17 Social Enterprise in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands

Where the Old Meets the New

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Introduction

This chapter¹ discusses social enterprise in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands and focuses especially on the relationship between social start-ups and more traditional organisational forms in the social economy or third sector. The three countries examined here share common borders and cultural traditions and, for better or worse, have a long common history. They are also all adherents of the economic system that has come to be known as “Rhine capitalism” or the “social-market economy”, mixing regulated market capitalism with well-developed social policies ensuring both fair competition within the market and the existence of a quite comprehensive welfare system. This type of welfare state is based on the conservative/corporatist model (Esping-Andersen 1991; Evers and Laville 2004), with non-profit private organisations, mainly financed and regulated by public bodies, playing an important role in the provision of social services (Defourny and Nyssens 2010: 35). Such an approach is based on the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, that is, the idea that those closest to a problem are more likely to understand it and better situated relationally to deal with it (Sirico 2014)—hence, the idea that the social unit closest to the person in need (e.g., family, friends, non-profit organisations) should be the first port of call, and direct intervention by government, only the last resort (Zimmer 2013: 684).

Because of the part that private, non-profit bodies traditionally play in the welfare states of all three countries, organisations driven by social aims and playing a role in social-welfare provision do not constitute a new phenomenon in any of them. In international comparative research, Belgium and the Netherlands frequently lead rankings in terms of share of civil-society workforce in the economically active population, with Germany not far behind (Salamon and Sokolowski 2014).

In Belgium (as in neighbouring France), the so-called social economy has a long tradition, alongside the conventional economy, driven mostly by capital interest. Social services are provided both by public bodies and by a strong associative sector, heavily regulated and financed by the state.

Germany and the Netherlands have also always had a strong third sector, beside the state and the market. In all three countries, citizens tend to organise themselves in associations, either for leisure or with societal or political goals. The Dutch are even world famous for their “polder model”, in which non-profits play an important role: due to the fragmented nature of the country’s society, which consists of several minorities without a dominant majority, the state does not provide social services itself, but funds services based on societal self-organisation.

Social enterprise as a term and concept has only been introduced in Germany and the Netherlands during the last 10 or 20 years, based on ideas developed in the Anglo-Saxon world and its liberal incarnation of the welfare state. In Belgium, though, the term has been used since the mid-1990s already. Indeed, Belgium has been one of the first countries to introduce a legal framework which recognised the possibility for commercial companies to be driven by social aims (“social-purpose companies”).

Even though the term “social enterprise” (SE) has been embraced enthusiastically by some, it poses several difficulties for practitioners and academics alike in all three countries and is thus also often criticised. In this chapter, we will present the argument that this is mainly due to the fact that the term social enterprise and the ideology behind it were developed in a different context and a different type of welfare-state regime, where the dichotomy between public and private is much stronger than in Belgium, Germany or the Netherlands, and where the borders between the realms of state, market and society are therefore much more clearly defined and more impenetrable. We argue that, because of this and even though the concept of social enterprise is now widely used in all three countries, even by actors from the social economy itself, it remains fuzzy and contested.

We will discuss this argument in more detail by exploring the SE sector in these three countries, where the old and the new meet. What does the emergence of a new wave of social enterprise mean for the provision of social services, for the organisations already active in this field as well as for the newcomers operating under the label of social enterprise? We will first look at the historical roots and developments of social enterprise in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands; then, we will discuss the rise of new-style social enterprises. We will examine what this development means and how it has changed the SE field in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands and discuss the challenges and opportunities ahead.

17.1 Historical Roots and Developments

As mentioned before, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands all adhere to a type of welfare-state regime in which private non-profit parties play an important role in the provision of social services. Consequently, in order to understand how these three countries perceive the notion of social enterprise, it is necessary to take a closer look at how their version

of the welfare state developed and which types of organisations traditionally play an important role in it.

Non-profit organisations providing social services have existed in all three countries since the Middle Ages. Churches and other religious institutions, for example, played an important role in caring for the poor and the ill. However, there was no real system organising welfare based on individual rights. The poor, the sick and other disadvantaged groups in society relied heavily on the alms and goodwill of those in power. This changed when, due to the negative effects of the industrialisation, social problems such as poverty, illness and bad housing conditions became so severe that the state had to intervene.

