

# Pro-Innovative Orientation of Polish Social Enterprises: The Empirical Perspective

Agata Sudolska and Monika Chodorek

*Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Gagarina 13a, Torun, Poland*

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**Abstract** Contemporary times require an entrepreneurial approach to social problems. As the consequence social enterprises have emerged as a new type of organization which despite its non-profit character is treated as a fully entrepreneurial organization. As social enterprises adopt business principles while providing social goods or services, it has to develop an orientation that enables not only to survive, but also to compete in the contemporary environment. The paper is an attempt to contribute to the research in the field of social enterprises activities by examining their attitudes towards innovations. The main purpose of the paper is an attempt to assess pro-innovative orientation of Polish social enterprises. The paper addresses two tasks. The first part of the paper provides short theoretical overview of the idea and nature of social enterprise. As the theoretical analysis presented in the paper is exemplified with the empirical study, the second part of the paper presents the research findings which indicate the manifestations of social enterprises pro-innovative orientation. Based on the conducted research, we attempt to identify how social enterprises understand innovations, what kind of innovations they introduce. Finally, we attempt to connect the fact of creating innovations with pro-innovative behaviors of social enterprise employees.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises have appeared as a new significant phenomenon responding the need to introduce an entrepreneurial approach to solving social problems. Despite the lack of universal definition of social enterprise, the term is increasingly used to describe the organizations that are created specifically to pursue social goals (Thomson and Doherty 2006; Defourny and Nyssens, 2008). Social enterprises are characterized not only by sociality, but also by market and innovation orientation (Nichols and Cho, 2006; Weerawardena and Sullivan Mort, 2012).

With the increasing interest in social enterprises concept, considerable attention has been placed on their nature and role for the society. However, although social innovations are said to be innovative because of their nature, the issue concerning their pro-innovative orientation and innovations created by this type of entity has received limited attention. Thus we suggest that there is a need for an in-depth examination of this issue. Accordingly, in this paper we look at the aspects related to pro-innovative approach and attitude towards all kinds of novelty in social enterprise operating in Poland. Throughout

the paper we refer mostly to a social cooperative as the most common form of a social enterprise in Poland. Following Weerawardena and Sullivan Mort (2012) we assume that social enterprises operating in highly competitive environment tend to adopt an innovative posture in order to acquire needed resources and cover their costs. Bearing in mind the uncertainty concerning social enterprises financial situation (revenues coming from differentiate sources), we argue that they need to adopt entrepreneurial posture which, among other, involve pro-innovative orientation.

Given the fact that several authors agree on the view that nowadays enhancing any organization's ability to create innovations seem to be an essential process for its success, survival and renewal as well as an important way for achieving advantages over competitors (Dess and Lumpkin, 2005; Kaplan and Warren, 2010), in our paper we search for at the manifestations of such activities in social enterprises operating in Poland.

The paper consists of two parts: the theoretical grounding and the empirical research. The theoretical part, first of all, outlines the concept of social enterprise and its pro-innovative orientation.

The empirical part of the paper presents the manifestations of social enterprises pro-innovative orientation. It also discusses how the innovations introduced in analyzed social enterprises influence their employees' pro-innovative behaviors. As the outcome of the conducted research we provide social enterprises managers with the knowledge concerned the activities in the field of innovations carried out by other entities from this sector. We believe that our findings provide also managerial implications referring to enhancing employees commitment to creating innovations.

## 2 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Social enterprise idea has emerged as an answer to several complex issues facing contemporary world. Due to its focus on providing benefits to different groups in society, social enterprise is perceived as ideal for addressing the global concerns of environment, healthcare, education, economic growth and poverty alleviation (Akinyemi, Dilyard, Anderson and Schroeder, 2013).

Due to diversity of approaches to describe the nature of social enterprise, the term is used in different ways in various European countries. Based on the Social Business Initiative document prepared by the European Commission (2011), we define social enterprise as a business in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders.

The nature of social enterprise combines two attributes. The first concerns entrepreneurship and the second sociality. Entrepreneurship aspect refers to conducting an activity of economic character and thus creating value for the market. This attribute requires being innovative and effective, because without innovativeness and effectiveness we can't speak of entrepreneurship. On the other hand, the aspect concerning social issues directly refers to the mission of social enterprises that is preventing social exclusion through occupational and economic activation of particular groups (Hausner and Lauriusz, 2008, p. 9).

The European Commission applies the term 'social enterprise' to embrace three types of organizations. First are those, for who the social objective of the common good is the reason for the commercial activity. Second are those, where profits are mainly reinvested with a view to achieving this

social objective. And the third group involve those, where the method of organisation or ownership system reflects the enterprise's mission, using democratic or participatory principles or focusing on social justice.

