

Unraveling the Role of Culture in Social Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

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Abstract: This study explores the role of culture in shaping social entrepreneurship ecosystems with a lens of context dependent framework on culture. While ecosystems have been studied in terms of actors, networks, and resources, the cultural layer remains understudied. Responding to the lack of in-depth, culturally informed analysis beyond broad syntheses in literature on the topic, this study sheds light on national social-enterprise ecosystems through Abramson's context-dependent model to show how locally embedded values, meanings, resources and motivations shape, and are in turn shaped by entrepreneurial ecosystem dynamics, thus extending existing theory. A qualitative content analysis is used to analyze four EU social enterprise ecosystem country reports in terms of how they describe cultural meanings, resources and motivations in the country's social enterprise ecosystem. The findings shed light on which cultural elements are emphasized within social entrepreneurship ecosystems across different country contexts. Through cross-analysis, four thematic categories are identified, describing cultural elements emphasized in the country's social enterprise ecosystems, welfare and institutional models, history of cooperatives, associations, perceptions of entrepreneurship, the role of institutions and the overlapping category of values and norms. This study argues culture in social entrepreneurial ecosystems can be studied viewing culture as an overarching and inseparable dimension, from a more heuristic point of view. The key themes that emerge from the study are the role of welfare systems, perceptions of entrepreneurship, institutions, values. These themes function as symbolic carriers of cultural meanings in social entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Keywords: Social Enterprise Ecosystems, Social Enterprise, Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, Culture

1. Introduction

Social enterprises by nature engage in market methods while simultaneously solving social problems (Kerlin 2013). It is known that institutional contexts influence evolving social enterprise ecosystems (Kerlin 2013), and social entrepreneurship ecosystems in general are influenced by institutional and cultural factors. While formal institutions have received attention in literature, the role of culture in the ecosystems remains underexplored, despite the rising interest in understanding cultural influences in social entrepreneurial ecosystems (Roundy & Bonnal 2017; Diaz Gonzalez & Dentchev 2021). This study offers perspective in this gap by investigating how cultural elements are presented in social enterprise ecosystems across different country contexts.

Likewise, there is a gradual shift in policymakers' attention towards social entrepreneurial ecosystems. Since 2021, EU policy has shifted from supporting individual social enterprises to building full social economy ecosystems, recognizing the need for legal, financial, and structural support across all levels. This approach aims to align diverse local social economy actors with broader EU goals like the single market, green transition, and social cohesion, while respecting diversity of actors in the field (Carini et al. 2024). Culture affects social entrepreneurship practices and policies.

Cultural elements are shown in many ways in entrepreneurial ecosystem theoretical perspectives. Culture has been approached in numerous ways, as fixed attributes such as collectivism-individualism (Kerlin 2013; Coskun et al. 2019), as a conducive culture shaping opportunity perception, failure tolerance, entrepreneurial identity, (Isenberg 2010) or entrepreneurial culture (Stam & van De Ven 2021). Roundy (2017) highlights the importance of culture in the broader context of social ventures, emphasizing that to fully understand their success or failure, researchers and practitioners must consider the cultural forces that shape them, from perceptions of social problems to the organization and legitimization of social entrepreneurship ecosystems, though this issue is not explored in greater detail.

Despite these calls, culture's dynamic role in entrepreneurial ecosystems is overlooked. A more comprehensive perspective to culture is required. This study applies the lens of context dependent theory on culture by Abramsson (2012), defining culture as meanings, resources and motivations. This lens offers a more holistic and dynamic view to culture in entrepreneurial ecosystems compared to the prior theoretical perspectives on culture in entrepreneurial ecosystems. This perspective moves beyond viewing culture instrumentally, offering a more integrated understanding of its dynamic and embedded role in shaping ecosystem practices. A qualitative

content analysis is used to analyze four EU social enterprise ecosystem country reports in terms of how they describe cultural meanings, resources and motivations in the country's social enterprise ecosystem.

