

THE PERFORMANCE OF LATVIAN SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES AND THE VISION FOR THE FUTURE

 
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Abstract

Performance is a concept which is critical to both conventional businesses as well as social enterprises. However, for the latter, performance is closely tied to social impact which social enterprises and governments supporting the social entrepreneurship field are seeking to achieve. Despite the criticality of the topic, in Latvia performance of social enterprises has not been analyzed in detail before; therefore, this study serves as a valuable starting point for discussions and evidence-based policy and also as a benchmark for future development in the field. Research results indicate that the Latvian social enterprises regard their performance across the social dimensions to be stronger, compared to their results in the business/financial dimensions. A greater balance between the social and businesses/financial performance dimensions is desirable, providing ample space for interventions aimed at strengthening the business skills and capacities of social enterprises, paying particular attention to those engaged in work integration.

Key words: social enterprise, Latvia, performance, social entrepreneurship.

Introduction

The times when social entrepreneurship was a novelty have long been gone both in the economically advanced countries where social entrepreneurship initiatives are strongly supported by governments and also in the least developed countries where this movement is propelled by the society reacting to a variety of unmet needs (Tkacz, 2016). In the context of the latter, higher social inequality (Aponete, Alvarez, & Lobato, 2019) has been established as a factor contributing to the speed of development of various social entrepreneurship initiatives. The global movement of social entrepreneurship has earned recognition, among other merits, as a tool for tackling a variety of social and economic problems (Bandyopadhyay & Ray, 2019), driving innovations (Monroe-White & Zook, 2018), and promoting sustainable development (Blagoycheva, 2019). According to the vision of Michael Porter, the world-renowned professor and author of many books and competitiveness theories, social entrepreneurship also serves as a much needed catalyst for transformation of capitalism which will inevitably result in perception of shared value creation, a particular strength of social entrepreneurs, as the new norm (Driver & Porter, 2012). However, despite the wide acknowledgement and numerous attempts to set clear conceptual boundaries to the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship, a number of 'great divides' still exist (Morris, Santos, & Kuratko, 2020), highlighting its complexity. Questions and concerns regarding the performance of social enterprises contribute to the aforementioned intricacies.

The concept of performance, which can be understood as the ability of an organization to achieve the set goals with the available resources, allows evaluation of social enterprises across both the economic and social domains. Therefore, it is better suited to the social entrepreneurship context compared to the concept of competitiveness which pertains largely to the economic goals. While the social and ecological dimensions of performance entered the traditional business world only with the rise of the stakeholder theory (Öncer, 2018), in the social entrepreneurship context these dimensions have been inherent since the very beginnings of the social entrepreneurship field. Nevertheless, social enterprises find performance management and measurement challenging due to lack of expertise, the complex interconnections between social and economic value created by social enterprises, and also due to the large diversity of operational fields where social enterprises are found, as well as due to the differences in organizational forms and size of the enterprises (Costa & Andreaus, 2021). Although due to the aforementioned reasons it would be impossible to invent a universal approach to performance measurement for social enterprises (Costa & Andreaus, 2021), academic researchers have invested considerable effort in developing and summarizing approaches of varying complexity (Lortie *et al.*, 2021; Costa & Andreaus, 2021; Öncer, 2018; Behmane, Rutitis, & Batraga, 2021; Braslina *et al.*, 2020; Braslina *et al.*, 2021; Seimuskane, Vilka, & Brekis, 2017) that would be suitable for social enterprises. However, what truly indicates how well social enterprises perform, is the social

impact (Öncer, 2018) they create. Social impact ‘...corresponds to a sustainable change in society and mirrors the effect of SEs on changing the root causes that have initiated their creation.’ (Salavou & Cohen, 2021). However, as Rangan & Gregg (2019), contend, there are two levels of social impact – the first related to the social enterprise interventions at the level of individuals and households but the second – related to permanent societal changes achieved via addressing the social problem comprehensively and gaining support from external partners (governments, social services, etc.). It is essential to recognize that the direct reach of social enterprises stretches only as far as the interventions at the household level (Rangan & Gregg, 2019). Achievement of permanent societal changes without active involvement and interest of external stakeholders would be close to impossible. While social impact is crucial, Salavou & Cohen (2021) also highlight the importance of the entrepreneurial orientation and the need to strive for balance which allows social enterprises to achieve even better results.

