

Paper on Values of Social Economy Organisations

This is a very tricky issue! However, it seems that there are three types of values that underpin all the actions of a social economy organisation, namely:

- Fundamental values
- Operational values
- Political values

This paper will deal with each of these sets of values in turn. Its purpose is to give an idea of the range and types of values. You may find this a useful starting point in discussing what your values are for your organisation. In discussing values, you may find it helpful not only to categorise your values as above but also to prioritise them.

It is interesting to note that often social economy organisations do not consider values to any great degree but go straight into discussions about what they want to do. This can be a mistake.

Often values are *implicit* and can be the personal values of the key people who work within the organisation but have never been discussed by others. We would suggest that there is merit in making your organisation's values the subject of discussion and come up with a set of prioritised values that are *explicit*. If this happens, stakeholders, including all staff and management members, gain a much better understanding of the organisation and why and how it operates.

Fundamental values...

It is possible to identify nine *fundamental values* which arguably should underpin all organisations which claim to be part of the social economy. This paper draws on trans-national European research published in 1997, Key Values and Structures of Social Enterprises in Western Europe, and on Chapter 3 of Social Enterprise in Anytown (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 2003)

- 1 **Common good**
Working for the common good means having a purpose which benefits humanity and/or the planet rather than working for individual gain. Assets are held and profits used for the benefit of society.
- 2 **Co-operation**
People and organisations involved in the social economy work together for mutual benefit.
- 3 **Subsidiarity**
Subsidiarity (or decentralisation) seeks to ensure that policies and practices rest with people at the lowest, or most local possible level. This implies a preference for organisations which are appropriate to local conditions and which can be owned and controlled by local communities.
- 4 **Democracy**
Social economy organisations should have democratic structures such that each person involved in their governance shares equal rights to participate in decision-making.

- 5 **Inclusivity**
Inclusivity ensures that all persons in society have an equal right and an equal opportunity to participate in or to benefit from the social economy organisation without discrimination as to race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, political belief or social and economic disadvantage.
- 6 **Good work**
Social economy organisations will seek only to undertake work which is socially or environmentally useful and which therefore enhances the quality of life while at the same time offering acceptable rewards and working conditions.
- 7 **People-centred**
Addressing the needs and wishes of people is the primary task of social economy organisations rather than serving the interests of capital. Performance will therefore be measured in terms of impact on people and on society while the role of capital will be to serve the interests of people and of the planet.
- 8 **Sustainability**
The social economy ensures that its work and practices safeguard both human and ecological diversity and the resources of the planet for future generations. (Adopting environmentally sustainable policies and practices is often expressed as a specific objective with very clear activities against which performance may be measured.)
- 9 **Accountability**
Social economy organisations accept that they shall be accountable both to their own stakeholders and to the wider community.

Operational values...

Analysis of social accounts produced reveals a number of *operational values* which may be adopted by social economy organisations and which guide the way in which they seek to behave from day to day. Some of those which most commonly recur are (in no order of priority):

- 1 **Partnership**
Social economy organisations seek to work in partnership with many other agencies in order to achieve their objectives. (Partnership working is sometimes expressed as a specific objective.)
- 2 **Professionalism**
Social economy organisations aim to be professional in their work and approach.
- 3 **Quality**
Social economy organisations aim not only to undertake work of the highest quality but to apply a quality standard to all that they do.
- 4 **Innovation/Creativity/Risk-taking**
Social economy organisations aim to be innovative (or creative) in all that they do and therefore are willing to take risks.

- 5 **Commitment to a local area**
Social economy organisations which are linked to one particular locality aim to demonstrate their commitment to that place and to be seen as belonging to it.
- 6 **Openness/accessibility/approachability**
Social economy organisations will seek to ensure that no barriers prevent people from accessing their services. (This operational value follows from the *fundamental value of inclusivity* and is often linked directly to specific objectives or activities.)
- 7 **Trust**
Social economy organisations will seek to build relations of trust with all those stakeholders with whom they interact on a regular basis.
- 8 **Participation**
Social economy organisations will ensure that their stakeholders both have the opportunities and are encouraged to participate in the democracy of the organisation. (This value is often expressed as an objective with some very specific activities against which performance may be measured.)
- 9 **Valuing the individual**
Social economy organisations respect and value the individual and tailor their practices and services accordingly. This is perhaps a controversial or contradictory value for the social economy which would seem to value the collective over the individual. However, it could mean 'seeing' the individual as part of the 'whole'.
- 10 **Listening**
Social economy organisations listen to what their stakeholders have to say and respond, even if they do not accept or agree with what is being said.
- 11 **Fair trade**
Social economy organisations will seek to ensure that their trading relations are based on fairness; and some will try and ensure that they always use 'fair trade' suppliers where these exist.
- 12 **Caring**
Social economy organisations will seek to care for the people within the organisation as well as those it seeks to serve. (This value is usually expressed as a specific objective to do with being a good employer or a good manager of human resources.)
- 13 **Celebration**
Social economy organisations will celebrate achievements as part of their caring and sharing approach.

Political values...

Political values may vary substantially depending on the organisation. Here are some generic examples.

- 1 **Favouring the most vulnerable in society**
Social economy organisations may wish to declare that they will always work on the side of the most vulnerable in preference to aiding the more able.

- 2 **Distribution of wealth**
Organisations working in the social economy may want to work towards a more even distribution of wealth and resources within society.
- 3 **Equity or social justice**
Working towards a more fair and equitable society – socially, economically and politically.