The findings shed light on what cultural elements are emphasized in four EU social enterprise country ecosystem reports (European Commission 2018, European Commission 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). By cross analyzing the data, four thematic categories are identified, explaining major cultural elements: welfare models, cooperative history, associations, entrepreneurship perceptions, institutional roles, and values and norms. This study broadens the understanding of culture in social entrepreneurial ecosystems, offering a new analytical lens and advocating for context-sensitive support mechanisms. Social enterprises and their ecosystems are culturally mediated, with cultural elements acting as scripts that shape their actions, relationships, and evolution.

2. Theoretical Background

The use of various ecosystem concepts has seen a rise in management and organizations studies over the last decades. The entrepreneurial ecosystem as a concept underlines system nature and interconnectedness of actors and context for entrepreneurship in particular regions (Phillips & Ritala 2019; Stam & van de Ven 2021; Stephens et al. 2021) or organized around geographically dispersed networks (Isenberg 2010).

Social enterprises are particularly influenced by their regional context (Kerlin 2013). Practitioners and scholars have suggested that social enterprise ecosystems are different from traditional enterprise ecosystems (Bozhikin 2023; European Commission 2021). Bozhikin (2023) highlights that these issues have been examined both from a broad perspective and through the lenses of specific industries or geographical regions. Social enterprise ecosystems develop as response to social issues that actors aim to address (Bozhikin 2023). Warnecke & Balzac-Arroyo (2023) comment that communities have a central role in social enterprise ecosystems. The literature emphasizes a need to understand better how various factors influence the success of social enterprises to develop strategies to strengthen the social entrepreneurship ecosystems (Diaz Gonzalex & Dentchev 2021; Lorenz et al. 2024).

Cultural elements are shown in many ways in entrepreneurial ecosystem theoretical perspectives. Kerlin (2013) chooses to focus on cultural traits that are likely to influence social enterprise, in-group collectivism vs. individualism and uncertainty avoidance. These are seen to link with innovation and resource mobilization. Coskun et al. (2019) build on the work on Kerlin and add two variables to culture in their social enterprise framework but find in their analysis that collectivism vs. individualism remains the only significant one. These dimensions are recognized as significant but in this study, they are not addressed in depth here, as they concentrate on culture as more fixed attributes.

In Isenberg's entrepreneurship ecosystem framework culture is positioned as one key dimension alongside policy, finance, support systems, human capital, and markets. Isenberg (2010) sees a conducive culture as essential to fostering entrepreneurship, suggesting that culture influences how opportunities are perceived, how failure is tolerated, and how entrepreneurial identity is constructed. The interaction of cultural elements with other domains creates unique local or regional ecosystem configurations. In Isenberg's theory, each entrepreneurial ecosystem has its own cultural context. Equally, in Stam's and van De Ven's (2021, 815) approach culture refers to "*entrepreneurship culture*" that "*reflects the degree to which entrepreneurship is valued in society*". They measure entrepreneurship culture by how common startups are and how society views self-employment and entrepreneurs. Culture is seen as part of informal institutional arrangements. It is embedded in the systemic conditions of the ecosystem. Adapting this to social entrepreneurship, this would reflect how much social enterprises are valued, measuring the prevalence of social ventures and societal attitudes toward social entrepreneurs.

Cohen (2006) views culture as the most critical, foundational and unique, yet least replicable component in the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Cohen (2006) defines culture broadly to include the region's environmental features, shared civic knowledge as well as community ethos. Going further, Roy et al. (2015) treats culture in social enterprise ecosystem acknowledging historical legacies. Culture is seen closely tied with political narratives and regional identity. They view culture as one of the forces behind the divergent development of social enterprise ecosystems. Similarly, Roundy (2017) raises the issue of culture's role within a wider context but does not explore it in greater detail; He argues that social ventures are embedded within a web of interconnected influences, and to fully understand their success or failure, researchers and practitioners must recognize the cultural dimensions that shape them. As such, cultural forces influence from the perceptions and valuations of social problems to how social entrepreneurship ecosystem is organized and legitimized (Ibid.)

