

Chapter 49

ECO-SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

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Introduction

A transition to an equitable and sustainable degrowth society (D’Alisa et al., 2015) calls for a re-thinking of conceptualisations of the economy and of the enterprise as well as for practical changes on the ground. While some—such as Fotopoulos [see [Chapter 44](#)]
—have advocated abolishing private property, markets and money altogether, we take a more practical view. We envision seeds of the future by looking at enterprises and forms of provisioning in the here-and-now that do not comply with the mainstream model of the firm [[Chapter 19](#)], nor do they mesh easily within the capitalist growth paradigm.

The chapter opens with a discussion of mainstream and alternative conceptualisations of the enterprise and of the economy. Next, we turn to an overview of existing forms of eco-social enterprises and of their framings within different discourses and schools of thought. After giving some examples, we discuss five dimensions of a broad definition of eco-social enterprise, based on the literature and our own empirical research.

The economy and the enterprise in orthodox and alternative economics

A central part of the narrative of orthodox economic theory is the enterprise as a capitalist firm operating in a generalised and abstract market and producing goods and services to be consumed by utility maximising consumers and measured in money terms. Firms are assumed to be guided by self-interest and their success is measured by the scale of annual profits flowing to owners. They are also expected to grow in terms of output and assets and to aim for efficiency, seen as maximising outputs and minimising inputs. The economy, in this discourse, is the world where such firms operate and create wealth. In this chapter, we will refer to such an ontological perspective as ‘market logic’. The theory of the firm, and the wider perspective of which it is a part, have been criticised for decades [see [Chapter 19](#)]. Orthodox economists can be found offering critiques (e.g., Ackerman and Nadal, 2004; Hill and Myatt, 2010: 46–168). Others, writing from more heterodox positions, have emphasised the role of unexamined assumptions in shaping the orthodox economic narrative of the firm.

Most notably, Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]) criticised the narrative of a beneficial, self-regulating and naturally emerging global market, divorced from local culture, geography, tradition, environmental constraints and power relations [[Chapter 14](#)]. His analysis drew upon critical institutionalism [[Chapter 3](#)], history and cultural anthropology to discredit the assertion that humans are inherently prone to

profit-led exchange, an assumption colouring orthodox economics since Adam Smith. Polanyi (2001 [1944]: 46, 48, 60) showed that, on the contrary, historically markets were localised and embedded in wider economies that were in their turn embedded in social systems constrained by social norms and a community ethos. Such social norms were antithetic to a market logic of profit maximisation and included a belief in a just economy, or as economic historian E.P. Thompson (2013 [1963]: 72) called it, “a moral economy”. To give just one illustration of its manifestations, during uprisings in Ireland and England in the late eighteenth century, often led by women, over-priced bread, grain or butter was taken from sellers and sold at what was deemed a fair price to consumers. The proceeds were then returned by the rebels to the original sellers (Thompson, 2013 [1963]: 67–75).

The belief in a moral or social economy, immersed in social relationships and constrained by moral considerations, has never really gone away (Beer, 1953: 203; Clark and Johansson, 2016). The negative impacts of enterprises driven by the market logic on Nature and society have been recognised for some time (Kapp, 1975), and as they become clearer new critiques have been emerging. Ecofeminist political economist Mary Mellor (2006: 141) has critiqued “the economy, as it has become known in the west” as “carved out of the complexity of the whole of human and non-human existence” and as leaving aside the workings of natural systems, domestic work and non-market economies [see also [Chapter 5](#)]. Social geographers Gibson-Graham et al. (2013: 54) have argued that wealth is created by enterprises at the expense of Nature, workers, their families and wider communities, whose survival needs are implicated. Accepting this position, the argument is then that the proceeds of this wealth be re-invested in the ecosystems and communities whose wealth (often described as capitals) enabled the production in the first place.