In Latvia, the growth of the social entrepreneurship sector has been rather moderate (Casno & Sloka, 2020) and fluctuating in response to availability of financial grants (Register, 2023). Competitiveness of social enterprises has been evaluated as insufficient (Dobele, 2015), especially for work integration social enterprises (Timofejevs *et al.*, 2021). Social enterprises have been able to increase their turnover and increase the number of their employees (Timofejevs *et al.*, 2021). However, a significant proportion of social enterprises (43%) operated with losses in 2020 (Ministry, 2022), indicating a need for policy makers to pay attention to this topic. Although employment of employees from various target groups has been steadily increasing since 2018 (Ministry, 2022), there is still left much to be desired, particularly in terms of employment of people with disabilities (Oborenko, 2022). Efforts towards development of the social entrepreneurship field are visible; however, they lack a holistic approach. Financial grants are not strategically targeted towards resolution of the most severe social problems within society. Moreover, there is a lack of a comprehensive strategy for social entrepreneurship development, detailing the targeted outcomes and actions to be taken to support their achievement. Meanwhile, the attention towards social entrepreneurship among researchers in Latvia is continuing to grow.

A significant milestone and achievement for the Latvian social entrepreneurship sector was the opportunity to take part in the European Social Enterprise Monitor survey for the first time in 2021. The results, apart many other interesting aspects, revealed that social enterprises struggled during Covid-19 largely due to decreased sales. However, many were also able to showcase their resilience by developing new offers for existing and new target groups, and digitalizing their offerings, which actually allowed to increase their revenue (Social, 2022). Among the most common barriers indicated by social enterprises were lack of financing options after starting the business, lack of qualified employees, and poor awareness of social enterprises among customers and general public (Social, 2022). Lack of financial resources among social enterprises has been also highlighted by Casno & Sloka (2023b). Furthermore, authors also accentuate the insufficiency of the technical and material base and partner networks and highlight that resource insufficiency is even more pronounced (although not significant statistically) among work integration social enterprises (Casno & Sloka, 2023 b), reflecting the additional operational challenges they face due to the specificity of their work. Among other aspects, recently researchers have also paid attention to the social entrepreneurship ecosystem (Casno & Sloka, 2023a) and the identity (Casno & Sloka, 2022) of Latvian social enterprises. However, social enterprise performance has not been previously analyzed in depth. This research provides valuable insights from the point of view of social enterprises providing practical implications, support for evidence-based policy-making, and also serving as benchmark to monitor future development of the field.

Materials and Methods

For the research purposes several methods were applied. Specifically, analysis of previous research and analysis of a survey (designed and conducted as part of a doctoral research) of Latvian social enterprise managers, applying statistical analysis methods (descriptive statistics (indicators of central tendency or location), indicators of variability (range, variance, standard deviation, standard error of mean), and independent samples t-test). The survey was distributed among Latvian social enterprises with the official status via direct e-mail and among the members (including *de facto* social enterprises) of the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia

via a newsletter. The survey was selected as the best methodological choice for this research since it allows fast and efficient collection of detailed quantitative data, which can serve as a valuable benchmark for future monitoring needs and is particularly important for evidence-based policy-making. Taking into account the time pressure of social enterprise managers, to elicit a higher rate of completed surveys, none of the survey questions were purposefully made mandatory, resulting in a varying number of valid responses but also at the same time increasing the quality of responses to the more detailed performance questions.

Four questions were used to obtain the evaluations of performance from the point of view of social enterprise managers. 1) respondents were asked to select the most appropriate statement regarding their performance within the last two years (or a shorter period of time if the organization was younger), indicating whether their performance had increased, decreased or remained the same. 2) the respondents who had indicated either a decrease or no changes in performance, were further asked to evaluate the importance of listed preventive factors to obtain insights regarding the most significant challenges. 3) and 4) respondents were also requested to evaluate their past and project their future performance across a number of performance dimensions (question adapted from Salavou & Cohen (2021)).