In considering the issue of social enterprise nature, it is necessary to point out three objectives that a social enterprise is to reach. Firstly, every social enterprise has a mission concerning the help for the disadvantaged people who want to integrate with the society. The second objective that a social enterprise has to reach concerns the need to generate profits in order to survive on the market and be able to carry out its mission. Obviously in case of social enterprises the desire for the financial success is secondary, but they need to be profitable to survive. Although they focus on meeting social needs and stimulating social change, they have to find different resources (human resources, capital, knowledge etc.) for their business (Santos, 2012). The final objective refers to the 'political' field. The reason for social enterprises existence is also to show that local authorities implement a social policy in the region.

Taking into account the aforementioned, we can say that the term "social enterprise" is very broad and encompasses a lot of issues. The fact that it combines the features of business and non-governmental organization as well as accomplishes both social and financial goals suggests that social enterprise is of a hybrid nature. Moreover, nowadays social enterprises are no longer perceived as charities. They are the organizations having sustainable business models that aim at long-term survival, are profitable and thus deliver social value.

## 3 PRO-INNOVATIVE ORIENTATION OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

### 3.1 The Nature of Innovation

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the issues related to organizations' ability to innovate. All contemporary organizations are supposed to make several efforts aimed at finding new opportunities to enhance their effectiveness in the challenging environment. Caring out the activities focused on supporting any kind of novelty is equated with fostering pro-innovative orientation of an organization. Implementing pro-innovative orientation refers to development, assimilation and utilization of new knowledge as well as finding new

opportunities and creating the atmosphere favorable to all kinds innovations (Isaken, Lauer, Ekvall and Britz, 2000-2001, Sudolska 2012). The reference literature presents wide range of definitions of innovations. In general innovation is any change appearing in different areas of the organization's activities, developed in or outside the organization, that introduces progress while compared to the existing state (Damanpour 1996). What is of great importance, innovation represents newness to particular organization that is concerned. In other words, it means novelty to the organization itself rather than in absolute sense (Osborne and Flynn, 1997; De Dreu, 2006). Another relevant issue concerns the fact that innovation is both a process and an outcome. Baregheh, Rowley and Sambrook (2009) who have conducted a comprehensive analysis of several innovation definitions argue that innovation is a multi-stage process in which organizations transform their ideas into new or improved products, processes in order to advance and differentiate themselves successfully in the market (Baregheh et al. 2009). Finally, what seems to be of great significance, innovation involves discontinuous change resulting in transformation of organizational capabilities (Osborne and Flynn, 1997; Baregheh et al., 2009).

The complexity of innovation nature combined with the variations in the way it occurs in different organizations results in difficulty to provide clear-cut typology of innovations. Innovation is multifaceted and can take many forms. However, based on extensive literature review, we assume that the main innovation types comprise the following: technological product and process innovations (TPP), organizational and marketing innovations, social innovations and business models (paradigm) innovations (Damanpour 1996; Oslo Manual, 2005; Bessant and Tidd, 2011). Certainly, introducing above mentioned types of innovations is observed both in firms and social enterprises, although in case of social enterprise we observe organizational and social innovations more often than other types.

### **3.2 Pro-innovative Orientation of Social Enterprise**

While considering how innovative social enterprises are we may take the view from the perspective of other sector. From such perspective all social enterprises are innovative. It refers the fact that social enterprises are practicing innovative ways of doing business through introducing social issues into their business models. On the other hand, if viewed

from within the sector, then some of them are just imitating others or being pressured by their environment rather than aiming to adapt or change current conditions (Westal, 2007). However, discussing the issue we need to remember that in the literature innovation is also defined as intentional introduction and application within a group or organization of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new to the relevant unit of adoption, designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, the organization or the society (West and Farr, 1990; De Dreu, 2006). Therefore any novelty appearing in social enterprises deserves attention and appreciation.

While discussing social enterprise pro-innovative orientation, we need to remember that this type of entity is characterized by high level of autonomy. Due to this, social enterprises are focused on searching for new initiatives and solutions. Moreover, as they want to survive in highly unstable environment, they are forced to seek for all kind of novelty which may result as innovation. This pro-innovative orientation is also a consequence of another characteristics of social enterprise nature – taking economic risk, strongly stimulating creativity and openness to change.

