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| 2

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THE ROLE OF ICT IN SUSTAINABLE MARKET PERFORMANCES: IN-DEPTH STUDY OF WISES IN THE CONTEXT OF SLOVENIA

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Abstract

The article addresses Working Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) in the Slovenian context. It is focused on the in-depth study of the WISE sector referring to some common territorial challenges of WISEs in Central Europe area, such as technological progress and economic innovation. By deploying qualitative research methods, the study presents innovative solutions and technologies that can be applied to WISEs and determines shortages, which yield for such innovative approaches

Key words: WISEs, social entrepreneurship, ICT, Slovenia

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Introduction

The article addresses Working Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) in the Slovenian context². It is focused on the in-depth study of the WISE sectors, which reveals and elucidates some common territorial challenges of WISEs in Central Europe area referring to the issues of the technological progress and economic innovation. By deploying qualitative research methods, the main attempt of the study is to recognize shortages, which call for the innovative solutions and technologies, and on that basis to select such approaches that can be applied to WISEs, with the special focus on the ICT and other innovative technological solutions³.

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² It is based on the research activities within the Interreg Central Europe project, entitled Technologies, Competences and Social Innovation for Work Integration Social Enterprises – INNO WISEs (<https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/INNO-WISEs.html>)

³ The whole research process, analysis and data interpretation were a part of the Deliverable within the INNOWISE project, i.e. D.T1.1.4.Regional report Slovenia

WISEs in their general terms operate within the label of social enterprises. Although their mission is to provide socially responsible business, social justice and environmental sustainability (Retolaza et al. 2007, Sanchis-Palacio 2013), they have to meet also other specific criteria. Their core mission is the integration of disadvantaged people through work process, with the minimum threshold of such employees over total workflow (DIESIS; A map of social enterprises and their ecosystem in Europe 2015). A generally accepted definition of WISEs sees them as:

“autonomous economic entities whose main objective is the professional integration - within the WISE itself or in mainstream enterprises - of people experiencing serious difficulties in the labor market. This integration is achieved through productive activity and tailored follow-up, or through training to qualify the workers” (Davister et al. 2004, 3).

However, WISEs in Europe are quite heterogeneous implying no unified definition of the concept. In Slovenia, important actors of WISE are disability enterprises, work centers and protective-work centers that employ the most severely disadvantaged people. In that regard, they are eligible to draw from certain financial instruments of the state, including quotas and subsidies. In common public discourses, WISEs are thus deprived from real entrepreneurial spirit, which sets certain consequences in terms of their positions on the market and informal ways of business performances, such as specific mind-set and value orientation. WISEs are torn between market demands, entrepreneurial freedom and social services (see ŠENT 2014, 13-14). They are consequently facing specific challenges referring to the prevailing connotation of their performance they have in public, which pose certain obstacles to the growth and development of the sector. In general, social entrepreneurship in Slovenia is associated predominantly with disability enterprises, and different kinds of subsidies, and it is hardly associated with innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship spirit (see also Skok et al. 2016). It has only been in 2018 that enterprises employing disabled people are not strictly distinguished by the Law on a matter.

In order to provide a framework for overcoming those shortages, the present research aims to analyze different aspects of WISEs' performance in terms of managerial practices, common products and services of WISE, markets on which WISEs work, and specific technological shortcomings. For that purpose, the study takes into account previous studies, which are revealing the state-of-the-art by auditing secondary data and deploying primary research techniques (Adam et al. 2015), or focusing on particular topics, such as the

legislation (Skok et al. 2016), education (ŠENT 2014), and other fields (Hrast et al.2014; Kramberger 2010) etc. It has been shown that the business, management and marketing skills of social entrepreneurs are of great importance in the emergence and running the enterprises. Also, specific suggestions have been proposed how to increase the development of the sector. However, one can notice certain lack of considering ICT tools and technologically skilled labor force as factors affecting the adaptation to current market needs and as a booster of business performances of WISEs. Accordingly, the purpose of the paper is to focus on the latter, and thus to represent the extent to which ICT is known and used in the WISEs. In that regard, it addresses the specific mind-sets of the management, encouraging or impeding the utilization of technological innovations in the company. Further, it also represents how technology serves specific working areas in the selected companies, and what part ICT plays in working integration of vulnerable groups. The main aim is therefore to determine not just the obstacles, but predominantly good practices and specific ICT used in WISEs that can contribute to better business performances.

