leuven, which also invites tourists to discover the city by bicycle.

#### 4. Conclusion: high potential for reaching the SDGs, or just a 'small cog in the machine'?

The high potential of ESIs as SSE actors for reaching the SDGs has been shown in the previous section. All the ESIs contribute in different ways to the realization of a number of SDGs. This does not come as a surprise, since by definition they incorporate social and environmental goals, just as Agenda 2030 does on a global scale. Our closer examination of ESIs' potential to promote the realization of SDG 8 and its targets has also yielded positive results. Several targets are addressed in the work of the ESIs and their new ecosocial practices. They improve the indicators of several targets of SDG 8 on a community or local level. In some cases, such as VELO in Leuven, due to a strong alliance with the city, the university, and other public institutions, the positive effects are impressive. VELO definitely has had and continues to have a great influence on reaching the SDGs and other sustainability goals on a local and regional level. But some of the younger and smaller organizations, such as the social cooperative Vinterra in Italy, have also created a number of jobs for underprivileged people who had previously depended on subsidized work for years.

Despite these positive examples, ESIs as part of SSE could have a much greater influence on the future of work and employment, and make a much larger contribution to the promotion of SDG 8. There are certain constraints when it comes to fulfilling the potential of ESIs. What is needed is the political will to support SSE actors such as ESIs, including in the field of labour market and unemployment policies. Organizations such as ESIs can serve as good examples and models for such a policy change. Based on this cross-national case study, three policy recommendations can be identified. First, whole sectors, such as the cooperative sector within SSE, could be promoted in a more coherent and longer-lasting way. This would also mean strengthening collective action and helping to change the focus from mere job creation and employability to more sustainable work (cf. Montt, Fraga, and Harsdorff 2018). Second, on an organizational level, as shown in our results, certain types of SSE actors such as ESIs need more direct financial support. Their integrative ecosocial basis should be valued and acknowledged much more, and it would require breaking the silos between different policy sectors. In the future, all organizations that support unemployed people could be more deliberately based on such an ecosocial approach in order to prevent the controversial impacts of job creation based on unsustainable economic growth. Employment policies should rather support production and participation possibilities that meet local needs in an ethical way, as is the case in SSE (see Utting 2015, 2018). Third, on an individual level, specific programmes for unemployed people, based on SSE networks and organizations, could combine social and environmental goals. In some cases, more leeway for unemployed people to choose places to volunteer while receiving unemployment allowance would strengthen active citizenship and support organizations such as ESIs at the same time. To sum up, the suggested measures would help to activate the high potential of ESIs as SSE actors regarding the full implementation of SDG 8.

#### Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the Academy of Finland for funding the research project. We also appreciate our colleagues in the networks, and the participants in the ESIs who provided us with access to the field and the data. Finally, we also wish to acknowledge Merl Storr for helping us by proofreading the text.



## References

- Bazeley, Pat. 2013. *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies*. London: Sage.
- Bryman, Alan. 2007. 'The Research Question in Social Research: What Is Its Role?' *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 10 (1): 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570600655282>.
- Coates, John, and Mel Gray. 2012. 'The Environment and Social Work: An Overview and Introduction'. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 21 (3): 230–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00851.x>.
- Cook, Sarah, Kiah Smith, and Peter Utting. 2012. *Green Economy or Green Society? Contestation and Policies for a Fair Transition*. Occasional Paper 10. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- Deacon, Bob. 2016. 'Assessing the SDGs from the Point of View of Global Social Governance'. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* 32 (2): 116–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21699763.2016.1198266>.
- Defourny, Jacques, and Marthe Nyssens. 2013. 'Social Innovation, Social Economy and Social Enterprise: What Can the European Debate Tell Us?' In *The International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*, edited by Frank Moulaert, Diana MacCallum, Abid Mehmood, and Abdelillah Hamdouch, 40–52. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Elsen, Susanne. 2017. 'Community-Based Economy and Ecosocial Transition'. In *The Ecosocial Transition of Societies: The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy*, edited by Aila-Leena Matthies and Kati Närhi, 54–70. Oxford: Routledge.
- . 2018. 'Solidarische Ökonomie'. *Blätter der Wohlfahrtspflege* 165 (6): 206–10. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.5771/0340-8574-2018-6-206>.
- . 2019. *Eco-Social Transformation and Community-Based Economy*. London: Routledge.
- Gough, Ian. 2017. *Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Hargreaves, Tom, Noel Longhurst, and Gill Seyfang. 2013. 'Up, Down, Round and Round: Connecting Regimes and Practices in Innovation for Sustainability'. *Environment and Planning A* 45 (2): 402–20. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a45124>.
- Harrikari, Timo, and Pirkko-Liisa Rauhala. 2019. *Towards Glocal Social Work in the Era of Compressed Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Helne, Tuula, and Tuuli Hirvilampi. 2015. 'Wellbeing and Sustainability: A Relational Approach'. *Sustainable Development* 23 (3): 167–75.
- Hickel, Jason, and Giorgos Kallis. 2019. 'Is Green Growth Possible?' *New Political Economy*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964>
- Howaldt, Jürgen, Ralf Kopp, and Michael Schwarz. 2015. 'Social Innovations as Drivers of Social Change: Exploring Tarde's Contribution to Social Innovation Theory Building'. In *New Frontiers in Social Innovation Research*, edited by Alex Nicholls, Julie Simon, and Madeleine Gabriel, 29–51. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Kemp, Susan. 2011. 'Recentring Environment in Social Work Practice: Necessity, Opportunity, Challenge'. *British Journal of Social Work* 41 (6): 1198–210. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr119>.
- Kuckartz, Udo. 2013. *Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice and Using Software*. London: Sage.
- Littig, Beate, and Markus Spitzer. 2011. 'Arbeit neu: Erweiterte Arbeitskonzepte im Vergleich:

- Literaturstudie zum Stand der Debatte um erweiterte Arbeitskonzepte'. Arbeitspapier 229. Düsseldorf: Hans-Böckler-Stiftung. [https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p\\_arbp\\_229.pdf](https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_arbp_229.pdf).
- Lyons, Karen, and Corinne May-Chahal. 2017. 'Glocal Social Work'. *European Journal of Social Work* 20 (1): 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1279253>.
- Matthies, Aila-Leena, and Kati Närhi, eds. 2017. *The Ecosocial Transition of Societies: The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy*. New York: Routledge.
- Matthies, Aila-Leena, Ingo Stamm, Tuuli Hirvilampi, and Kati Närhi. 2019. 'Ecosocial Innovations and Their Capacity to Integrate Ecological, Economic and Social Sustainability Transition'. *Sustainability* 11. <https://doi.org/doi:10.3390/su11072107>.
- McKinnon, Jennifer, and Margaret Alston, eds. 2016. *Ecological Social Work: Towards Sustainability*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Mehmood, Abid, and Constanza Parra. 2013. 'Social Innovation in an Unsustainable World'. In *The International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*, edited by Frank Moulaert, Diana MacCallum, Abid Mehmood, and Abdelillah Hamdouch, 53–66. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Montt, Guillermo, Federico Fraga, and Marek Harsdorff. 2018. 'The Future of Work in a Changing Natural Environment: Climate Change, Degradation and Sustainability'. Future of Work Research Paper Series. Geneva: International Labour Organization. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms\\_644145.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_644145.pdf).
- Moulaert, Frank, Diana MacCallum, Abid Mehmood, and Abdelillah Hamdouch, eds. 2013. *The International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Raworth, Kate. 2017. *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. London: Random House.
- Ryan, Gery W., and H. Russell Bernard. 2003. 'Techniques to Identify Themes'. *Field Methods* 15 (1): 85–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569>.
- Saldana, Johnny. 2016. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage.
- Schiederig, Tim, Frank Tietze, and Cornelius Herstatt. 2012. 'Green Innovation in Technology and Innovation Management: An Exploratory Literature Review'. *R&D Management* 42 (2): 180–92. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/j.1467-9310.2011.00672.x>.
- Seyfang, Gill, and Adrian Smith. 2007. 'Grassroots Innovations for Sustainable Development: Towards a New Research and Policy Agenda'. *Environmental Politics* 16 (4): 584–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010701419121>.
- Stamm, Ingo Peter, Tuuli Hirvilampi, Aila-Leena Matthies, and Kati Närhi. 2017. 'Ecosocial Innovations as Part of Social and Solidarity Economy: Local Models for a Sustainable Development'. *RISUS: Journal on Innovation and Sustainability* 8 (4): 200–218. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.24212/2179-3565.2017v8i4p200-218>.
- Stamm, Ingo, Aila-Leena Matthies, Tuuli Hirvilampi, and Kati Närhi. 2019. 'Labour Market and Unemployment Policies Towards Sustainability: A Cross-National Study on New Eco-Social Policies'. Unpublished paper.
- Utting, Peter, ed. 2015. *Social and Solidarity Economy: Beyond the Fringe*. London: Zed Books.
- . 2017. 'Public Policies for Social and Solidarity Economy: Assessing Progress in Seven Countries'. Geneva: International Labour Office. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/---coop/documents/publication/wcms\\_582778.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---coop/documents/publication/wcms_582778.pdf).
- . 2018. 'Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Through Social and Solidarity Economy: Incremental versus Transformative Change'. Knowledge Hub Working Paper.

Geneva: United Nations Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy.  
[http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/%28httpAuxPages%29/DCE7DAC6D248  
BOC1C1258279004DE587/\\$file/UNTFSSSE---WP-KH-SSE-SDGs-Utting-  
April2018.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/%28httpAuxPages%29/DCE7DAC6D248BOC1C1258279004DE587/$file/UNTFSSSE---WP-KH-SSE-SDGs-Utting-April2018.pdf).

van Kemenade, Tim, and Aurora A. C. Teixeira. 2017. 'Policy Stringency and (Eco-)Innovation Performance: A Cross Country Analysis'. *Journal on Innovation and Sustainability* 8 (2): 34–60. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.24212/2179-3565.2017v8i2p34-60>.

Wallimann, Isidor. 2013. *Environmental Policy Is Social Policy—Social Policy Is Environmental Policy: Toward Sustainability Policy*. New York: Springer.

———. 2014. 'Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development: Its Premises—and the Social Economy Basel Example of Practice'. *International Review of Sociology* 24 (1): 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2014.894345>.