Overall, the survey was viewed by 94 social enterprise managers, 67 social enterprise managers took part in the survey (survey period: 25.04.2022.-21.06.2022). Although the sample is not fully representative (the overall population size of social enterprises was 202 at the time of the survey according to the Social Enterprise Register), its quality is substantially enhanced by the fact that almost half of the respondents (47.22%) were engaged in work integration, yielding valuable insights about this particular respondent group. All respondents were social enterprises with the official status (organizational form of a limited liability company). Majority (69.44%) employed 1–9 employees, operated 1–4 years (61.11%) and were located in Riga (40%) or Pierīga (20%). Respondents mostly operated in education (19.44%), services (16.67%) and health and social care (13.89%) which is an excellent fit to the overall population (Register, 2023).

Results and Discussion

Although the Covid-19 pandemic brought about challenges for many businesses in Latvia, majority of the surveyed Latvian social enterprises (68.2%) indicated that they had actually managed to improve their performance within the past two years (or a shorter period of time if the organization was younger), 25% of respondents indicated a decrease in performance while for 6.8% performance had not changed. These results largely compliment social enterprises and highlight this particular business form not only as beneficial for the wider society but also as particularly resilient and sustainable also during economically turbulent times. Furthermore, among those who had indicated an increase in performance, the proportion of respondents who were engaged in work integration was even slightly higher compared to the respondents who were not (70.6% and 63.2% respectively). Company age-wise, the respondent group in operation from one to four years, which was also most widely represented in the sample, had indicated an increase in performance most often (86.36% of all respondents in operation from one to four years). This indicates that younger social enterprises have possibly been more capable towards adapting to the digital environment and able to more effectively capitalize upon the opportunities it provides, compared to respondents with considerably more experience in the field. However, the proportion of respondents whose performance either did not change or had decreased during the past two years is still considerable (a total of 31.8%). On average, the respondents belonging to this group evaluated the recent Covid-19 pandemic as the most significant factor preventing the development of the performance of their organizations during the past two years, followed by lack of finance, and lack of government support, as reflected in Table 1.

However, a relatively high degree of variance was observed across the responses for all factors except 'Insufficient recognition of social entrepreneurship within society', indicating that the particular situations of social enterprises have been rather diverse. Overall, despite the challenges, a significant proportion of respondents were able to capitalize on the various opportunities and quickly adapt. However, from the perspective of respondents, despite the overwhelmingly positive trend in terms of cumulative performance, respondents' evaluations regarding particular performance dimensions, reveal certain strengths and weaknesses, as reflected in Table 2.

Table 1

Main indicators of descriptive statistics for the evaluations of the question “To what extent these factors have prevented the development of your organization’s performance during the past two years (or shorter period of time if your organization is younger)?”

		Covid-19 pandemic	Lack of finance / investment	Shortage of qualified workforce	Insufficient recognition of social entrepreneurship within society	Lack of government support	Shortage of knowledge / skills
N	Valid	13	13	13	13	13	13
	Missing	54	54	54	54	54	54
n/a		0	0	1	1	0	0
Mean		8.31	6.38	6.00	2.83	6.31	3.62
Standard Error of Mean		0.827	1.003	0.921	0.613	1.028	0.859
Median		10	7	6.50	2.50	7	2
Mode		10	10	8	1; 3	10	1
Standard Deviation		2.983	3.618	3.191	2.125	3.706	3.097
Variance		8.897	13.090	10.182	4.515	13.731	9.590
Range		9	9	9	6	9	9
Minimum		1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum		10	10	10	7	10	10

Source: Author’s own construction based on author’s designed and conducted survey in 2022, Evaluation scale 1–10, 1 – did not prevent, 10 – prevented significantly, n/a – not applicable, n=67.