To exit the orthodox reductionist conceptualisation of the economy, an ontological reframing has been underway for some time in heterodox economic literature. Summarising these new conceptualisations, Dash (2014: 11) describes the economy as “the ways people organise themselves collectively to make a living, and the ways a society organises itself to (re)produce its material life and well-being”. Such a reframing of the concept of the economy does not aim to subsume new realms to the market logic. On the contrary, it highlights the limitations of such an approach in the face of a complex reality and questions its ontology and epistemology (Dash, 2014). Importantly, it broadens the economy to include, on the one hand, provisioning and caring activities outside the monetised sphere—such as subsistence, do-it-yourself, care for children and elders, work in the household and neighbourhood reciprocity (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 7–15)—and, on the other hand, alternative economic entities in the liminal zones between market, State, community and commons, between profit and non-profit and between the monetised and non-monetised spheres of human provisioning (Johanisova et al., 2013: 10–11). These entities are the eco-social enterprises to which we turn next.

Eco-social enterprise: both old and new

Although often hailed as innovative and alternative, eco-social enterprises are not a new phenomenon. As part of the moral economy, they are as old as the hills. Medieval craft guilds and nineteenth-century co-operatives are historical examples (with many of the latter still operating in the twenty-first century), while traditional commons [see [Chapter 38](#)] are still very much with us. City gardens and allotments, communal burial societies, rotating credit and savings associations, informal Islamic money transfer systems, or solidarity networks enabling the livelihoods of slum dwellers in African cities (Latouche, 2007, chapter 6); these are only the tip of the iceberg of ‘another economy’ that remains invisible from the vantage point of the mainstream economics. As demonstrated in a case study from the Philippines, once the economy is reframed to include non-market and other alternative provisioning pathways and livelihoods, such existing diverse and non-capitalist economies can sometimes be rescued from oblivion (Gibson et al., 2010).

At the same time, there has been a burgeoning of new eco-social enterprises (often with a co-operative organisational structure). These can include: village transport systems; local food markets and community supported agriculture schemes; local currency systems and barter networks; communal organic farms and ecosystem regeneration initiatives; community radios, schools, gardens and cafés; work-integration social enterprises; producer, consumer, credit and renewable energy co-operatives; trading branches of non-profits; community land trusts; left-wing political squatters' communities; social banks, and many others. Although at times conceptualised as part of a third or fourth sector (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2016: 38, 43), eco-social enterprises blur distinctions between sectors and can form hybrids, mutual linkages and umbrella groups.

Since the pioneering work mapping the alternative economy (e.g. Douthwaite, 1996), research interest has increased dramatically. Regional and national overviews have been emerging, e.g. Conill et al. (2012) for Catalonia or Welzer et al. (2014) for Germany. International research networks have also sprung up, such as the EMES International Research Network (<http://emes.net>) and the Community Economies Collective (CEC) and Community Economies Research Network (CERN) (www.communityeconomies.org).

What is an eco-social enterprise?

The concept itself, like much else in the field, is contested. The institutions of the alternative economy have been variously described, including designations such as: community enterprise (Douthwaite, 1996: 341), community economy (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013), (social) solidarity economy (D'Alisa et al., 2015: 154–155; Lewis and Conaty, 2012: 30–32), alternative economic spaces (Leysholn et al., 2003), social enterprise (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001), and eco-social enterprise (Johanisova and Fraňková, 2013). Of these, the discourse of social enterprise (with social economy sometimes used as a synonym) has been the most academically prolific and influential. Espoused by the EMES network and growing mainly from European intellectual roots, the concepts have entered the European Union (EU) political discourse, and organisations seen as social enterprises have garnered public funding at EU and national levels (European Commission, 2014). While defining social enterprise is an ongoing process (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2016, chapter 2), most definitions focus on three aspects: (i) democratic governance structures and stakeholder governance involvement, (ii) an explicit public benefit aim, and (iii) some restrictions on profit/surplus distribution (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; European Commission, 2014).

