



The Role of Social Entrepreneurship in Building a Circular Economy Ecosystem in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

The circular economy (CE) is a key player in transforming production systems and consumption habits in Western Balkans (WB) countries to tackle the challenges of climate change in a region that includes some of the most polluted capital cities in the world, such as Skopje and Pristina. The circular economy roadmap is one of the main priorities of the Green Transition in the region. Although circular economy practices in the WB countries are still in the early stages of development, there is potential for growth, primarily through the 5Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Refurbish, Recycle). The contributions of the circular economy and social entrepreneurship to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are well recognised, as they provide solutions to social, environmental, and economic challenges. However, there is a need to pair these two concepts more effectively and integrate them. While the circular economy focuses on financial and environmental solutions, social entrepreneurship compensates by offering social solutions. Social enterprises create an inclusive approach to the circular economy. On the other hand, social enterprises that adopt the principles of the circular economy can reduce their operational costs, add value, and create further opportunities for jobs and training. Social enterprises also offer more inclusive business models that prioritise the needs of local communities. Additionally, the transition to a circular economy presents opportunities for social entrepreneurship and social enterprises, including upskilling and reskilling the workforce, developing collaborative business models that target consumers, fostering innovative partnerships, and promoting advocacy opportunities. In the context of WB countries, social entrepreneurship and the circular economy are often studied separately, although research interest in both fields is increasing. Social entrepreneurship has been a crucial driver of social and economic development in these countries. However, the circular economy ecosystem in the WB region remains fragmented. This paper aims to investigate how social entrepreneurship can contribute to building a circular economy ecosystem in the WB region. The approach of this study is qualitative, based on case study methodology, focusing on one particular WB country, Albania. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including government representatives, academics, NGOs, and social entrepreneurs, between October and November 2024. The study presents a conceptual framework for the circular economy ecosystem, integrating aspects of social entrepreneurship, including social orientation, market orientation, innovation, opportunity recognition, and community orientation. The main contribution of this study is in linking social entrepreneurship with the circular economy.

Keywords: circular economy, social entrepreneurship, 5Rs, social orientation

1. Introduction

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013) defines CE as a system framework that looks beyond the current linear models of the economy, which are based on taking materials from Earth, transforming them into products, and discarding them as waste. Several conceptual frameworks have been employed to explain the CE process. The 3Rs framework is a foundational conceptual framework of the CE, where the 3Rs stand for reduce, reuse, and recycle (King et al., 2005). The

4Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Recover) are at the core of the European Union (EU) Waste Framework Directive (European Commission, 2008). In contrast, the 5Rs conceptual framework encompasses reducing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling. The 9Rs conceptual framework of the circular economy has evolved from the Rs framework, which includes refusing, rethinking, reducing, reusing, refurbishing, remanufacturing, repurposing, recycling, and recovering (Van Buren et al., 2016). In general, the CE model is based on three principles: eliminating waste and pollution, circulating products and materials, and regenerating nature. A recent conceptualisation of CE by Kircherr et al. (2023) considers industry, academia, policymakers, and consumers as enablers of CE. This conceptual framework is based on the core principles of material sourcing, consumption, and production, with the primary objectives of maintaining environmental quality, promoting economic development, and achieving social equity. The primary beneficiaries of the CE, according to this conceptual framework, are current and future generations.

The transition to CE is crucial for WB countries, not only to fulfil EU integration prerequisites, but also to achieve the SDGs and ensure a sustainable future for future generations. Radivojević et al. (2024) suggest that CE contributes positively to economic growth, but it also means raising awareness on CE among producers and consumers. CE The concept of CE is quite a different concept of the functioning of the economy different from the linear model, increasing the opportunities even for WB countries to cope with the challenges caused by climate change (Kennedy & Linnenluecke, 2022), CE it is supposed as well to support resilience that results in a decoupling of economic growth from material systems. CE fosters is an enabler of sustainability transition and innovation (Geissdoerfer et al., 2016). On the other hand, the development of social enterprises has contributed to CE.

In the context of WB counties, the concepts of CE and social entrepreneurship are still evolving. This paper aims to explore how the CE ecosystem can benefit from the synergy between CE and social entrepreneurship. In the second section, the literature review is analyzed by identifying the main research gaps. In the third section, research methods are explained, and in the fourth section, the results are presented, concluding with conclusions in the fifth section.