Yet, scholars underline the need to study the cultural dimensions of social entrepreneurship further for understanding the motivations, practices, and contextual variations that shape how these initiatives emerge and operate across different settings (Weerakoon 2024).

Taking cues from Cohen (2006) and Roundy (2007), this study adopts a more expansive definition. However, it is necessary to define culture more thoroughly in this research because this study specifically focuses on understanding culture dimension in “the social enterprise ecosystem”. This study adopts Abramson’s (2012) context-dependent model on culture. This theory synthesizes research on culture, acknowledging diverse elements of culture that influence action. Culture refers to values, resources, motivations and meanings. All these elements in culture influence action in a complex way. Importantly, context matters. (Abramson 2012)

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative approach to explore the cultural elements embedded in social entrepreneurship ecosystems. Social interaction shapes how social enterprises and their ecosystems are viewed. The data source in this study is EU’s social enterprise ecosystem country reports (European Commission 2018, European Commission 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). The analysis focuses on section “*Background, roots and drivers*” in each of these reports. This section was selected because it best captures the key narratives and motivations shaped by cultural factors. The countries chosen are Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Latvia. These Baltic and Nordic countries represent diverse backgrounds. These reports use institutional, official types of narratives and are created by experts in certain contexts. They use a shared definition for social enterprises. Looking at the language they use helps reveal what cultural elements are shown.

These reports describe social enterprise ecosystems at the country level. At the same time, according to ideas of the constructivist paradigm, they also actively reproduce and shape the ideas of social enterprise ecosystem. Knowledge is constructed through interpretation. Data gains meaning when viewed through different perspectives (Fischer 2003). Analyzing how cultural elements are represented in policy documents provides new perspectives on the role of culture in ecosystem dynamics.

Content analysis is a suitable method for analyzing policy documents in entrepreneurship and management research (e.g., Horne et al., 2020; Groenland & Dana, 2020). The analysis in this study progresses iteratively: After first, broad reading of reports the scope of this study’s focus is deliberately delimited. The first reading helps identifying how culture is described in each policy document. This step involves a thorough review of each document to extract descriptions of cultural elements. The second reading analyzes how cultural meanings, resources and motivations are described in detail. These are coded. The third reading cross-analyzes these codes and categorizes them into themes. The themes are identified based on their prominence in the policy documents. To validate these themes, the documents are carefully checked and reread multiple times, ensuring that recurring elements are consistently recognized and accurately represented. The interpreted themes describe what type of cultural element categories are presented as relevant in a sample of social enterprise ecosystem country reports.

4. Findings

First, cultural elements interpreted in the report by individual countries are presented. After that, cross-analysis and thematic categorizing are presented.

4.1 Cultural Meanings, Resources, and Motivations in the Finnish Social Enterprise Ecosystem

The term “social enterprise” is relatively new in Finland. However, the social enterprise ecosystem has roots in traditions of cooperatives and associations emphasizing collective self-help. These are associated with social justice, and ethical entrepreneurship. The Finnish social enterprises represent all types of organization forms. Lessons shaping cultural meanings of social enterprises are also drawn from international experiences.

A key driver is the need to address gaps in welfare provision. The report notes that the trend of delivering public services through quasi-markets has steadily risen, with a clear shift from public to private provision of social services. Social enterprises are seen as partners to the public sector, and they address service gaps particularly in rural areas. Workforce challenges in the social and health care sectors, especially in Finland’s sparsely populated areas, illustrate how cultural resources shape the development. Difficulties in recruitment and staff motivation also reflect cultural tensions around the perceived value of care work. Care sector social enterprises

have role in these cultural dynamics in Finland, influencing in the value of care work and accessibility of services in rural areas.

One of the drivers for social enterprises is described as promoting labor market inclusion. Work integration enterprises represent the most institutionalized category of social enterprises. At the time of the report, the Social Enterprises Act applied to work integration enterprises and this is mentioned. Access to European funding is mentioned as well.