The arithmetic means do not fall below 6 (on a 10-point scale) for any of the dimensions confirming a certain level of grit and persistence. Social enterprises are most confident in their performance with respect to such social performance dimensions as ability to resolve the social problem significant for the organization, ability to create social impact, and ability to ensure the satisfaction of the beneficiaries, demonstrating a relatively high appreciation for their investment in and importance of their individual social missions. However, the evaluations across the economic / business-oriented dimensions of performance lag behind rather significantly reflecting the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic to a certain extent. While social enterprises faced the most challenges in terms of increasing revenue from commercial activity (arithmetic mean of 6.21), other business-oriented dimensions such as the ability to create economic impact and increase other sources of revenue as well as the number of products/services,

and the number of customers, of which the latter two are especially significant for financial viability, reveal plenty of room for improvement as well.

Although social enterprises who were engaged in work integration revealed even slightly stronger performance across such dimensions as the ability to create social impact and increase the number of beneficiaries, confirming their vital role as an employer of various groups at-risk, their evaluations for the remaining performance dimensions were slightly lower, as reflected in Table 3, pointing towards additional difficulties that work integration social enterprises face to remain financially viable.

Although the aforementioned differences were not found to be statistically significant, they nevertheless confirm particular challenges among work integration social enterprises due to their operational specificity in terms of employing people with various disabilities, mental disorders, etc.

Table 2

The evaluation of the various dimensions of performance within the past 2 years (or a shorter period of time, if the organization is younger) by Latvian social enterprises

		Ability to create environmental impact	Ability to create social impact	Ability to create economic impact	Ability to increase the number of beneficiaries	Ability to increase the number of customers	Ability to increase the number of products / services	Ability to increase revenue from commercial activity	Ability to increase other sources of revenue (grants etc.)	Ability to ensure the satisfaction of the beneficiaries	Ability to resolve the social problem/-s significant for the organization
N	Valid	44	44	43	43	44	44	44	44	43	43
	Missing	23	23	24	24	23	23	23	23	24	24
	n/a	7	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
	Mean	7.03	7.89	6.48	7.19	6.98	6.89	6.21	6.56	7.79	8.05
	Standard Error of Mean	0.413	0.282	0.332	0.348	0.334	0.346	0.344	0.375	0.357	0.268
	Median	7	8	6	8	8	8	6	7	8	8.50
	Mode	8; 10	8	6	8	8	8	8	8; 9	8	9
	Standard Deviation	2.511	1.870	2.100	2.244	2.215	2.295	2.253	2.462	2.312	1.738
	Variance	6.305	3.498	4.410	5.036	4.906	5.266	5.074	6.062	5.343	3.022
	Range	10	8	9	9	9	8	9	0	9	6
	Minimum	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	4
	Maximum	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Source: Author's own construction based on author's designed and conducted survey in 2022, Evaluation scale 1–10, 1 – very poor, 10 – excellent, n/a – not applicable, n=67.

Table 3

Comparison of arithmetic means for the evaluations of listed performance dimensions during the past two years (or a shorter period of time if the organization is younger) between social enterprises engaged in work integration and conventional social enterprises

Does your organization employ people from the groups at risk for social exclusion?		Ability to create environmental impact	Ability to create social impact	Ability to create economic impact	Ability to increase the number of beneficiaries	Ability to increase the number of customers	Ability to increase the number of products / services	Ability to increase revenue from commercial activity	Ability to increase other sources of revenue (grants etc.)	Ability to ensure the satisfaction of the beneficiaries	Ability to resolve the social problem/-s significant for the organization
Yes	Mean	7,53	8.29	6.71	7.24	6.88	6.59	6.06	6.18	7.24	7.75
	N	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	16
	Standard Deviation	2.601	1.896	2.779	2.333	2.315	2.347	2.680	2.942	2.905	1.949
No	Mean	8.16	7.79	7.22	7.11	7.00	6.95	6.42	6.58	7.89	8.21
	N	19	19	18	19	19	19	19	19	18	19
	Standard Deviation	2.814	1.843	2.102	2.470	2.211	2.297	1.924	2.411	1.967	1.686

Source: Author's own construction based on Kristine Casno designed and conducted survey in 2022, Evaluation scale 1–10, 1 – very poor, 10 – excellent, n/a – not applicable, n=67.