2. Literature Review

2.1 SD approaches and the CE

A recent study by Knäble (2022) shows that CE has a significant impact on the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of SD (sustainable development). Different practices of the circular economy affect SD. For example, renewable energies, reuse, and reduction have a positive impact on the environment, while repair and recycling have a significant effect on employment. Business organisations that already implement CE practices should not only strive for circularity (Walker et al., 2021). Some scholars, such as Bina (2013), agree that CE is situated at the intersection of the economic and environmental aspects of SD. For Li et al. (2009), CE aims to integrate ecological aspects with financial elements. To prevent the CE from being considered solely as an environmental management approach, it is essential to incorporate social dimensions (Geng et al., 2009). One of the main criticisms of the circular economy has been its long-standing exclusion of the social dimension.

The implementation of the CE practices has an impact on society (Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020). Valencia et al. (2023) elaborated a set of a set of socioeconomic strategies for the implementation of CE that aims to expand the 9Rs model of CE (Refuse, Rethink, Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Refurbish, Remanufacture, Repurpose, Recycle and Recover) to rethinking the economic model, discourse, management strategies, ownership, business models, care work and value chains combined with remembering, reorganising and revitalising. Suppose it is assumed that CE is connected to major global and emerging issues of governance and the transition of consumption and production systems. In that case, there is a weaker interest in the political, cultural, and ethical issues associated with the circular economy (Zavos et al., 2024). Mies & Gold consider that collaboration among different stakeholders is a primary facilitator for CE, enabling the integration of the social dimension of SD. Education participation and legislative support are also necessary. Moreover, Kranosutka & Danko (2024) argue that in multinational corporations (MNCs), a combination of CE philosophy and adequate management practices can contribute to the creation of socially sustainable strategic behaviour and help foster social sustainability in global markets. Bianchini et al. (2022) propose a framework for assessing the social indicators in CE perspective that lies in assessing social indicators that can cover broad categories in the supply chains such as corporation, community, consumers, suppliers, human rights, and human resources in three managerial levels (strategic, tactical, and operational). A study by Mansilla-Obando et al. (2022) shows that some other social implications of CE practices include supplier evaluation with social impact, responsibility for the product, and ultimately decent work. In developing countries, there is a need for community and consumer engagement in CE practices, and social inclusion can

be enhanced through entrepreneurship and social innovation (Piao et al., 2023).

One of the main priorities of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2020) is CE together with decarbonisation, pollution reduction, sustainable agriculture, and biodiversity. The Green Transition in the region requires the development of CE practices. The concept of the CE in the region remains in a nascent stage, where communities and industry continue to have low levels of awareness about circular economy. As suggested by the Balkan Forum (2021) in the WB countries, there continues to exist a misconception, especially from the consumers, related to the linear economy model. Most of the time, resources used by the linear economy model are considered inexhaustible. Unfortunately, these misconceptions persist even among policymakers. Ndoka & Alimehmeti (2024) suggest that WB countries have nearly the same performance in terms of CE indicators, requiring improvement in the legislative system, business environment indicators, policy-making, waste management initiatives, financing, and technological innovation. Some of the barriers to adapting CE business practices for WB firms include added costs, a lack of skills and experience, insufficient consumer demand, and inadequate government subsidies (Mahmutaj et al., 2025). A recent study by Kosta & Ramadani (2025) shows that not all CE practices have a significant impact on firm performance in WB countries. Some CE practices, such as recycling materials, selling by-products, and waste management, are easier to maintain, use, and repair, and do not significantly impact firm performance. CE is linked to sustainability, but more specifically to the environmental dimension of SD, particularly in the construction sector (Milović et al., 2024). The European Commission (2024) suggests that the region should encompass the transition to the Green Deal and smart regional specialisation, focusing on sustainability and societal challenges. There is a gap in the literature regarding the relationship of CE practices and social dimension of SD in the WB region. The limited research available primarily focuses on the environmental and economic dimensions of SD.

2.2 Social entrepreneurship as a vehicle for sustainable development

Social entrepreneurship is often defined as an activity undertaken by individuals who are considered social entrepreneurs to establish a social enterprise (Mair & Marti, 2006). Social entrepreneurs are individuals who bring innovative solutions to social problems, serving as catalysts for change. As assumed by Dees (1998), social entrepreneurs are change agents in the social sector because they adopt a mission to create and sustain social value, recognise and pursue opportunities to accomplish their mission, demonstrate constant engagement in processes of continuous innovation, engagement, and learning, and act boldly. They exhibit a high sense of accountability.