4.2 Cultural Meanings, Resources, and Motivations the Swedish Social Enterprise Ecosystem

Although the term "social enterprise" is relatively new, Sweden's tradition of social initiatives is described to be rooted in democratic and labor movements. Well established non-profit sector has reflected the cultural understanding of the purpose and legitimacy of civil society in Sweden.

Swedish social enterprises blend cooperative, nonprofit, and business logics, framed within a welfare model where they complement public services. There is a cultural shift towards more marketization of welfare. In the field competition, choice, and market principles are new normal. "Competitive neutrality" suggests a cultural shift toward diversity of providers what was earlier more clearly public services. Civil society actors are no longer considered as activists or advocates, they adapt more entrepreneurial models. Terms like social enterprise and social entrepreneurship indicate a cultural blending of business logic with social purpose. Cultural motivations include maintaining access to welfare services, solving societal problems and serving humanitarian values, seizing opportunities within public service markets, and defending social value logics against commercial pressures.

4.3 Cultural Meanings, Resources, and Motivations in the Estonian Social Enterprise Ecosystem

Estonia's social enterprises draw on traditions of self-organization and civic participation while distancing themselves from negative Soviet era associations with forced collectivism. During the Soviet period, forced collective labor created deep distrust toward collaboration and collective entrepreneurship in Estonia. Cooperatives became associated with coercion and loss of autonomy, giving them a negative cultural association. The most common legal form for social enterprises and civic initiatives is the non-profit association.

Cultural reorientation in Estonia has used historic cultural resources of mutual aid, new social initiatives and civic participation and EU influences. The report mentions the EU accession in 2004, the introduction of the concept of social enterprise after 2005. At first the concept of social enterprise was considered unclear and elitist. Institutional cultural resources have supported ecosystem development. The establishment of supportive structures like the Estonian Social Enterprise Network in 2012 further supported motivations for building social enterprise ecosystem. The rise of social enterprises in Estonia reflects the activation of civil society as a cultural resource. There is a motivation toward autonomy, community-building, and democratic involvement. Social enterprises also fill in welfare gaps. The welfare model has been transitioning towards Nordic models. Social enterprises are diverse and emphasize transparency and local ownership in their operations.

4.4 Cultural Meanings, Resources, and Motivations in the Latvian Social Enterprise Ecosystem

Latvia's ecosystem builds on a tradition of civic activism rather than cooperative models, reflecting post-Soviet skepticism towards collectives and profit-driven enterprises. Social enterprises are culturally tied to values of altruism, solidarity, and community benefit. Historical association structures, evolving legal frameworks, early foreign donor support, and EU funding shape the resource environment. Organizations must navigate complex legislation and increasingly focus on sustainable financing. Latvian social enterprises are driven by the desire for improved living conditions, ethical entrepreneurship, government gaps in welfare provision, and the need for sustainable income models post-foreign donor withdrawal. A broader shift toward national self-reliance after EU accession also inspires social enterprise ecosystem development.

4.5 Thematic Categories and Cross-country Comparison

Based on the country reports, the following themes are interpreted to be influential higher categories or clusters for understanding cultural elements.

The first theme, the welfare state model, is a critical context with varying influence across countries. In Sweden and Finland, with publicly funded but transitioning welfare states, social enterprises function as complementary

entities, addressing gaps or innovating at the margins. Social enterprises here focus on enhancing existing structures rather than replacing them. After gaining independence, Estonia and Latvia had weaker welfare systems, so social enterprises emerged to meet important service needs. Social enterprises functioned as filling service gaps in the welfare system.