Overall, the distinct focus among social enterprises on social rather than business-oriented performance can be explained by the recent Covid-19 context and involvement and contribution of social enterprises in securing the well-being of their beneficiaries and at the same time by their lower capacity to capitalize on the opportunities provided by digitalization. However, this trend should be monitored especially, since the theoretical literature advocates for balanced social and economic missions and highlight the importance of economic aspects in generation of sustained social impacts.

The projections of social enterprises towards their performance for the next two years reveal confidence in their ability to improve the financial/business oriented performance dimensions. As reflected in Figure 1, social enterprises project that they will be able to strengthen their position (especially in terms of ability to increase revenue from commercial activity) across the economic/financial dimensions of performance, allowing also slight improvement in performance across the social performance dimensions in the upcoming two years.

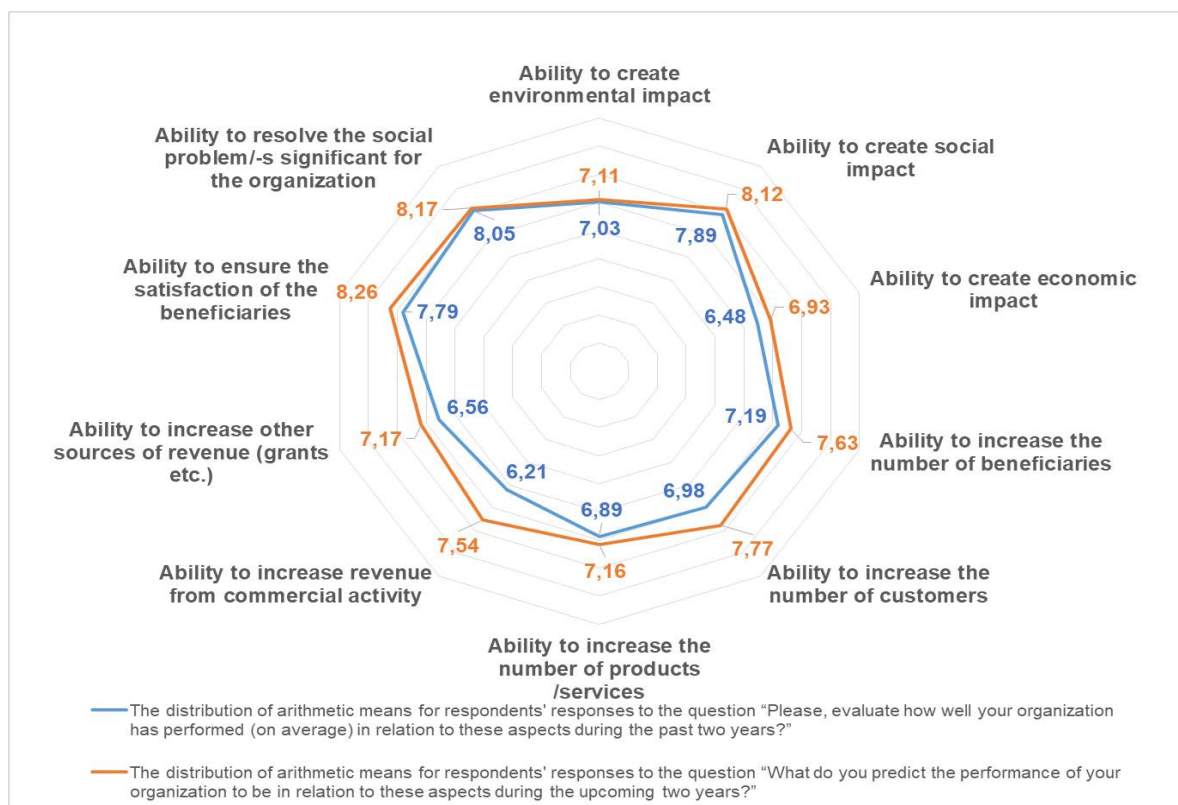


Figure 1. Distribution of the arithmetic means for the respondents' evaluations of their past and future performance across listed performance dimensions.