Social entrepreneurship combines the persistence of entrepreneurial behaviour with the desire to accomplish a social mission. Austin et al. (2006) add a sectoral dimension to the definition of social entrepreneurship, as it can occur in the business sector, the governmental sector, and the non-profit sector. Nichols & Cho (2006) identify three other dimensions of social entrepreneurship, including sociality, innovation, and market orientation. It is essential to emphasise that the social dimension of social entrepreneurship is the primary focus, surpassing profit and market orientation.

Social entrepreneurship (SE) is a vehicle of SD, particularly in developing countries where inequalities, informalities, and institutional gaps persist (Raman et al., 2025) because SE aligns with SDGs and it contributes to inclusive development and innovation. Social entrepreneurship also influences the risk management of implementing the SDGs. Innovative business models are promoted through social entrepreneurship (Shinde, 2025), although social entrepreneurship remains influenced by several factors, including access to finance, government policies, stakeholder engagement, and technological advancements. In developing countries, particularly in low-income countries, social entrepreneurship continues to face several barriers, including a complex regulatory environment, securing funding, and establishing community trust.

It is essential to explore the integration of the three dimensions of SD in social entrepreneurship. In their study, Yan et al. (2022) show that in China, social entrepreneurship promotes mainly the environmental approach of SD. In terms of social sustainability, Kalamudin (2023) concludes that the main priorities of social enterprises are value creation, establishing innovative partnerships, and social innovation. Ramadani et al. (2022) suggest that the development of sustainable competencies remains crucial for social entrepreneurs to integrate the three dimensions of SD into social entrepreneurship.

In WB countries, awareness of social entrepreneurship remains low, despite growing initiatives that support its recognition, visibility, and promotion (Chichevaliev et al., 2023). A regional study and guidelines on social entrepreneurship in the WB countries by Andjelic & Petricevic (2020) shows that the majority of the governments in WB countries have not adopted a definition on social entrepreneurship and on social enterprises where none of the countries in the region has legal form for the registration of social businesses, they are often registered under the form of

associations. Funding opportunities remain limited, with **the majority** of funding coming from grants and seed investments. Even if there is a lack of awareness about social entrepreneurship, in the region, there are role models that can promote social entrepreneurship with an impact on SD.

2.3 Circular economy and social entrepreneurship synergy

As social entrepreneurship plays a fundamental role in the economies of developing countries by reducing inequalities and poverty, the introduction of CE practices in social entrepreneurship business models has considerable potential (Saiz-Alvarez, 2019). Both CE and social entrepreneurship contribute to the solutions and challenges of SD, which are also related to social and environmental problems. A recent study by Hua (2024) identifies three main circular practices in social entrepreneurship: circular products, circular services, and circular ecosystems, which focus on prolonging the lifespan of products and services and raising awareness within the community. A framework of social entrepreneurship + circular economy is proposed that can contribute to creating a triple societal, environmental, and social value. Circular practices can help generate more social value beyond the creation of job opportunities, leading to a more humane entrepreneurship orientation (De Angelis & Vesci, 2024). TechnoServe (2023) proposes an inclusive loop framework for integrating social impact and circular synergies in social enterprises. The closest provider model of a social enterprise offers the highest level of social impact and circular synergies, as it provides low-cost products that incorporate recycling practices.

In contrast, the lowest level of circular synergies is observed in social enterprises that are merely narrow buyers. CE practices can help social enterprises to increase their social, environmental, and economic impact. On the other hand, social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in building circularity.

Moreover, the features of circular commercial business together with the social mission features can help the transition of non-profit organisations for social enterprises (Costanza, 2022) even if there exist some barriers to the full integration of social entrepreneurship and circular economy, such as regulatory challenges, limited funding, and lack of education and awareness. In a study in Lebanon, Chaarani & Raimi (2021) found that the success of social entrepreneurship in the CE depends on both psychological and environmental factors.

3. Methods

This study aims to explore the role of social entrepreneurship in building a CE ecosystem in WB countries. The synergy between CE and social entrepreneurship needs to be further investigated, primarily through the role that social entrepreneurship has in building circular economy ecosystems in the WB countries. Therefore, the primary motivation for choosing the research method in this study is based on its exploratory aim; consequently, qualitative methods are the most suitable for exploratory studies. Qualitative research methods are appropriate when a deeper understanding of a phenomenon is required, particularly when there is limited prior knowledge or existing research.