The second main group for cultural elements is the history of cooperatives and associations in each country. Reports highlight that Finland and Sweden possess an appreciated history of cooperatives, associations, and collective movements. This is seen to play a role in supporting modern social enterprise development. In Finland and Sweden historical infrastructures of collaborative action serve as cultural elements that support social enterprise ecosystem and help legitimizing social entrepreneurship. While Finland and Sweden build on longstanding traditions of cooperative action, Estonia and Latvia had to engage in a process of reinterpretation and reconstruction of collective action. This process aimed to culturally legitimize cooperation once more, separating it from its coercive Soviet era connotations, and re-establishing it as a voluntary, community-driven practice.

Thirdly, one key theme to understanding culture is the role of institutions. Historical views on entrepreneurship show different cultural paths: In Finland and Sweden, entrepreneurship has developed mainly positively, being seen to benefit the community and drive innovation. Entrepreneurship is closely tied to values of social responsibility and progress, showing a strong belief in its ability to benefit society. In Estonia and Latvia, however, the post-Soviet perception of entrepreneurship was initially negative, associated with corruption, profiteering, and opportunism. Social enterprises in these countries had to actively challenge these stereotypes, rebranding entrepreneurship as ethical and mission driven. This reflects a cultural effort to distance entrepreneurship from its exploitative, post-Soviet associations and reframe it as a tool for social good.

The role of institutions is the fourth main category for understanding cultural elements. Institutional environment refers to legislation, cooperative advisor services, structured funding mechanisms and any institutions that secure a role of social enterprises in the ecosystem. All country reports refer to these. All sample country ecosystems interact with other country ecosystems and get influences from them. Importantly, EU accession and targeted programs (e.g., EU structural funds, establishment of national networks) have been critical catalysts in building formal support infrastructures. These influences are underlined more in Estonian and Latvian reports.

Finally, values and norms are an overlapping theme. In Finland and Sweden, social enterprises are shaped by stable values of democracy, equality, and solidarity, which have evolved by integrating modern business practices with traditional collective action. In contrast, Estonia and Latvia experienced skepticism toward collectivism due to their Soviet past, but have gradually rebuilt values like trust, transparency, and civic engagement, emphasizing grassroots, bottom-up activism. While Finland and Sweden have hybridized their values with business methods, Estonia and Latvia have consciously reconstructed their values, focusing on local, community-driven efforts.

Table 1: Cultural aspect clusters in social enterprise ecosystems

Cultural aspect cluster in ecosystem	Welfare and institutional models	History of cooperatives and associations	Views of entrepreneurship	The role of institutions	The overlapping theme: values and norms
Description	Cultural expectations on the role of the state and public and other service providers	How collective organizing is perceived and what type of institutional arrangements and collaboration patterns are valued	Embedded values and cultural experiences related to entrepreneurship, what kind of enterprises are valued or stigmatized, how enterprise, social enterprise and impact are defined	Institutional programs Laws, regulations and codes Funding Networks	What is seen as valuable, ethical, legitimate

5. Discussion

In the reports culture is not directly defined, but interpreted themes welfare model changes, history of entrepreneurship, co-operatives and associations carry, values and norms cultural weight. All country reports comment that social enterprises are a new or relatively new phenomenon, yet their roots can be traced back to local initiatives where people created wellbeing.

By examining these cultural elements, the reports shed light on the local dynamics that drive social enterprise models, emphasizing the importance of context in shaping their success, goals, and relationships with institutional structures. The historical and cultural roots explain why some elements are trusted or mistrusted. In Estonia and Latvia, the economic traditions were disrupted and therefore building ecosystem is a different cultural shift. Trust and legitimacy issues can be interpreted to be more sensitive in Estonia and Latvia. For example, in Finland and Sweden, cooperatives are appreciated, in Estonia and Latvia, they are culturally sensitive topics because under Soviet perestroika, cooperatives became associated with corruption. In Estonia and Latvia social enterprise ecosystem is described to be influenced more from EU social economy goals.