Source: Author's construction based on Kristine Casno developed survey conducted in 2022, Evaluation scale 1–10, 1 – very poor, 10 – excellent, n/a – not applicable, n=67.

This again highlights the resilience of social enterprises. Although the future projections reveal a greater balance between the social and economic missions, the dominance towards social goals still prevails, accentuating a need for strengthening the revenue generation capacities of social enterprises for enhanced and sustained ability to deliver social impact in the future. Furthermore, the projections for future performance among work integration social enterprises lag behind those of the conventional social enterprises across all performance dimensions, as reflected in Table 4.

Moreover, compared to their evaluations of performance in the past 2 years, their future outlook is more cautious as regards their ability to create environmental and social impact and resolve the social problem significant for the organization. For other dimensions, they project either a slight increase in performance or no changes. None of the arithmetic means for their future performance projections reach the threshold of 8. Although these differences were not found to be statistically significant, they nevertheless confirm a continued cautiousness on behalf of social enterprises regarding their performance potential which

also points towards existence of additional challenges they encounter in their operation compared to those

social enterprises who do not employ people from the groups at risk.

Table 4

Comparison of arithmetic means for the evaluations of listed performance dimensions during the next two years between social enterprises engaged in work integration and conventional social enterprises

Does your organization employ people from the groups at risk for social exclusion?		Ability to create environmental impact	Ability to create social impact	Ability to create economic impact	Ability to increase the number of beneficiaries	Ability to increase the number of customers	Ability to increase the number of products / services	Ability to increase revenue from commercial activity	Ability to increase other sources of revenue (grants etc.)	Ability to ensure the satisfaction of the beneficiaries	Ability to resolve the social problem/-s significant for the organization
Yes	Mean	6.88	7.88	6.71	7.65	7.53	6.59	7.24	6.59	7.82	7.65
	N	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17
	Standard Deviation	3.080	2.369	2.085	2.090	2.125	1.970	2.195	2.293	2.243	2.262
No	Mean	8.53	8.42	7.47	7.84	8.05	7.47	8.26	7.79	8.58	8.79
	N	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19
	Standard Deviation	2.796	1.610	2.318	2.089	1.929	2.366	1.727	2.043	1.835	1.843

Source: Author’s own construction based on Kristine Casno designed and conducted survey in 2022, Evaluation scale 1-10, 1 – very poor, 10 – excellent, n/a – not applicable, n=67.

Conclusions

1. Social entrepreneurship has strong potential in improving the social and economic welfare of citizens. However, particularly in Latvia, more strategic management of the field and targeted support grants could contribute to enhanced social impact.
2. Social enterprises have demonstrated a substantial degree of resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, confirming the sustainability of this business model also during economically turbulent times and highlighting the vital role social enterprises can play in securing the well-being of the wider society.
3. Not all social enterprises were able to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the Covid-19 pandemic, indicating differences in terms of capabilities and specific situations.
4. Past evaluations of the various performance dimensions of respondents reveal particular strengths across the social performance dimensions while the business/financial dimensions lag behind.
5. Future performance projections towards the ability

- to strengthen the respondents’ performance across business/financial performance dimensions are optimistic confirming the resilience of social enterprises; however, the focus on the social aspects of performance prevails, indicating a need for policy-makers to closely monitor the developments.
6. The evaluations of the past as well as projections of the future performance of work integration social enterprises lag behind those of the respondents who are representing conventional social enterprises, confirming the existence of particular challenges characteristic to work integration social enterprises and providing valuable evidence for policy-makers questioning the need for enhanced and specific support measures for this particular social enterprise group.
7. For a sustained development of the social entrepreneurship field, policy makers are recommended to strengthen the businesses development skills and capacities of social entrepreneurs, paying particular attention to work integration social enterprises.

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