Pro-innovative orientation of an organization involves wide spectrum of components. Among pertinent issues fostering organization's pro-innovative orientation the relevant literature points out: entity strategy mission clarity, leadership, clarity of innovation process, organizational culture and values, people's skills, focus on employees growth and development, challenging and interesting employee tasks, employee feeling of autonomy, positive interpersonal exchange, intellectual stimulation by debating and discussing new ideas, involving employees in new projects allows them to present their creativity and skills in some novel areas, freedom, trust/openness of employees (Ekvall 1996, Isaken et. al, 2000-2001; Isaken and Lauer, 2002; Loewe and Dominiquini, 2006; Hunter, Bedell and Mumford, 2007).

The outcomes of pro-innovative orientation of any kind of organization are different types of innovations. As highlighted by Westal (2007), innovation in social enterprise refers to new products of new qualities, new methods of organization and/or production, new production factors such as atypical employment and involvement in governance, mixing voluntary and paid employment, new market relations such as the changing welfare mix, new legal forms (Westal, 2007, p. 5). In the following part of the paper we present the attitudes

of Polish social enterprises towards innovations and several types of innovations introduced by them.

## 4 RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHOD

In the paper, we study social enterprises pro-innovative orientation by addressing the following academic questions:

- How do Polish social enterprises understand innovations?
- What kind of innovations do Polish social enterprises introduce (is there any type more frequently appearing than others)?
- What is the result of introducing innovations in terms of employees' and participant pro-innovative behaviors?

The study was the element of the comprehensive research project on issues concerning innovations creation and implementation in companies and social economy enterprises operating in Poland. The research is based on statistical analysis of data coming from a survey conducted with CATI technique on a sample 140 social enterprises within the project "Innovation among people. The analysis of the innovations creation and implementation in companies and social economy enterprises operating in Poland". The project was funded by the Polish National Science Centre grant on the decision number DEC-2013/11/B/HS4/00691.

The sample of analyzed social entities consisted of 40 centers of social integration and 100 social cooperatives, all such entities operating in Poland. The respondents were mainly heads of cooperatives (52,9%) and directors of centers of social integration (13,6%), managers (7,1%), project coordinators (3,6%) and other employees. Majority of investigated social enterprises operate in the field of services (106), few deal with building services (21) and trade (18). Only 4 of investigated social enterprises conduct industrial activities, 7 represent IT sector and the rest described their field as "other".

Examining the aforementioned academic questions needed: listing the symptoms of pro-innovative orientation and behaviors, listing the symptoms of innovations, listing the indications of the results of the implemented innovations in the employee behavior area.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 Manifestations of Social Enterprises Pro-innovative Orientation

As the main empirical objective of the paper is to assess pro-innovative orientation of Polish social enterprises, first we provide details on the study concerning the symptoms of such orientation of the analyzed entities. The results are given in table 1.

Table 1: Symptoms of social enterprises pro-innovative orientation.

Symptoms of pro-innovative orientation	Number of enterprises Sample 140
In our organization people being under reintegration process participate in creating innovations	67
In our organization innovations are proposed by employees regardless of their position	49
In our organization innovations result mainly from the cooperation with other entities	45
Innovations are proposed by different teams in our organization	40
In our organization innovations are proposed by employees who are responsible for this	36
Managing innovations is the central element of our strategy	28
In our organization there are teams dedicated to creating innovations	19

To examine pro-innovative orientation of the sampled entities we investigated several issues related to their approach towards innovations. In general, the minority of respondents really focus on innovations. Half of them involve their "clients" (people who they provide social services with) into the process of creating innovations. This directly result from above mentioned nature of such entities. About one third of the enterprises seem to activate their employees to think about and propose some innovations. According to the research findings, in these enterprises innovations are proposed by employees regardless of their position. Also in about one third of analyzed organizations innovations are proposed by different teams, not necessarily people who are expected to do so. Such attitudes probably result from management as well as employees' consciousness concerning the need to be innovative

in order to diversify their income streams or just be more efficient and profitable. The data presented in table 1 proves also that one third of research participants focus on creating innovations based on external sources. As they declare that in their entities innovations result mainly from the cooperation with other organizations, we assume that they understand the necessity of market learning. In this context social enterprises activities are similar to for-profit organizations. Presented data also indicates that only 28 of sampled enterprises focus on innovations as the main component of their strategy. However, this is not surprising as social enterprises first of all focus on delivering social value and solving social problems. Only some of them adopt market businesslike principles.

An important aspect of conducted research was to obtain the information regarding perceiving the nature of innovations by representatives of Polish social enterprises. As said before, innovation is multi-dimensional and complex issue so it might be understood differently by several people. Representatives of studied social enterprises were asked to mark to what extent they agree with the descriptions presented in table 2.

Table 2: Understanding of innovations in Polish social enterprises- Means, Standard Deviations.