Under German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who tried to maintain traditional relations of authority against the modernist forces of liberalism and socialism (van Kersbergen and Vis 2015: 38), a first social security system was developed in Germany, which is now seen as the basis of the welfare state as we know it in many countries today, including Belgium and the Netherlands. This system was based on mandatory social insurance and supplied direct financial support to those in need through funding a wide range of in-kind benefits and subsidised services (Stolleis 2013). These services were and still are mostly delivered by non-governmental organisations, based on the already mentioned principle of subsidiarity, that is, the idea that social services should rather be provided by societal actors than by the state. Today, the following societal organisations play a role in the welfare states of Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands: voluntary associations, cooperatives, mutual-insurance companies, philanthropic organisations, work-inclusion and integration providers and community action groups (European Commission 2016, 2018, 2019). These different types of organisation will be examined in turn below.

17.1.1 Voluntary Associations

Voluntary associations, that is, associations established by a group of individuals (volunteers) to accomplish a specific purpose, were originally often set up by local churches or trade guilds but can now be found in many guises (e.g., football clubs and other sporting associations). During the 20th century, associations also played a pioneering role in the provision of many social services (health, youth centres, domiciliary care, nursing schools, etc.). In all three countries, a significant percentage of the population is still member of at least one association.

17.1.2 Cooperatives

Cooperatives were mainly set up in rural areas but were also established by small retailers and workers in cities with the idea that organising would give their members more bargaining power and the possibility to pool resources.

Examples include consumer cooperatives, retail cooperatives, agricultural cooperatives and cooperative banks (based on the ideas of Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen). In all three countries, the cooperative organisational form and the idea behind it were long seen as old fashioned, but they have experienced a revival recently. Beside more traditional cooperatives, such as cooperative banks and agricultural cooperatives, we now also find new cooperatives, for example, organisations trying to deal with social issues in urban communities or citizen cooperatives involved in short circuits or renewable energy.

17.1.3 Mutual-Insurance Companies

Mutual-insurance companies also have a long tradition in all three countries. By joining one of them, individuals can insure themselves and their families against the negative effects of all kinds of disasters, such as fire, poor health and death. These organisations are part, as such, of the social-security system.

17.1.4 Philanthropic Organisations

Philanthropists—private individuals who devote their time and money to charitable causes—also play an important role in the provision of welfare and other services, at least in Germany and the Netherlands. In most cases, they are industrialists who start their own foundation, but philanthropic activities can also be started by other types of actors, such as lotteries. In the Netherlands and Belgium, the royal houses also engage in philanthropic activities, though those are mostly funded by the taxpayer.

17.1.5 Work-Inclusion and Integration Providers

In the three countries analysed here, people with severe physical or mental handicaps can find opportunities for employment in sheltered workshops, and sheltered employment is the backbone of social services for these populations. The 1990s have seen the development of specific public programmes targeting the field of work-integration social enterprise (WISE) to help low-qualified unemployed people, who are at risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market, and to integrate these people into work and society through a productive activity (Nyssens 2006). This development of WISEs has even led in some cases, like in Belgium, to the concept of social enterprise being systematically associated with such employment-creation initiatives.

17.1.6 Grassroots Initiatives

Finally, since the 1970s, there have been many examples of citizens organising themselves in all sorts of grassroots initiatives, for example,

advocating for certain environmental causes or fighting for the quality of life in a certain neighbourhood. These organisations mostly take the form of associations and sometimes turn to philanthropists for (part of) their funding.

17.1.7 Hybridity as a General Characteristic

All the organisational forms described above were originally independent from the state: they originated from civil society (e.g., associations, cooperatives) or the private sector (philanthropic organisations, cooperatives). Yet today, they are very much linked to it: they are indeed now often funded by the state and/or conduct activities at its behest and/or deal with public issues that traditionally fall under its purview (Brandsen 2010; Brandsen and Karré 2011; Billis and Rochester 2020; Karré 2020). The hybridisation of various logics that can be observed in these organisations occurred in two steps: In the first stage, organisations began to engage with the state and underwent a process of professionalisation and bureaucratisation (Smith 2014). Later, they were also expected to behave in a more entrepreneurial fashion and to become more market oriented in their activities, as new public management ideas of running government like a business took hold (Barzelay 2001; Christensen and Lægread 2011).