Towards the data

The data collection took place between October 2017 and December 2017. Our sample included the companies from legal categorization social enterprises type B, work centers, disability companies and protective – working centers. Sampling was based on the responses to the pre-sequent survey, however, since only 10 companies agreed to participate in the qualitative research, we targeted companies also by using personal contacts, snow-ball sampling, and convenience sampling⁴. WISEs were sampled from each of the following sectors: sustainable agriculture, sustainable tourism, waste management, recycling and re-use of waste and others (catering, other services, etc.).

WISEs participating in the study were quite heterogeneous. Their legal form and status reflect the rigorous legislation and often insufficient definition what comes under the umbrella of social entrepreneurship and WISE as such. In the field of social entrepreneurship one can find different definitions (Adam et al. 2015), which often overlap: a) organizations of social economy such as NGOs, cooperative, disability companies and employment centers; b) social enterprises with the status of independent entrepreneur, which often come from non-profit association; c) profit enterprises with social impact, where one can place also disability centers.

⁴ The project partner Municipality of Nova Gorica was also engaged in collecting data, in addition, the students from SASS were participating within two research oriented courses

WISEs in the study held different legal forms: a foundation (3), cooperative (2), association (2), companies (18). They also had quite different statuses. They were either social enterprises, employment centers, disability companies or protective-working centers, some of them were a mixture. Differences in their legal form and status have important influence on their business success market orientation, and their support to innovation, life-long learning education and ICT. Disability companies generate their revenue mostly on the market and thus create new jobs. However, it has been argued that their social mission is weak. They are predominantly profit enterprises not including employees and other stakeholders in management (Borzaga and Galera and Gonzaga 2006; in Adam et al. 2015). Employment centers seem to be more likely to pursue a social mission, but they are more dependent on public funds and subsidies. Protective daily centers to a large extent depend on subsidies and they hardly achieve a business dimension, but their social mission is strong, and to some extent they still depend on the market (ibid.).

However, regardless of the legal form and status, all WISEs in the research were employing disadvantaged groups, pursuing social mission, and were at least to a certain extent depending on a market. In order to get relevant data, we used a uniform questionnaire and carried out 25 semi-structured interviews with different WISEs⁵. Our respondents were mainly directors or other representatives of WISE employed in management. The material was analyzed on the basis of open coding using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. Firstly, we determined coding units, which were in line with thematic parts and goals of the study. They are:

1. leadership and management (including general information of the company);
2. market and partners;
3. marketing,
4. tools and technologies.

Thematic units were then analyzed by using open coding techniques enabling to generate initial categories. These categories were then combined into meaningful themes based on selective and axial coding. We have analyzed: (1) specific managerial models and practices used in relevant sectors; (2) products and services; (3) Needs answered; (4) markets on which WISEs work as well as potential markets they could

⁵ In the process of collecting qualitative data, students from SASS were of great support

access; (5) Specific technological shortcomings. These analyses are represented through four code families:

1. Advantage: This category group encapsulates the positive strategies, performances and value-orientation in all selected topics. It represents good practices either in management, market and technological performances or all together combined, which can be applied to other WISEs. The criteria of “positive” is based on the assessment of their performance referring to three dimensions of social enterprise, that is a) social dimension – an explicit and primary social aim; b) entrepreneurial dimension – continuous economic activity and c) governance dimension - limits on distribution of profits, organizational autonomy and inclusive governance (European Commission 2014). As majority of respondents did not meet the third criteria, the social and entrepreneurial dimensions played a more important role in the analysis. This category also includes codes referring to explicit suggestions and statements of good practices proposed by respondent themselves and their own assessment of their business performance, marketing strategies, management and ICT tools.

