

MESMER+

Mapping European Social Economy: Employment, Social Dialogue and the European Pillar of Social Rights

Project nr. 101052222

Policy lab – Ireland

12 September 2023

From 14.00 to 17.00

Venue: Liberty Hall Theatre

Edan Quay, Dublin D01 F9K2

Policy Brief and Summary of the Event

As part of the MESMER+ project, IDEAS Institute held the Irish Policy Lab in Liberty Hall theatre on 12 September 2023 in Dublin. The number of participants were limited; however, social economy organisations were represented, and the participants aimed to focus on a quality discussion and outcome.

Mary Ogundipe (project administrator, IDEAS, Ireland) on behalf of the host organisation, the Irish subcontractor in the Mesmer+ project, opened the seminar and welcomed all participants as well as thanked them for their interest in the project.

Kevin P O’Kelly, external researcher (IDEAS, Ireland) introduced the aims of the policy lab and explained that the objective of the MESMER+ project is to establish an up-to-date in-depth mapping on activity and representation of social economy players – both from the employers’ and employees’ side – within social dialogue institutions and various industrial relations settings in nine countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Ireland, North Macedonia, Poland, Spain and Sweden. He made it clear that the mapping will encapsulates several dimensions, including institutions, actors, practices and processes.

He also explained the methodology and background of the research activities, including the research questions. The research was framed around two questions:

RQ1: How inclusive are social dialogue institutions towards social economy players?

RQ2: How are social economy players having their voice heard in national industrial relations systems?

Based on the draft national report prepared within the framework of the Mesmer+ project, he gave a summary of the historical development and various forms of social dialogue in Ireland. They are as follows:

- 1970s: Bi-partite National Wage Agreements
- 1980s: Tripartite National Understandings
- 1990s: Tripartite National Economic and Social Agreements
- 2000s: Return to enterprise-level bargaining
- 2020s: Labour, Employers' Economic Forum

He also gave an overview of the social economy in Ireland and focused on the following points/items:

- agricultural Co-operatives since the 1890s
- credit unions since the 1950s
- responsible Government Department (Ministry) since 2017

Furthermore, he also explained the situation of social enterprises in Ireland and provided the following numbers:

- estimated number of enterprises in Ireland: 4,300 (excluding agricultural co-ops, credit unions and worker co-ops)
- estimated employment: 84,000 persons
- estimated number of volunteers and board members: 75,000 ((Source: Baseline Data Collection Exercise, Amárach Research (May 2023))

He also mentioned the main bodies such as the government ministries involved in social economy.

Key questions on social economy and social dialogue

After the introduction to the main elements of the draft national report that also double served as policy brief, participants were invited to discuss and share their practical experiences of social dialogue. The following questions were addressed:

- Sectoral representation of the social economy/social profit sector between the various joint committees: an adequate organisation for the needs of the field?
- Are there rules and norms related to the organisation of social dialogue (e.g., bipartite or tripartite structure of representative bodies, collective labour agreements) that are difficult to apply in social economy organisations?
- What are the specific features of the social economy that it would be useful to distinguish in social dialogue so that it corresponds to the realities of this economic model?
- Should special mechanisms for social dialogue be set up in the social economy (enterprise and/or sectoral level)? If so, what would these mechanisms look like and why.

Outcome of the discussion:

Based on the draft of the project report for Ireland and after discussion of the key questions above, a number of key issues emerged from this discussion:

1. The term social economy is not generally used in Ireland, and it is seen as an EU term.
2. Many organisations that 'fit' the definition of social enterprises, as set out in the DRCD definition, do not consider themselves as social enterprises, so this is a challenge for organisations representing social enterprises and influencing public policies.
3. There is a challenge for representative organisation to make the term more recognised and acceptable. One suggestion is that in tendering for public contracts there would be an element (percentage) of social value in the tender assessments.
4. While it would be desirable to involve DRCD in the Government's LEEF delegation, so as to bring the social economy into its social and economy discussions, there were differing views on having one body to represent all social enterprises at the national level. There are many different business sectors in which social enterprises operate and it would prove difficult (if not impossible) to agree an overall coherent policy context for social economy actors.

Finally, it was announced that the project' next European meeting would be held in Dublin in September, where the participants of the policy lab are welcome to join. The final version of the national report that incorporating the result of the present policy lab is expected to be published and disseminated by the end of the current year.