Because of this hybridisation process, many organisations traditionally active in the social-welfare sector in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands can now (and could perhaps already before) be called social enterprises, in the sense given to this concept by Defourny and Nyssens (2017), who see social enterprises as hybrid organisations located between the realms of state, market and society and mixing their institutional logics. We thus argue that there had already been social enterprises in all three countries before the rise of the “new-style social enterprises” that are described in the following section.

17.2 The Rise of New-Style Social Enterprises

A fairly recent development in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands is the emergence, from the 1990s onwards and especially during the last 10 to 15 years, of “new-style social enterprises”, linked to discussions about social innovation (Nicholls *et al.* 2015; Brandsen *et al.* 2016; Anheier *et al.* 2018). This is a notion inspired by experiences with product testing in the field of technology (Chesbrough 2003; Chesbrough *et al.* 2006; Howe 2008; Brown and Katz 2009), which postulates that social problems can only be solved by new constellations of social actors that have the freedom to develop new ideas and to test them in real-life settings, such as “living labs” (Bergvall-Kareborn and Stahlbrost 2009; Dutilleul *et al.* 2010; Puerari *et al.* 2018).

These “new-style social enterprises” also strive to solve social problems through economic activity, but there is an important difference with the organisations described in the previous section. The latter—with the exception of cooperatives, which operated on the market from the outset—gradually evolved towards a more entrepreneurial stance mainly as a result of government policy, while the “new-style social enterprises” described in the present section were explicitly established for the purpose of solving social problems through commercial activity and were also explicitly framed as social enterprises from the outset.² They are rooted in the discourse about bridging the divide between social and economic welfare creation through processes of social innovation as it has been developed in the Anglo-Saxon world. There, as already alluded to earlier, the realms of state, market and society are seen as distinct from one another and there is a strict dichotomy between the public and private spheres; in such a context, social enterprise is seen as a way to bridge that divide—which traditionally does not exist to the same extent in the three countries examined in this chapter. Another important difference between new-style social enterprises and their predecessors is that the former typically do not originate from the third sector but from the market sector, as they are established by socially-minded entrepreneurs. As such, they can be labelled as social businesses according to the SE typology put forward by Defourny and Nyssens (2017).

The school of thought on social enterprise as part of social innovation has been introduced in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands by actors “from the outside”, purposefully promoting it. Especially two non-profit foundations played a role in this, namely Ashoka and the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. The first is active in all three countries, while the second one is especially active in Belgium and Germany. Ashoka originates from the US and was founded by Bill Drayton, a management consultant who became a public manager, and who is said to have invented the term social enterprise. The Schwab Foundation was established by Klaus Schwab, who also founded the World Economic Forum (WEF), and his wife. In the Netherlands, Social Enterprise NL, a homegrown non-profit foundation established by Willemijn Verloop, a peace activist, and Mark Hillen, a former management consultant, played a major role in introducing and promoting social enterprise, though Ashoka and the Schwab Foundation are active there as well.

Of course, philanthropism by industrialists and entrepreneurs is no new phenomenon. However, what is new and noteworthy about Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation and Social Enterprise NL is that they do not use social enterprise to achieve certain societal goals; the promotion of social enterprise *is* their goal. Because of this, they also differentiate themselves from other institutions that promote corporate social responsibility (CSR), where social goals are also striven for but remain

secondary to the organisation's financial goals. They seek to achieve this by various means. Ashoka, for example, affiliates individual social entrepreneurs into the Ashoka organisation and pays them a financial stipend so that they can focus on their activities as social entrepreneurs. The Schwab Foundation publishes research reports and practical guides aimed at helping to develop the skill set of social entrepreneurs. And Social Enterprise NL brands itself as the national membership and campaigning body for the SE movement in the Netherlands. In Belgium, Belgium Impact has recently been created to inspire and connect social entrepreneurs, and in Germany, the Social Entrepreneurship Netzwerk (SEND) aims to represent social entrepreneurs at the national level.

Due to the activities of organisations such as Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation and the national bodies advocating for social enterprise, there is now a—still relatively small but growing—support network for social enterprises in all three countries, which not only promotes the concept and the ideas behind it but also provides hands-on support. In the Netherlands, the buzz about social enterprise has even turned into a hype, with a whole industry of workshops, roundtables and inspirational sessions (ABN AMRO 2017: 5).