Although the cultural elements can be traced back to historical changes and evolution, the EU level discourses on social enterprises are influential in all four country reports. Within this discourse, all country reports note that all four countries demonstrate a move toward hybrid models that blend social value creation with entrepreneurial methods. Social enterprises respond to welfare model transition and cultural perceptions of ethical business and societal needs. In Finland and Sweden, strong welfare states allow social enterprises to complement public services. Social enterprises are culturally associated with ethical entrepreneurship and democratic values. In Estonia and Latvia, weaker post-Soviet safety nets led to social enterprises focusing on community resilience and distancing from collectivism. Notably, terms such as “collective” or “social economy” are culturally interpreted differently depending on historical experiences.

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

Whereas the EU synthesis report (2020) integrated views from country reports, this study has provided a more detailed and fine-grained cross-country analysis by utilizing the theoretical perspectives of entrepreneurial ecosystems and specifically a cultural lens to them. In doing so, the present study contributes to literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems and social entrepreneurship in the European context, by showing how a broader cultural lens to entrepreneurial ecosystems and social enterprise ecosystem studies can be applied and integrated. Although culture is often mentioned in literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems and social entrepreneurship in general, research until now has tended to neglect engaging with it in depth or to consider its construction at the cultural level specifically. By adopting a broader definition of culture, inspired by Cohen (2006) and Roundy (2007), and applying Abramson's (2012) context-dependent model, the present study contributes to the literature from this perspective; This model specifically emphasizes how values, resources, motivations, and meanings shape actions, highlighting the importance of context in understanding cultural influences within the social enterprise ecosystem. The approach to culture differs from prior entrepreneurial ecosystems studies that have positioned culture alongside policy, finance, support systems, human capital and markets (Isenberg 2010). This study argues culture in social entrepreneurial ecosystems could be studied viewing culture as overarching and inseparable dimension, from a more heuristic point of view. This way of thinking sees social entrepreneurship and their ecosystems as shaped by multiple, emergent, complex and interdependent layers of context. The role of welfare systems, perceptions of entrepreneurship, institutions, values are key categories shaping culture in social entrepreneurial ecosystems. Future studies are encouraged to adopt a heuristic approach to enable nuanced exploration of social entrepreneurial ecosystems and their evolving cultural dynamics.

5.2 Practical Implications

Understanding social entrepreneurship as a socially constructed practice highlights the value of shared communication, learning and exchanging practices. Recognizing the ways people locally give and make sense of meaning is essential for crafting actions that participants want to engage in. Culture sensitive knowledge is useful in aligning initiatives with local cultural expectations.

Policymakers can design support measures that are aware of cultural elements and support evolution of social enterprise ecosystems appreciating local cultural elements. In Estonia and Latvia, policies might benefit from fostering mission-driven models and supporting community-rooted initiatives. In Finland and Sweden, there

could be value in reinforcing the integration of ethical business practices within existing welfare structures. But more research in this area is needed. Appreciating diversity may play a crucial role in facilitating inclusive growth that corresponds to the varied contexts across Europe.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

While the study provides insights into how culture is framed in the selected documents, it is important to recognize that these documents only offer a partial view of the cultural dynamics in question. The study relies on official documents. This shapes interpretation. The documents or this analysis are not able to capture the real-life complexity and informal side of the cultural nuances. However, the insights gained from these documents still offer important perspectives on the institutional framing of culture.

To truly understand the living culture of social enterprising, both from the grassroots and from institutional levels, there is a need to study more with empirical, qualitative approaches. Future studies could investigate countries' welfare systems as ecosystems and shed light on the diversity of dynamic systems where social enterprises play a role. Abramson's (2012) context dependent model on culture can provide a foundation for investigating the questions of how and where more, and how some of the cultural element's influence in action differently in diverse social enterprise contexts. There is a need to better understand the different aspects of social enterprise ecosystems, including individual motivations, norms, values, and attitudes, as well as skills, welfare model dynamics, and the interactions between the public, private, and third sectors. Expanding this knowledge supports social value creation while addressing contextual challenges and opportunities.

Ethics Declaration

No sensitive data were collected, and all procedures met ethical standards.

AI Declaration

Chat GPT was used for grammar checking.

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