2. Disadvantage: This category group refers to the specific problems and obstacles hindering successful performance of WISE. The category group is mainly based on respondents’ statements and assessments of factors hindering the growth and development of particular WISE. It elucidates certain aspects of a) policy and legislation, b) public support, c) networks and mutual support mechanisms, d) lack of investments, e) specific value orientation and predominant public discourses

3. Education: This category group embraces code and categories representing special needs for trainings and learning. It specifically refers to the lack of entrepreneurial and business skills at managerial level, and also to the lack of other competences and skills of management, administration and of vulnerable groups in the particular WISE as recognized by our respondents. This category group is related to all thematic parts and objectives of the study, and comprises categories and codes, which in the analysis represent some of the building blocks of further project activities such as building project strategies and tools for improving managerial competences for WISEs, competences and skills of vulnerable groups and knowledge of other relevant stakeholders.

4. Transversal code - Tools and technologies: This category comprises information regarding the a) existing ICT as claimed by respondents referring to management, marketing, financial issues, education or other aspects of WISEs performance; b) ICT needs as recognized by respondents, which would facilitate and improve their working process, enable scaling up and managing more professionally their products and services, enable connections with business partners and customers and integrate vulnerable groups into work; c) obstacles referring to the lack of knowledge and financial resources entailing the fact that WISEs very often lack the expertise to be able to use and fully exploit such technologies.

Interpretation of the data

Analysis of the code family: Advantage

The important advantage of WISEs is when they invest in innovation, creativity and business strategies that ensure their unique and competitive position in the market. This can refer to unique products that can be sold on market or it can refer to general orientation of the WISE supporting sustainability aspects of environment and society. As one of the experts said: "The advantage of the company is in our products that are manually produced and unique. They carry a special story of those who are making them".

When vulnerable groups are integrated not just into production but also into creativity process, the overall results of the enterprise are better. In that regard, it has been emphasized that a good working atmosphere, referring especially to the possibility to interchange ideas and having opportunity to participate in management of work at least to a certain extent, is of great importance. The important element is also a close linkage between working and personal interest. When employees are pursuing the same goals, and are fulfilling their working obligations "with heart", having a feeling that they contribute something good to society and to themselves, they also achieve better business result.

Further, when enterprises pursue sustainability goals, they are often tightly knitted with local community and they address local needs. As one of the experts working in eco-tourism said: "If we compare ourselves with the business sector, our advantage is certainly in addressing some local interests, therefore, we are not just attempting to connect associations and companies, but also local community in order to assure some common need."

Strong connections with the local community often turn out into fruitful collaboration on the local level with the same sector. Those connections are of great help in getting new customers, who are successfully attracted through organizing special events, festivals for potential customers, partners and other relevant actors. These events can take a form of specific education and trainings, local fairs for selling products, or other events. They are also a good opportunity for getting new competences and skills on a managerial level and among vulnerable groups. However, there are not just positive impulses from local community that represent advantage. One can notice also relevant financial benefits from such orientation. WISE with sustainable orientation can more easily get funding from national and European funds. It has been also shown elsewhere that priority in financing get WISEs with combining energy sources, cultural heritage and ecological production (Radej 2013, in Adam et al. 2015).

As bearers of sustainable values and innovative methods, they can have an important role in spreading good practices and encouraging other WISEs to attain better performances on the market and in achieving social dimensions. As one of the experts said: "We operate as rural incubator". There is an interesting example of the successful company working in the field of waste and cleaning, while supporting strong ecological orientation, who actually developed a new method for ecological cleaning and maintaining the environment. When supporting innovative methods and creativity processes, the need for ICT in working process often comes to the fore. Some enterprises have established a special internal initiative and innovation system rewarding creativity and innovation.

WISEs with more branched network of partners and customers show better results in at least two dimensions of social entrepreneurship (e.g. business and social dimension). Important role is played by connections with local community, municipalities, NGOs. The advantage occurs, when one is active in a social economy association or if one has productive linkages with HEIs, which encourage innovation and enable WISEs to have access to the survey results on the market or provide expert opinions. When focusing on networks, the role of social capital turns out to be crucial. While this is a broad sociological concept with many different meanings and implications (Adam and Rončević 2003), herein it will suffice to define it as the degree of common relationship enabling social proximity. It enables an exchange and diffusion of informal knowledge and facilitates collaboration (Balland 2012).