The meaning of „innovation”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Innovation means going beyond existing patterns of thinking and acting	76,4	23,14
Innovation is every outcome of human creativity	67,3	23,55
Innovation is the activity contributing to environment protection	50,2	31,70
Innovation is the activity contributing to people’s life quality improvement	77,9	20,31
Innovation is the activity resulting in employees work conditions improvement	71,9	22,87
Innovation means new or improved products	74,8	25,84
Innovation means new or improved technologies	72,8	29,73
Innovation is every activity enabling organization to perform better (more effectively, more efficiently)	76,0	22,28
Innovation is the activity distinguishing the organization from others	67,4	25,00

Data shown in table 2 suggest that the phrase “innovation” is understood by the majority of analyzed entities as the activity that contributes to people’s life quality improvement (77,9). However, also in most of investigated social enterprises innovation is perceived as something that exceeds existing patterns of thinking and acting (76,4) or as any activity that enables the organization to perform better (76). The aforementioned meaning of innovation pointed out by our respondents are very general. On the other hand, it suggests that they are very open-minded while having such point of view.

What is interesting, the survey has shown that the social enterprises very frequently perceive innovations in more traditional sense - as new or better products (74,8) or new or better technologies (72,8). Such approach is much closer to the way how companies perceive innovations. Moreover, majority of research participants understand innovations also as the activity resulting in employees work conditions improvement (71,9). Based on presented results, we can say that in case of analyzed social enterprises it is difficult to find a typical way of understanding innovations (the differences are not significant and standard deviation is high). We assume that it results from aforementioned hybrid nature of such organization types.

However, the main research problem was discovering the outcomes of social enterprises in terms of innovations. Thus we asked enterprises representatives what types of innovations have appeared in their organizations for the last three years. The obtained data is shown in table 3.

The data presented in table 3 shows that the majority of entities focus on the solutions aimed at work conditions improvements (103). They also pay much attention to the necessity of implementing individual solutions referring to work and organization and time schedules (101), solutions enabling employees to reconcile between work and personal life (96) as well as the necessity to implement the activities focused on employees’ personal and professional development (95).

It is evident that for social enterprises the main field of attention while implementing innovations is related to their social capital. As they are originally established to solve social problems, it seems natural that they concentrate on the aspects concerning their social capital which is the foundation of their existence. Although they introduce some product or market innovations (69, 67), their main focus is on another area. This proves that even though social enterprises have to generate profits in order to survive, delivering social value is their priority.

Moreover, we need to remember that the financial outcomes of a social enterprise result from the efforts of its participants and employees. We assume that due to this correctness, social enterprises heads most of all try to satisfy their participants and employees by implementing some innovations of social character. What is also interesting a lot of investigated entities (79) for the last three years also have introduced some innovations concerned with changing their internal and external communication.

Table 3: Innovations appearing in social enterprises.

Type of innovation that has appeared for the last three years	Number of enterprises Sample 140
Implementation of individual solutions concerning work organization and time schemes	101
Implementation of activities aimed at employees' personal and professional development	95
Implementation of solutions aimed at employees' work conditions improvement	103
Implementation of solutions aimed at employees' social and life conditions improvement	76
Implementation of solutions enabling employees reconciliation between work and personal life	96
Changes in the field of internal and external communication	79
Market innovations	67
Product innovations	69
Technological innovations	48
Strategic innovations	52

As proved by presented research findings, analyzed social enterprise concentrate mostly on internal social innovations (called also innovations at the workplace) which are perceived as a restoration of an organization directed at employees and their relationships, leading to more efficient functioning of an organization and the opportunity to develop and implement any talents appearing within them (Jędrych, 2013). Here, it is important to say that social enterprises' human capital is very diversified, taking into account such variables as education, qualifications, abilities, motivation to work or temperament. That is another reason to focus on integrating people within such entity and paying attention to their feelings and behaviors concerning the workplace.

## 5.2 Innovations versus Pro-innovative Employee Behaviors

Another research problem was to identify how the innovations introduced in the studied social enterprises influence the behavior of their employees and participants. The collected data collected enabled us also to calculate Pearson correlation coefficients between the introduced innovations and chosen manifestations of pro-innovative orientation of social enterprises' employees and participants. The obtained correlations are given in table 4.

The data presented in table 4 verify the link between the fact that organization's management implements changes aimed at employees and participants personal and professional development and the low level of employees resistance towards changes. There is no doubt that people's fear of changes is one of the most significant obstacles while implementing innovation process. Therefore, overcoming employees and participants' resistance towards novelty becomes a priority for social entities who want to survive and increase their performance. Moreover, as evident from the data shown in table 4, there is quite high correlation between implementing innovations of strategic character (e.g. building strategic networks with other organizations) and the low level of employees resistance towards changes. We assume that implementing "pro-employees" and "pro-participants" innovations makes them aware of the benefits resulting from openness to novelty. This seem to be a good direction to stimulate pro-innovative attitudes of people.

