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The Maximization of the Social Impact of Social Enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic: The Greek Case

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The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and how social enterprises manage to maximize their social impact are still under research and constitute the most vital issues in the social entrepreneurship field, while little empirical research has been concentrated on them so far. Drawing on scholarship on organizational theory and social entrepreneurship theory, we studied a sample of ten Greek social enterprises. Our findings indicated that the Greek social enterprises took as an opportunity the challenges addressed by this unprecedented crisis and achieved to maximize their social impact with various approaches.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship; social impact; COVID-19; pandemic; maximization

Abstract

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been suddenly intervened in our daily lives, causing a magnitude of social and economic issues (Bacq, 2020; Weaver, 2020). Governments worldwide imposed measures such as the limitation of the public's movement and the continuous lockdowns that have radically changed our society (Ebersberger & Kuckertz, 2021). This ongoing changing environment has increased the existing social problems and the need for social enterprises to be at the top of the business world (Bacq, 2020; Bacq & Lumpkin, 2021). Several scholars have proved that social enterprises are entrepreneurial forms robust enough to alleviate such social difficulties because of the social mission and the social impact that they create (Ratten, 2020; Bao et al., 2020; Doherty et al., 2014). Drawing on the organizational theory and the social entrepreneurship theory, with the present study, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of those innovative strategies followed by the social enterprises to maximize their social impact during this global crisis.

Categories of Social Impact's Maximization

According to the relevant literature, social enterprises utilize both tangible and intangible methods to escalate their social impact (Maseno & Wanyoike 2020; Desa & Koch, 2014; Alvord et al., 2004). For example, Desa and Koch (2014) argued that in social enterprises, the social impact could be separated into two categories according to their different maximization features: *breadth social impact* and *depth social impact*. Breadth social impact can be maximized through the spread of the social enterprise's social mission to a more extensive geographical area acquiring more beneficiaries (Desa & Koch, 2014). Depth social impact can be maximized through organizational processes such as sharing information and technical assistance, forming networks and affiliations, and establishing new branches within the existing organization (Dees et al., 2004). Therefore, social impact maximization is a significant process that social enterprises should do in their life-cycle to achieve sustainability (Lyon & Fernandez, 2012).

The Greek Context

Greece is a country in which social enterprises are still under development. In Greece, because of its increased growth, the social entrepreneurship field has been studied by many scholars over time (e.g., Graikioti et al., 2020; Trigkas et al., 2020; Salavou & Cohen, 2020; Sotiropoulou et al., 2019). However, the most incremental growth rate of the Greek social enterprises' establishments has been noticed since the law 4019/2011 was enacted (Kornilakis, 2017). The Greek Government introduced a new law in 2016 (law 4430/2016) regarding the social economy, which is applied until now. This new law recognized two primary legal forms of the social enterprises in Greece, the Social Cooperative Enterprises (SCEs) and the Workers Cooperatives (WCs). Thus, in our study for diversity, we choose eight SCEs and two WCs.

Methodology

Employing the principles of the qualitative methods, we used ten illustrative cases of Greek social enterprises that realized to cope with the adversities of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study is a broadly used technique to compare various cases and offer theoretical development (Eisenhardt, 1989). More specifically, we conducted interviews with the president or the vice president of each investigated social enterprise based on the same interview guide. The interviews took 25 minutes to 1 hour and transcribed word-for-word in order for the coding process to follow. We used theoretical thematic analysis to analyze our data due to its adaptability and comprehensive utilization by most qualitative scholars (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This technique allowed us to use existing themes from the relevant literature and enhance them with the present study's emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Our research findings have shown that social enterprises maximize their social impact in four distinctive ways: (a) *acquiring more beneficiaries in a more extensive geographical area*, (b) *developing new innovative products/services*, (c) *supporting their rights to the Government*, and (d) *developing robust organizational processes*. Table 1 summarizes some example quotes of the interviewees which prove the above ways of maximization social impact.

Table 1. Example Quotes

1. Acquiring more beneficiaries in a more extensive geographical area	“Our clientele is Municipalities [...], and the pandemic gave a "trigger" of new funding to Municipalities with a clear view such as climate change, resilience, green infrastructure, etc. Therefore, we were called to serve others throughout the Greek territory in addition to the existing Municipalities. This resulted in the beneficiaries (citizens of each region), during the
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	<p>pandemic, participating in various public workshops related to climate change or participatory planning, thus improving their daily lives.” (Case 8)</p>
<p>2. Developing new innovative products/services</p>	<p>“During the lockdown and the quarantine, we "released" a new big program with online 120 screenings of 60 movies (2 screenings per day, one in the morning at 11:00 and one at 18:00) to support children and teachers. This action was constructive as it introduced a new innovative way of learning through digital platforms, helping teachers to make the learning processes more intriguing for the children” (Case 1)</p>
<p>3. Supporting their rights to the Government</p>	<p>“During the pandemic, we were called to help some new energy communities to be sustainable and active enough, despite the adversities of this new era; we offered them the knowledge to start their initiative; we made many supportive campaigns to promote their rights in the Government” (Case 7)</p>
<p>4. Developing robust organizational processes</p>	<p>“During the pandemic, all members and employees of our SCE participated on a systematic basis, and whenever the opportunity is given, to various training seminars related to the function, institutional form, and nature of a Cooperative Organization. Furthermore, beyond the above, they participated in some seminars related to the subject of their work.” (Case 6)</p>

In conclusion, the present study has proved that social enterprises are sustainable organizational forms that face all the challenges and difficulties with the more innovative ways. During this crisis, i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, they fulfill their mission, successfully combining their social and economic targets. The governmental measures to protect public health, such as lockdowns and movement restrictions, worked as an opportunity for social enterprises to become more agile and productive than before the pandemic outbreak. Thus, the different ways that social enterprises use to maximize their social impact could be an illustrative example for other organizational forms to respond to a future crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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