All informants express the need for a stronger and wider partnership, as it is a social capital that can help to reduce certain obstacles in WISEs sector. In Slovenia, WISEs still mostly depend on public calls and subsidies. The profit from market activities remains relatively low. Those obstacles can be overcome with more intensive collaboration and networking between different levels and institutions. As observed in Adam et al. (2015, 48-49), the solution is in the aggregation of functions or so called industrial symbiosis based on the cooperation with commercial enterprises in terms of smart specialization. According to our interviews, regular consultations with partners contribute to better results in terms of managements, marketing activities, education and trainings and overall performance of the company.

The important role is also played by networking beyond local and national environment. Cooperation with similar institutions from abroad enables exchange of good practices and innovative models. In the recent decades, it has become increasingly important to have an access to different kinds of information and also to participate in its production. Technological development and mass mediation have induced certain social conditions, which have contributed to different ways of social organizations, communications and individual perceptions, while it also seems to be important to make a distinction between those “having information and being informed” (Webster 2014, 32). Therefore, it is important to have access to information, but also to be able to properly interpret it. The compilation, exchange and interpretation of information, which are crucial for WISE, are internal or external.

The former refers to regular evaluation of work process, which successful WISEs often emphasized in the interviews. Regular evaluation allows one to identify certain mistakes and inconsistencies in the working environment, and enables to plan future activities more efficiently. Successful WISEs claimed to organize such evaluations at least once per month. Such evaluations also contribute to better marketing strategies and education trainings, which are thus adapted to their special needs.

Crucial external information refers especially to regular analysis of labor market, public needs and other areas. At this point, it is worth to mention once again, the linkages with HEIs or institutions that can provide such information. Both, social capital and proper access to information, substantially influence marketing strategies and activities of a particular WISE. It seems to be an important advantage, when WISE has its own brand and integrated image, which increases its visibility on the market and attracts new customers.

The advantages are also regular trainings and education. It has been emphasized that it is important to plan education activities in advance. They should be based on consultation with employees. There are trainings for certain forms of WISEs, which are prescribed by the law (for mentors working with vulnerable groups additional trainings should be organized at least twice per year) but there should be more of them – adjusted to their needs. Respondents also emphasized that vulnerable groups should be regularly trained and encouraged to gain new competences and skills. Especially in the beginning, they should be trained and integrated properly into the working process.

The majority of WISEs representatives emphasized the positive role of public funds and subsidies. Firstly, they stress out that is very beneficial for them that they can invest certain money into development instead of paying taxes. They also support public initiatives to subsidy the employment of vulnerable groups on protected working places. There are different percentages of public subsidies for disability companies and employment centers. Disability enterprises get subsidy of up to 75% of the salary for each of the employed disabled person. When disabled employees represent more than 40-50% of all employed, from which one third are heavy disabled people, enterprises are exempted from paying part of tax contributions. Those enterprise that employ less than 50% of disabled persons, are entitled to a tax reduction of up to 50-70% of the salary. In the case of employment centers, public subsidies are from 20%-80% higher than in a case of disability enterprises. However, as Podmenik and Česnik show (2015, 39-40), the analysis indicates that all public investments are also beneficial for state budget.

Analysis of the code family: Disadvantage

Representatives of WISEs, regardless of their legal form or status, share the opinion that legislation provides neither proper definitions nor proper answers to the actual challenges. As they say, conditions for operating in the field of WISE are very demanding and strict. These claims are in line with the previous studies (Adam 2015; Skok 2016) showing that social entrepreneurship is only in the beginning of its development in Slovenia. Although WISEs have been the first representatives of social entrepreneurship, there is still a lot of space open to improve their formal conditions.

According to the document *Improving social inclusion at the local level through the social economy, Report for Slovenia* (2010, 17), the country has a long history of disabled employment and support. The first companies for the disabled were established in the 1960s with the main goal of integrating physically disabled people into work. Since then, their

scope of including disabled has become broader, and the types of activities carried out by the companies for the disabled have changed over the years. There has been an increased emphasis on disadvantages associated with intellectual capabilities.