As a result of the abovementioned developments and lobbying activities, a small but growing number of new-style social enterprises or social businesses have come into existence in all three countries; they could perhaps best be described as social start-ups, as they have only recently been established in order to tackle certain social problems. They aim to generate their resources mostly through market income and mix a focus on the general interest with the private interest of their founder(s). These organisations can operate under any of the legal forms of their more traditional counterparts. So far, most of them have been established in urban or metropolitan areas. There are hardly any links with more traditional third-sector organisations; on the contrary, these newly established social enterprises often see themselves as antidotes not only to the state but also to service provision by more traditional non-profits, which they see as equally bureaucratic. In the following section, we will look in more detail at these social start-ups and the developments which they have instigated in the SE field.

17.3 Developments in the SE Field

Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands do not yet have a special legal form for social enterprises or policies regarding the SE phenomenon in its totality (in Belgium, there are laws and decrees but they relate to special legal forms of social enterprise only).

All three countries also have a wealth of hybrid organisations, located between the social and the economic realms, which, for all intents and purposes, can be called social enterprises, though they often do not use

that label themselves. That makes establishing the exact number of social enterprises that can be found in each country an arduous task. In all three countries as well, the definition (inspired by the EMES approach) given by the European Union (European Commission 2020) is used when describing social enterprise, but this definition covers all sorts of organisations—traditional social-welfare providers, new cooperatives as well as social start-ups. And in all three countries, the number of organisations reported as being social enterprises differs widely from one estimate to the other. In Belgium, numbers range from the low thousands (between 2,210 and 3,170) to about 18,000 (see chapter 1 in the present volume), depending on the approach that is chosen. In Germany, estimates range from 2,000 to 70,000 social enterprises, based on either a stringent focus on social start-ups only or a more comprehensive approach that also counts traditional social enterprises (European Commission 2018: 57). And in the Netherlands, estimates range from a few hundred social enterprises to several thousands (see chapter 9).

There is no data available yet tallying different types of social enterprise following the typology put forward by Defourny and Nyssens (2017). Some organisations literally call themselves social enterprises or have used the EMES/EC definition as a guideline in setting up their organisational structure, which makes identifying them as such easier. The number of social enterprises rises if one also adds to the equation the more traditional forms of social enterprise that can be found in all three countries, even though they do not call themselves social enterprises (yet) but are active in fields and activities that can be seen as falling within the scope of social enterprise. However, such an approach makes it necessary for the researcher to deal with questions about definition and delineation which are far from straightforward (as described, e.g., in Dart *et al.* 2010).³

In all three countries, we see that the emergence of new-style social enterprises has brought the term social enterprise into the general consciousness and discussion; it had hitherto not been used broadly, even though organisations engaged in what we would now call social enterprise have existed for quite a while in these countries. Social start-ups and social businesses use the term to distinguish themselves from more traditional organisational forms in the third sector and social economy, which they often see as bureaucratic and not very innovative. They also often complain about facing competitive disadvantages in comparison with more traditional social-welfare providers (Karré and Van Meerkerk 2019). Indeed, as social businesses originating from the market sector, they do not adhere to the traditional ideas of organisations operating in the social-welfare sector and hence often face problems of recognition and awareness, especially in comparison with organisations that already have a long-standing history in that sector. And since their business models are innovative and non-traditional as

well, they also face problems of funding: banks traditionally shy away from investing in risky ventures and impact investment is still in its infancy in all three countries.

Thanks to their modern lobby work and organisations, new social enterprises are often (social) media-savvy and know how to influence politics. This lobby work is mainly aimed at overcoming the abovementioned competitive disadvantages of social start-ups through obtaining special benefits for them, and fostering awareness and recognition. More traditional parties in the welfare sector sometimes criticise these new competitors for “commercialising” social-welfare provision and for “social-washing” commercial activities, but they sometimes call themselves social enterprises as well, especially as the term gathers more traction in the political discourse.