A weakness of the social enterprise discourse is its lack of a deeper critical approach to the mainstream economic ontology. Many texts on social enterprise accept the capitalist growth paradigm and its theoretical underpinnings and see social enterprises merely as a vehicle for generating employment and providing services to socially excluded groups. In their analysis of paths to sustainable welfare in a future degrowth society in Europe, Clark and Johansson (2016) caution against such reductionism, and against using the social enterprise concept as an instrument to legitimise neoliberal policies of privatising and out-sourcing welfare services. Rather, deeper reforms, as well as investment, is required on the part of governments to support a social economy, in the Polanyian sense, within all sectors of the economy (Clark and Johansson, 2016; Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2016: 39–42).

Others, coming from social geography and post-development perspectives, often drawing on Marxian analysis, have been explicitly critical of the mainstream economic paradigm. They seek to dismantle the hegemonic status of neoliberal discourse and to “take back the economy” (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) by researching and actively promoting non-capitalist modes of economic reproduction and alternative economic spaces (Leysholn et al., 2003: 9). The CEC and CERN website, focusing on community economies, has emerged from this stream of thought. Topics vary from analyses of

community supported agriculture (Cameron, 2015) to household work practices and traditional reciprocal and subsistence forms of provisioning (Leysholn et al., 2003, chapter 7; Gibson et al., 2010). Compared with the social enterprise model, an initiative does not have to operate in a monetised economy, be incorporated, produce and sell goods and services, or aim towards paid employment, in order to qualify as an alternative economic space or a community economy (see Johanisova and Fraňková, 2013: 117 for a fuller discussion of this).

A weakness of some of this literature is a lack of critical engagement with mainstream economic concepts, with structure, finance and governance and with environmental concerns and limits. Although this is slowly changing, the literature linking the environmental crisis with eco-social enterprise remains sparse. Kothari (2009) has repeatedly argued that an ecologically centred vision calls for multifaceted support of surviving nonindustrial livelihoods, rather than for enhancing industrialised production modes, and has been active in documenting existing alternative economic spaces in India (<http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives>). Lewis and Conaty (2012) have linked eco-social enterprise with combating climate change and progressing to a steady-state economy [Chapter 45]. Johanisova and Fraňková (2013) discuss the possible environmental dimensions of eco-social enterprises, including their financial and organisational governance structure, which arguably makes them less vulnerable to the growth imperative. Jackson and Victor (2013, chapter 4) look at community enterprises. By and large, however, in view of the rapid expansion of the movement (see e.g. the website of the RIPESS, The Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy, <http://www.ripess.org>), we may agree with Dash (2014: 6) that what we have here is a “practice in search of a theory”. Especially a theory linking eco-social enterprises with the wider social ecological economics discourse.

Five examples of eco-social enterprise

The following five examples of eco-social enterprises, taken from the literature and our own research, are a small illustration of the myriad forms such enterprises can take.

Hostětín apple-juice plant (Czech Republic)

This is an enterprise established in 2000 in a village by the Slovakian border with the aim of creating a market for locally grown rare old apple varieties. Its foundation was aided by several grants and a loan from an ethical bank. It has since been producing high quality apple juice for local and national markets. The land and building of the plant are leased from a foundation that uses the income for grant funding. The plant itself is a business enterprise owned by a local association of non-profit organisations, and retained profits are earmarked for investment into the cultural and natural biodiversity in the region (Johanisova, 2005).

Appin community co-operative (Scotland)

This is a co-operative established in 1984 by people in a rural area in Western Scotland who took over the management of the local village shop threatened by closure. It has a membership of 250 (about half the local population) each of whom pays a one-time share of £50, and is entitled to one vote at meetings. The co-operative has a charitable arm, the Appin Community Trust, which receives funds primarily from profits from the village shop. This money has been used for many local projects over the years, such as rebuilding the shop and a local bridge and reflooring the village hall. Parts of the profits also go to a medical fund managed by the Trust that supplies residents with medical equipment and care not covered by the UK National Health Service (Johanisova, 2005; McNicol, 2015).