The analysis of presented correlations indicates also that implementing innovations aimed at employees and participants personal and professional development is positively correlated with the fact that innovations are proposed by employees and participants regardless of their tasks and position and the fact that employees and participants engage in implementing ideas proposed by others. Having to bear in mind that today innovations occur only as the result of common work of different actors who are able and eager to cooperate, we perceive this as the prove of developing pro-innovative orientation of analyzed social enterprises.

The data given in table 4 verify also the link between implementing innovations in the field of internal and external communication and the fact that employees and participants are not afraid of showing criticism. This is particularly important as successful implementation of any innovation requires discussion and confrontation of different

points of view. Thus employees and participants have to feel free to present their opinions, even if they are critical. It is also indisputable that while people feel satisfied at the workplace, they are more likely to take others' negative feedback as the opportunity to learn and change. Thus, the innovations can appear more frequently.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficients between innovations and employees pro-innovative behaviors.

	Low level of change resistance	Innovations are proposed by employees regardless of their position	Employees engage in implementing ideas proposed by others	Employees are not afraid of showing criticism	Managers share with employees both good and bad information	Relations between employees are positive
A	.180	.135	.502	.167	.215	.068
B	.505	.636	.545	.338	.333	.311
C	.064	.205	.187	.120	.209	.239
D	.481	.641	.190	.515	.257	.085
E	-.04	.156	.175	.147	.270	.072
F	.172	.211	.211	.603	.312	-.01
G	.138	.243	.480	.225	.253	.141
H	.120	.234	.161	.142	.116	-.03
I	.071	.313	-.01	.206	.099	-.01
J	.677	.545	.249	.518	.317	.260

- A - Changes of work organization and time schemes;
- B - Employees' personal and professional development;
- C - Changes employees' work conditions improvement;
- D - Employees' social and life conditions improvement;
- E - Employees reconciliation between work and personal life improvement;
- F - Changes of internal and external communication;
- G - Market innovations;
- H - Product innovations;
- I - Technological innovations;
- J - Strategic innovations.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, our findings advance the research on social enterprises in different ways. To our knowledge, the presented study is one of the few investigations concerning the issues of innovations and pro-innovative orientation of social enterprises in general, particularly located in Poland.

First of all, the research findings allow us to assess pro-innovative orientation of analyzed entities. Given research findings lead us to the statement that pro-innovative orientation of studied enterprises is at "intermediate level". Investigated manifestations proved that Polish social enterprises are not really advanced at focusing on innovations within their strategies and everyday activities.

On the other hand our findings prove that analyzed social enterprises are quite active in the field of introducing workplace innovations. Majority of them are oriented on solutions concerning work organization, personal and professional development of their employees and participants or solutions aimed at work conditions improvement. We assume that such focus results from the nature on social entities but also from the consciousness that satisfied workers are the most valuable assets for any organization. As proved by presented findings, employees and participants of social enterprise who perceive the innovations appearing in the enterprises as good and valuable for them (and thus feel appreciated) become more active in terms of pro-innovative behaviors.

Having to bear in mind that analyzed entities are not really active in introducing product and market innovations, we assume that they lack abilities concerning market analysis. This naturally results from the nature of this type of organizations. Thus we propose that Polish social enterprises need to concentrate on developing their market analysis skills to become more competitive and profitable.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations of our study. First of all, the collected data enabling the assessment of Polish social enterprises pro-innovative orientation is based on opinions of the selected employee of every organization. In spite of the fact that we attempted to conduct the interviews with a social enterprises representatives who were able to offer the necessary knowledge concerning the analyzed entity, there is always a risk that the person has presented a subjective picture of the enterprise situation. Secondly, we are aware of the fact that while describing the manifestations of pro-innovative orientation of investigated entities we used limited amount of characteristics that can be

used to do it. As enhancing organization's pro-innovative orientation involves wide range of issues, this study inspires us for in-depth investigations, not only with a use of quantitative methods, but also based on the technique of free-form interview, participatory observation or focus group interviews with the employees. Among implications of our study and the problems inspiring for further research we point out the issue of motivating social enterprises employees and participants to engage in the activities proving their consciousness and eagerness in the field of creating different types of innovations, particularly product and market innovations which are said to be the foundation of modern sustainable organization. We assume that the importance of being innovative and competitive entity implies the need to search for the ways of influencing employees pro-innovative behaviors.

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