In Germany and the Netherlands, for example, discussions are currently taking place about establishing better support structures for social enterprises in general and about introducing a specific legal form for social enterprises, though these ideas are at very early stages at the moment. These discussions are instigated by SE lobby organisations such as Social Enterprise NL and SEND; they are complicated by the difficulty of defining what to consider as a social enterprise and what not and by debates about possible distortions of competition. Why grant special advantages—and perhaps even privileges—to social start-ups, for example, and not also to already existing players in social-welfare provision? Why not grant special benefits as well to other enterprises that also try to influence society in a positive way, such as small businesses sponsoring local activities, even though their main business focus is on other activities than social ones (e.g., a baker sponsoring a local football team)? The main question here is whether social businesses can or should be seen as a group or subset of organisations that differ so significantly from more traditional organisations operating in social-welfare provision and have such a big beneficial impact on society that a special treatment is warranted. Whether attempts to develop a special legal form and a specific policy for social enterprises will be successful remains to be seen. In the Netherlands, attempts to devise a comparable special status for another set of hybrid organisations, namely “societal enterprises” (*maatschappelijke ondernemingen*), have ultimately failed due to similar delineation problems. Discussions are also underway about the motives of the new set of social enterprises, and about whether their activities herald a further commercialisation of the welfare state. As the idea behind social enterprise is seen by some with criticism, it seems unlikely that Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands will adopt in the near future a special legislation for social enterprises similar to the one that is currently found in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined the situation of social enterprise in three countries where new types of social start-ups or businesses are created in

a context characterised by the previous existence of other organisations that can be considered as social enterprises, even though that term had not hitherto been used to refer to them—hence the chapter’s subtitle, “where the old meets the new”. What conclusions can be drawn? What is the relationship between old and new forms of social enterprise? Two main conclusions, each linked to recommendations, can be highlighted.

First, transplanting discourses and labels from one welfare-state regime to another is a difficult endeavour. Concepts and conceptualisations do not fit in their new habitat, resulting in friction, confusion and possibly rejection. Those participating in the discussion about social enterprise in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands (be they entrepreneurs, policy makers, professionals in the social field or academics) should acknowledge that fact, as well as the existence of a wealth of organisations in the three countries that could be labelled social enterprises. More work needs to be done to distinguish between various types of social enterprise, to examine their respective strengths and weaknesses and the part that each of them can play in dealing with societal problems. Such approach appears potentially more fruitful than the ultimately futile quest to devise a special legal form that would encompass all the diversity of social enterprise—an endeavour that seems to be doomed to fail, given the ambiguity of the concept of social enterprise and the fragmentation of the SE sector in all three countries.

Secondly, discussions will have to be conducted on how the relationship between the new generation of social enterprises and the old one can become more productive and more fruitful. How can the two generations learn from one another and reinforce their respective individual efforts? Old and new types of social enterprise in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands should not see each other as competitors but as supplementary actors, in a world in which societal problems are often ambiguous, complex, volatile, wicked, and have to be dealt with using various approaches (Koppenjan *et al.* 2019). This is a view that should also be adopted by policy makers. Combining the agility of social start-ups with the continuity and steadfastness of traditional social enterprises can create a world in which social issues are dealt with in various innovative ways, while avoiding the danger of commercialising social care or missing out on the advantages that fresh and creative new approaches to long-term social problems can yield (Osborne 2010; Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016).

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proofreading and editing. All mistakes and omissions are, of course, very much my own fault.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on three individual country studies featured in this book (see chapters 1, 5 and 9, about Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, respectively), as well as on three country reports and a subsequent comparative synthesis that are part of a research project, undertaken at the behest of the European Commission, mapping social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe (European Commission 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020). It is also based on insights the author could gather in conversations with academic peers in all three countries as well as during a study visit he undertook as part of a team led by the OECD, conducting research on how to boost social enterprise and social innovation in the German federal state of Brandenburg.
- 2 Each country has its own terminology according to its language(s): “*Sozialunternehmen*” (German), “*entreprise sociale*” (French) and “*sociale onderneming*” (Dutch). The English term “social enterprise” is sometimes used as a substitute, especially in the rather Anglophile Netherlands. In Belgium, the term social business is also sometimes used as a substitute.
- 3 For information about how this question was addressed when mapping social enterprises in Germany, see appendix 2 of the mapping study published by the European Commission (2018: 116–118).

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