WyeCycle (England)

This enterprise, based in Wye, started out in 1989 as a Friends of the Earth group, and ran until 2013. It gradually became financially self-sufficient, with income from local authorities and from its own trading (e.g. selling glass, paper and compost). Its focus was on waste minimisation and it organised not only a kerbside recycling service in the area, but also local food projects and a community farm (all seen as paths to waste prevention). In addition, it ran a composting scheme, a furniture reuse centre and monthly swap-days of unwanted objects. It also employed several locals, with employment and social concerns gradually becoming an explicit goal of its operation. Its legal form was “company limited by guarantee”, a non-profit business model (Johanisova, 2005). WyeCycle ended operations after the borough council signed a contract with a large commercial recycling firm.

Nayakrishi Andolon (Bangladesh)

This is an organic farmers’ movement, which originated near Tangail in central Bangladesh in 1988 and now has over 300,000 members. Its members have been giving up industrial farming to improve their communities’ health as well as soil fertility and biodiversity and to escape debt spirals that had forced many to sell their land. They have shifted from outside inputs and monoculture to composting, nitrogen-fixing plants, local varieties of crops and animal breeds and mixed cropping. An important part of the project is a seed saving network. Seeds are saved in households, with a shared seed centre in villages and several regional seed banks, storing thousands of local varieties of crop. Care for seeds requires sophisticated knowledge traditionally kept by women, and a renewal of this tradition has increased their status. From the beginning, the movement has been supported by the local non-profit organisation Policy Research for Development Alternative (UBINIG) that has facilitated knowledge sharing between the communities (<http://ubinig.org/index.php/network/userNayakrishi/english>).

Soninké blacksmiths (Mauretania)

The trade of traditional blacksmiths of the Soninké people in West Africa was largely destroyed in the early twentieth century by cheap imports from Europe. However, a small community of Soninké blacksmiths have continued to produce high-quality, low-priced axes, hoes, rakes and other tools as well as kitchen utensils for the local agricultural community in Kaedi, a town near the Senegal border. The community comprised 25 workshops with 60 master blacksmiths and 160 helpers, as of 1991 (Latouche, 2007: 142). They use cheap inputs such as scrap metal and make most of their own tools themselves. The workshops are in their own homes and wares are sold (sometimes for payment in-kind) at the local market, in the workshop or directly (i.e., made to order). Families grow their own food and supplement incomes by sales of crops, woodworking and dyeing of fabrics. Though incorporated as a co-operative since 1984, elders of wider families remain the key decision-makers (Latouche, 2007, chapter 4).

Dimensions defining an eco-social enterprise

Reflection upon and analysis of a broader range of eco-social enterprises, as exemplified above, allows key characteristics to be defined. We identify five dimensions of eco-social enterprises, drawing on existing definitions and on our own research, namely: (i) other-than-profit goals, (ii) using profits to replenish Nature and community, (iii) democratic and localised ownership and governance patterns, (iv) rootedness in place and time, and (v) non-market production, exchange or provisioning patterns.

Other-than-profit goals

As opposed to the capitalist firm, the founding documents of many eco-social enterprises contain explicit social, cultural and/or environmental aims, often interlinked. A primary non-financial motive is evident in the operations of the Hostětín, Appin and WyeCycle projects.

Similarly, the Nayakrishi communities have blended the goal of securing local livelihoods with the goal of systemic support for their natural environment, which directly provides for their sustenance in terms of food, fuel, building materials and medicine. The extractive relationship between resource (land) and producer (farmer) as assumed by the market logic gives way to another ontology: farming as a reciprocal nurturing relationship between human and natural communities. Within such a subsistence perspective (Bennholt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999) profit loses its importance or disappears altogether.