The Law of social entrepreneurship in 2011 represented the basis for Strategy of Social Entrepreneurship in Slovenia, prepared by the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology. The Ministry is also the government regulatory and monitoring body of social entrepreneurship field in Slovenia that also prepared the list of actions necessary to support and implement the strategy (details in Skok et al. 2016). While these initiatives may represent a step forward to a better organization and more favorable environment for social enterprises and WISE specifically, the legislation is also an administrative obstacle. As one of the experts said:

“The legislation we have is absurd. That is why, we have not registered any of our companies as a social enterprise and we do not have any intentions to do so in the future, and we stopped thinking about that, because ...in the draft of the law it was a criminal offense if you declare as a social enterprise and if you are not in the state register. Although we perform on the basis of the principles of social entrepreneurship, however, legislation that is useless is certainly an obstacle. Too many administrative obstacles but you know the law, it cannot prescribe to the entrepreneur the areas on which he can work, thereby violating the Constitution or the entrepreneurial freedom.”

As the respondents emphasized, those flaws contribute to certain obstacles and unfavorable position of WISEs in the market. Some managers of disability enterprises see a major problem in the unfair competition in the market stemming from the unfair competition with protective work centers and students work. As one of the experts said:

“The employer prefers to give a job to protective working center, where one can pay a norm, it is a standard for one euro or two, we are talking about the norm of the hour, which means that the individual gets fifteen cents per hour, this is on the thin line with slavery. And this part of the social care permits that...looking at student work is about the same story”

Another obstacle can be found in supporting improper business practices and thus contributing to the maintenance of a certain value orientations hindering entrepreneurial spirit. As it was emphasized in Skok et al. (2016), in some points the Law actually allows candidates to

establish enterprises, which are just waiting for tenders and the support of society.

Many of our respondents have argued, that many WISEs do not operate in an entrepreneurial way. There has been a lack of basic values observed, which would encourage market orientation and entrepreneurial spirit. Many WISEs are just expecting to operate exclusively by the help of public social support. It has often been emphasized, that the word “social economy” in general holds an inappropriate connotation in Slovenia. As one of the respondents said: “I see the main obstacle in the growth and development of WISE sector in the word social economy. In Slovenia, it is understood as a particular social problem, as something that needs to be supported, financed, instead of being socially responsible”.

It has been argued elsewhere, that the key obstacles in establishing social entrepreneurship in Slovenia are in the lack of understanding of the term – social entrepreneurship and the lack of awareness what role the latter has in the economic and social environment, in the local and national environment (Lužar Šajt et al. 2005, in Adam et al. 2015). According to the document *Improving social inclusion at the local level through the social economy, Report for Slovenia (2010, 12-14)*, the recent history shows us important discontinuities with the social economy of the past, which have a crucial impact on specific connotations linked to the social economy. The predominant role in the development of the sector was traditionally played by the Catholic church. The establishment of the communist regime in end of the World War Two, severely broke with the tradition of a strong and developed social economy. Many functions of that sector were taken over by the public sector. It has been argued (ibid. 2010, 13) that the latter continues to be a hindering factor in the current development of the social economy in Slovenia. In the transition developments occurring after the 1991, Slovenia, unlike other transition countries, did not experience a so called “welfare gap” (Črnak-Meglič and Rakar, 2009; in *Improving social inclusion at the local level through the social economy, Report for Slovenia, 2010, 13*), which had encouraged the development of civil society organizations in other central European countries.

The obstacles, such as weak supportive environment, low recognition of social entrepreneurship and a lack of investments could be overcome by establishing stronger private and public partnership. Some of the respondents emphasized that their companies have many linkages with partners, but those connections are only formal. They do not benefit much from them. One of the interviewees sees the problem in the

inactivity of WISE management, which can once again be linked to the lack of proper values. As he explained: "I can notice, that on different events (linked to social entrepreneurship), we are more or less the same people attending them. Activity is problematic. People are differently engaged in business..."

Respondents emphasized difficulties in connecting not just with the business sector, but also with the with public sector, which does not seem to be interested enough in such cooperation, and as they say, public institutions are associated with the low response rate. As one of the respondents said:

"In fact, this cross-sectoral integration is what is problematic. The public sector is still a little immune to integration...We have one similar international project, under Erasmus +, and it is about finding some options for hiring vulnerable groups by transferring part of public services to social enterprises, to those companies that employ these vulnerable groups. The employment of the latter is therefore the goal of transferring these services. It's not necessarily a social enterprise, it can be something else, it's important to deal with it. This would proceed much faster if this link between the public sector and the non-governmental sector were stronger. In Italy, for example, they are much more "advanced", although there are also problems there, because they started much earlier this time".