A suitable qualitative data collection method for use when the focus is on participants' understanding of a topic or phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews are a flexible qualitative data collection tool, as they can combine questions included in a planned semi-structured interview guide with questions that arise during the interviews, depending on the participants' feedback. Baker et al. (2012) propose that the ideal number of semi-structured interviews should be 12 but should not exceed 20. Saunders (2012) suggests that the number of semi-structured interviews to be included in a qualitative research sample should range from 4 to 12 participants.

As stakeholders and stakeholder engagement is crucial for understanding the role of social entrepreneurship in building the a CE ecosystem in WB countries, the sample of this research contains Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with different stakeholders, such as government representatives, academia, NGOs, and social entrepreneurs, during October 2024 and November 2024 performed online via the platform MS Teams, focusing in one particular WB country, Albania. This research respects the confidentiality of the participants who wish to remain anonymous. The semi-structured interview consisted of 10 questions regarding the perception of the CE ecosystem in WB countries, the role of each stakeholder, perceptions of social entrepreneurship, perceptions of circularity in social entrepreneurship, and opportunities for circularity in social entrepreneurship.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The central theme that was identified after the coding process was:

A need for a conceptual framework of the CE ecosystem in WB countries - The CE ecosystem in WB countries, as highlighted by the interviewed participants, requires integrating several approaches of social entrepreneurship, including social orientation, market orientation, innovation, opportunity recognition, and community orientation.

Social orientation in CE ecosystems - there is a need to increase the participation of marginalised groups within the population, including vulnerable individuals and women, in CE ecosystems. As CE ecosystems in the region are primarily centred on an environmental approach to CE, women, vulnerable individuals, and marginalised groups are often overlooked stakeholders, even though they contribute to CE, primarily through the 3Rs, 4Rs, or 5Rs; their contributions are frequently taken for granted and do not receive the deserved recognition. As underlined by an interviewee from an NGO, women in the WB countries have traditionally contributed to CE and social entrepreneurship indirectly, often integrating the social approach into CE or social entrepreneurship-related projects. Still, there has not usually been given a "voice" for their contribution. Social entrepreneurship, by excellence, is considered to have contributed to the development of human capital in WB countries, primarily through lifelong learning and educational programs that have enhanced the skills development of marginalised communities, women, vulnerable individuals, and youth.

Market orientation in CE ecosystems: Market-oriented social entrepreneurship enhances the performance of social businesses, and in the case of CE ecosystems, it can create more social value through the application of market-oriented techniques, especially in CE business models. For social entrepreneurs, it remains unclear how such a value can be created and how to define the proper boundaries between economic and social value creation. Social entrepreneurship can help to determine such boundaries in CE ecosystems.

Innovation in CE ecosystems: In terms of innovation, social entrepreneurship in the WB region still faces problems that stem from the absence of a supportive entrepreneurship ecosystem oriented towards innovation, even though according to the interviewees from the government sector, different initiatives of the last 5 five years have been supportive for social innovation projects in Albania. Social entrepreneurship itself can be an innovation for the CE ecosystems in WB countries, especially in Albania, as it can bring a renewed perspective to the ecosystems.

Opportunity recognition - opportunity recognition remains at the very heart of entrepreneurship, in terms of opportunity recognition especially in the context of WB countries, there exist still mixed perception from the interviewees in terms of opportunity recognition for social entrepreneurship and CE entrepreneurship opportunities, this can be maybe linked to the fact that entrepreneurial culture continues to be absent or still ill-defined in the context of WB countries.

Community orientation in CE ecosystems - the majority of interviewees perceive that the sense of community has transformed in the WB countries, especially after the fall of communism. Even if WB countries are high-context cultures and should be oriented towards collectivism, community and community belonging as a vital factor for the development of WB societies have disappeared. CE ecosystems require a more holistic approach towards the impact of CE practices on the community. Social entrepreneurship can contribute to raising awareness about the importance of generating a positive impact for communities, and at the same time, it can nourish the development of communities, community-based initiatives, and community involvement in CE ecosystems.

5. Conclusion

This paper analysed the essential role of social entrepreneurship for a just and effective CE transition in WB countries. Policies should foster social entrepreneurship-CE synergies, focusing on raising awareness and building capacities of different stakeholders, resulting in increased stakeholder engagement. A conceptual framework was developed to connect social entrepreneurship and the CE ecosystem, encompassing social orientation in CE ecosystems, market orientation in CE ecosystems, innovation in CE ecosystems, opportunity recognition, and community orientation in CE ecosystems. Region-wide coordination is needed to provide support and incentivize further steps for the development of the CE ecosystems within the framework of EU integration, as various countries in the region are making promising progress.

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