Compared with the Nayakrishi farmers, who have explicit ideological principles and are in conscious opposition to the mainstream economy, the Soninké blacksmiths are what Smith and Jehlička (2013) designate as “quiet sustainability”; there is no conscious effort to be different from or go counter to the mainstream. They do what they have always done (as members of a traditional blacksmith caste), while adapting to the present in order to sustain their livelihoods. As in many traditional commons regimes, the primary goals are sustainable and equitable livelihoods for the community, rather than profit for individual members or growth of their production.

Using profit/surplus to replenish Nature and community

As we have seen, critics have been calling for profit (or surplus) to be at least partly returned to the communities, both natural and human, that enabled its creation. Such an approach, aside from its obviously positive environmental and social implications, can also be seen as a brake on capital accumulation and the growth imperative. So what happens when an eco-social enterprise creates a financial surplus at the end of the year? This depends on its organisational structure and often also on the ethical commitment and decisions of its members. In the case of non-profit organisational structures, no profit can be distributed to members by virtue of the inner rules and institutional structure. In the case of a trading branch of a non-profit organisation, like the Hostětín apple juice plant, profits are used for public benefit as defined by the rules of the non-profit organisation.

The situation can be more ambivalent under other organisational structures, such as co-operatives. Co-operatives, and some other types of eco-social enterprise, are often able to distribute profits to members. However, if grant funding is a priority, they might decide to opt for ‘asset-lock’ status. This means that only a stipulated part of their profits can be re-distributed. In the event of the organisation closing down operations, its assets are transferred to another organisation with non-profit or asset-lock status. In the case of the Appin co-operative, its members decided to waive all dividends and use their surplus for mutually agreed local projects, beneficial to the whole community, via their Community Trust Fund. Other eco-social enterprises may discuss and negotiate the issue of surplus distribution, sometimes using it (or part of it) to support the start-up of other eco-social enterprises, or to cross-subsidise their own activities that would otherwise be financially unviable (Johanisova, 2005; Cameron, 2015).

Democratic and localised ownership and governance patterns

An important dimension of eco-social enterprises is an emphasis on democratic governance structures. This can take the form of a board of directors elected by members on a one-member-one-

vote principle (e.g. the Appin co-operative), or of a self-perpetuating board of trustees, not elected directly by members, but rather chosen to represent different stakeholders (e.g. the Hostětín project).

In some cases the two modes (elected and appointed board members) may be combined, as with community land trusts. This is a type of American and British eco-social enterprise that takes land out of the market and puts it into community ownership in order to provide affordable housing, services, or land for local farming. A community land trust will typically have one-third of its board formed by representatives of tenants, one-third by representatives of the wider community, and the last third appointed to represent the public interest (Lewis and Conaty, 2012: 90). In some eco-social enterprises, such as the Argentinian worker-occupied factory Zanón, economic democracy takes the shape of all workers taking part in decisions directly, rotating positions of responsibility and receiving the same salary (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 51–53).

Governance is closely linked to ownership and indeed many eco-social enterprises are owned by their members. As opposed to mainstream firms with distant shareholders, these are often local people committed to the enterprise on a long-term basis. A democratic governance structure combined with a lack of obligation to maximise shareholder value may enable eco-social enterprises to step out of the market logic and aspire to serve the common good.

Rootedness in place and time

All the eco-social enterprises in the case studies have a strong and long-term commitment to their local area. For example, the Soninké blacksmiths use agricultural land on a commons basis and “depending on the importance of their rights, calculated according to the land they used before” (Latouche, 2007: 145). A strong link to land is a feature of many ecosystem regeneration projects and of traditional commons regimes [[Chapter 38](#)]. Here, as with community land trusts, we often find a rootedness in time as well as in place, with land seen not as a commodity (Polanyi, 2001 [1944], chapter 15), but rather as heritage involving the obligation of stewardship on behalf of future generations.