The need for stronger and more active partnership is also associated with marketing activities. Not all of the respondents see marketing as important in their business performances, however, those who claim marketing is important, are complaining against high prices for such strategies – money problems. They also emphasize that national media are not in favor of advertising their activities - problems with media. We can also notice the lack of knowledge, which could help in marketing activities. As one of the respondents said: "Maybe we are in need of particular knowledge, service development, maybe how to communicate with the public, so to advertise in the same way as business sector...there is never enough knowledge on rhetoric."

Important disadvantage that turned out to be relevant in the analysis, is also a project work. Many companies get their financial resources from national and also European project calls. Those projects do not offer permanent employment, while they often demand certain financial resources in advance, as financial resources come in delay. As somebody said: "In short, we are more vulnerable because of that. If we have one employee and when we finish the project, we cannot keep him

because he does not have a permanent job position, in case we do not find a new project, which is not easy... this is also our weak point.... This is one such demanding task, getting some additional sources of funding, considering we are only the non-governmental sector.”

Respondents also emphasized that they do not have enough employees, which can be due to the lack of financial resources, or because there is no proper labor force available. Either, the work demands special competences and skills, which they cannot find on the labor marker, or as a respondent said: “young people just do not want to work”. Due to a low number of employees, director or managers of the companies are often multitasking. As one of them said: “I’m everything in one person. I’m a cleaner, a trustee, a purchasing officer, I am a director, secretary, accountant, administrator, I am responsible for safety at work. Everything in one person.”

The role of ICT seems to be crucial in optimizing working processes and other aspects of enterprises. One respondent emphasized that ICT takes jobs away from vulnerable groups, which calls for special attention. There is a need of education on which ICT is actually available. As one said: “I think there is a flood of all these technologies. You cannot decide, which one would be the best for you. Because even with simple things, such as a card reader, you do not know which one to choose. You need someone who covers this area. If we look at finance, how payment transactions are handled...But it's not that far yet, you're the one who makes that decision.

Analysis of the code family: Education

The analysis of the interviews complements particular studies (Šentprima 2013) showing that there is a need of targeted education, trainings and more intensive promotion of enterprises in the social economy sector. Educational support is, in addition to promotional, financial and counselling support, crucial element in the growth and development of enterprises. There is also another aspect of the role education plays in the development of the WISE. As emphasized in Adam et al. (2015), highly educated employees contribute to innovation and creativity in working environment, thus assuring competitiveness on a market. Their added value can often be seen in their participation in supportive – collaborative environments, such as start-ups, co-working centers etc. They more easily penetrate international markets, which is crucial in the recent era.

The interviews revealed that regular education of employees is very beneficial for overall success of the particular WISE. As one said: “So,

we were talking about our advantages... We dedicate for education at least twenty days per person in a year. Therefore, each of our employees, speaking about professional workers, has at least twenty days for his/her progress. Regarding vulnerable groups, they are under training all the time”.

It is important to plan education and training in advance and in the accordance to specific needs that employees have. In that regard, it is crucial that there is a regular discussion among the employees linked to the monitoring and evaluation of the work process and progress. The education can be external and internal. While the former allows new knowledge, the latter especially enables greater flexibility and adaptability of employees. This is especially important for the mentors who guide and control the integration of disadvantaged groups into work. Regular education for the mentors also imply that they are more skilled for motivating disadvantaged groups. As one said, while explaining regular education for the mentors: “It’s not about physical or profession work, it is more about the way of managing and supporting those people, to motivate them, to prepare them to engage in a quality work, so they can also feel better...we are trying to catch targeted training...it depends on a topic...”

Herein, it is also worth mentioning the WISEs’ intensive support of the integration of disadvantaged groups. As the director said, they are encouraging education and training enabling empowerment of disadvantaged groups: “For the vulnerable groups, we carried out one project last year...where we trained women to be able to develop a business idea, to prepare a mini business plan, meaning how to proceed with business, and then they also registered their private institute. So, we are an incubator for the countryside... to aid disadvantaged groups to develop an idea and to help them within the initial phase”.