An aspect of the localised character of many eco-social enterprises with a strong environmental dimension is economic localisation. Douthwaite (1996: 42) has termed this “short-circuiting”, while the degrowth movement speaks of “re-localisation” (see also Frankova and Johanisova, 2012; and [[Chapter 47](#)]). The idea of shortening links between producers and consumers in order to tread more lightly upon the Earth, and to rebuild local communities, lies behind many eco-social enterprise projects, especially those focused on food, e.g. the Hostětín and WyeCycle projects. It is especially evident in the Nayakrishi movement, where previously unsustainable open loops of fertiliser, seeds and pesticides have either been eliminated (pesticides) or closed (fertiliser, seeds).

Non-market production, exchange or provisioning patterns

Eco-social enterprises step out of the market logic through their commitment to other-than-profit goals and limits on profit distribution. However, many go further and operate in the non-market and even non-monetised economy. Examples of the latter are the Nayakrishi farmers and the Soninké blacksmiths growing their own food, while the blacksmiths also make their own tools. Traditional commons regimes are another vast sphere where provisioning often takes the form of subsistence.

Co-operatives, whose remit is to serve their members, rather than maximise profits, are well-placed to defy market logic. Some, like the Cooperativa Integral Catalana (CIC) operating in the Spanish province of Catalonia, straddle the non-market and non-monetised economies, with members’ shares paid in Euros, in local community currencies or by a specified number of work-hours. Konzum, a

Czech consumer co-operative, sources dairy, bakery and other products from small local producers, despite the fact that they would be cheaper from a wholesaler. The reasons given are support for local enterprises and employment in the area where its 4,000 members live. Other examples of non-market approaches might be emphasis on a fair price for producers as well as consumers, as in community supported agriculture projects, and investment focusing on socially and environmentally useful projects rather than on financial gain (Clark and Johansson, 2016), as practiced by ethical finance institutions.

Future directions

The activities, approaches and principles of eco-social enterprises appear to chime with the operational goals of social ecological economics, as suggested by Spash (2011: 360): “achieving sustained human well-being on the basis of the maintained health and functioning of Earth’s ecosystems”. However, surrounded as they are by a global economy, operating on principles that are quite different, they remain fragile and vulnerable. Therefore it is important to understand the power differentials involved [[Chapter 14](#)], and the dimension of resistance [[Chapter 17](#)], implicitly present within many eco-social enterprises. Promoting policies supportive of a social economy and economic localisation at international, national and local levels is crucial (Jackson and Victor, 2013; Clark and Johansson, 2016). So is support for an eco-social enterprise infrastructure (e.g., enabling organisations such as UBINIG, ethical finance institutions) and for their linkages and mutual support (Johanisova et al., 2013). Academically, an opportunity arises here to name and discuss the hidden assumptions behind different conceptualisations of eco-social enterprise and the epistemological and ontological implications of such assumptions (Dash, 2014). This could provide an impetus towards achieving an integrating interdisciplinary heterodox economic approach within the discipline of ecological economics (Spash, 2011).

Concluding remarks

We have discussed alternative conceptualisations of the enterprise and the economy to give an overview of existing eco-social enterprises and summary of current thinking on the topic. As existing economic entities that deviate in their goals, structure and operations from the mainstream firm discussed in economic textbooks, eco-social enterprises can be seen as important constituent parts of a future more equitable and sustainable post-growth/degrowth society. In concluding let us make three points. First, one thing that emerges from this analysis is that the term ‘eco-social enterprise’ is contested and many other concepts can be and are used to designate such projects. However, these institutions are united by the five common characteristics that we identified: other-than-profit goals, limits on surplus distribution, democratic ownership, rootedness in place and time, and non-market practices. Second, while movements explicitly espousing such principles have been to some extent registered on research radars and analysed from various perspectives, there remains a silent, other economy of non-industrialised, traditional eco-social enterprises that can equally be seen as harbingers of the future, yet can be passed over because they have strong roots in the past. Third, eco-social enterprises have been under-theorised within ecological economics, despite their strong economic and environmental dimensions. More attention to this topic would be rewarding both intellectually and in terms of expanding the imaginary regarding other enterprises and economies, more in tune with a social ecological future economy.

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