Education is also associated with the organization of different events, where similar organizations, actors from local environment, development agencies, and HEIs can participate. As a respondent said: “We attempt to organize such events, where people can meet, establish networks...and also a transfer of information and knowledge occurs there”.

Despite a strong awareness of the important role education has, respondents reported many obstacles in that regard. The first obstacle refers to money, which is often needed for extra education, especially abroad. As one said: “As there is a lack of financial resources, we attend only trainings prescribed by the law”. Obstacles in education are also

linked to a low business culture, implying that education should contribute to great awareness of benefits of entrepreneurial spirit within the WISE sector.

Educational needs are strong and various. They refer to new knowledge, competences and skills in the areas of: a) financial issues; b) accounting; c) management; d) communication and social skills; e) marketing; f) digital marketing; g) ICT: a need for education on ICT has been especially emphasized, for professional workers and also for disadvantaged groups.

As some informants emphasized, disadvantaged groups need trainings especially on communication and social skills. A proper preparation for the work also plays the important role in the initial phases of employment, referring not just to working skills but also to the attitudes linked to the working process. As one said: "They especially need preparation for a job. They have to understand that salary is not a natural phenomenon, they have to earn it. With good work, quality work and dedication. Regardless of being social or business enterprise, in WISE, there should be an even stronger stimulation to be able to contribute to the profit. They just have to be prepared for that." The important aspect of education refers also to intergenerational cooperation and personal growth. As a respondent said: "Intergenerational cooperation...I can see that tolerance and interchange of professional knowledge and skills has occurred in that regard. We need mentorship for such exchanges."

Discussion

Social entrepreneurship has gained significant importance in developmental performances on different levels, i.e. local, national and the EU. It's crucial role in addressing contemporary societal and environmental challenges has been emphasized with the recent global economic crisis severing the political and economic conditions (European Commission 2014). Subsequently, the need for more inclusive, sustainable economic solutions in business environment has become widely recognized in public support and initiative. New or adjusted legislations, business and civil initiatives have fueled the emergence of the social enterprise sector in Europe, which is, however, despite certain common challenges, more a compilation of quite different national characteristics.

Based on the interviews, we have identified certain important elements of WISE in Slovenia. The important element, which they are emphasizing, is a social mission, and a social dimension of companies.

They employ disadvantaged groups, therefore the management and working process is adapted to their special needs. Because of their specific character, and also due to a strong need for enhancing entrepreneurial spirit within WISE and in public, they are challenged by quite many issues on the market. In that regard, support in education and ICT is crucial – but often there is a lack of proper knowledge and also financial resources. Nowadays, a definition of ICT includes unified communication technologies and it refers to the integration of telecommunications, computers, middleware and the data systems that support, store and transmit UC communications between systems (Murray 2013). WISEs most often operate on the level of small and micro enterprises. For that sector, ICT has turned out to be especially important. It has been shown (Patil and Chavan 2016) that ICT enables new business opportunities, cuts of costs by improving internal working processes, enables better and more efficient communication with customers, enhances promotion and distribution of product through on-line tools. Thus, it increases the efficiency not just of business systems but also business practices. According to the World Bank Report (2006, in Patil and Chavan 2016, 64), the enterprises that use ICT are more productive, more profitable, they invest more and also grow faster. Marketing is also important in that regard, but it is rarely adapted to the special needs, also in terms of digital marketing. Team work and good working atmosphere is also very beneficial – training plans should also consider intergenerational, inter-sectoral cooperation and personal development. Strong and good partnership is important not just on a local, but also on national and transnational level. And just as in entrepreneurship in general, it is important for them to be creative, innovative and unique. According to the interviews, there are substantial differences between WISEs regarding the extend, to which the ICT are used in the working environment. Firstly, we can distinguish between two groups of WISEs: 1. the ones who support ICT and encourage implementation of ICT into different areas of working process. They are following the ICT trends; 2. the ones who do not see important advantages in ICT tools. This can be either because there is a substantial lack of awareness among their managers what actually exists and what are the benefits of ICT, or because they consider their work to be too simple to acquire such tools. The latter is especially associated with vulnerable groups.

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