Innovating Together: The Power of Clusters in Poland's Social Economy

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to analyze social economy clusters (SECs) as innovative organizational structures that bring together social enterprises (SEs) and other actors to jointly solve social, economic, and environmental challenges. The article examines the role of SECs in fostering the development of SEs, focusing on the areas: implementation of innovative solutions, management of business operations, and creation of social and environmental impact. We assess how the clusters facilitate cooperation, knowledge exchange among SEs, and increase their visibility. The research includes a case study analysis of a specific SEC from Poland - the Cluster of Social Economy Initiatives (Klaster Inicjatyw Ekonomii Społecznej, KIES). This case was selected because it provides a practical example of how social economy principles can be implemented within a cluster framework. The analysis focuses on the cluster's structure, objectives, member composition, governance model, and the mechanisms it employs to promote both economic development and social cohesion. SECs, as a form of cooperation between different actors (e.g. NGOs, SEs, public administration, financial institutions), may be a response to the growing demand for innovative solutions for sustainable development. The cluster as an organization based on cross-sectoral cooperation allows for a better exchange of knowledge, resources, and innovations, which can be crucial for sustainable development. The Polish context shows that European Union (EU) funds have played a key role in the creation of SECs, but their long-term viability depends on local leadership, political will, and the creation of a broader enabling environment. The findings will provide policymakers, practitioners, and researchers with valuable information on how SECs can promote economic inclusion, environmental responsibility, and social innovation regionally and nationally.

Keywords: Social Economy Clusters, Sustainable Development, Social Innovation

1. Introduction

SECs represent a new generation of organizational models that go beyond traditional industrial clustering. They are based on the principles of solidarity, inclusiveness, and democratic governance, promoting open innovation ecosystems that integrate SEs, public institutions, research organizations, and civil society. Through trust-based cooperation and social capital, clusters accelerate the development of social innovations, improve resource efficiency, and build collective problem-solving capacity. In this context, cluster-based strategic management can increase organizational efficiency and enable the creation of shared value, local resilience, and the implementation of the SDGs.

This paper aims to explore SECs as innovative organizational models that unite SEs and other stakeholders to collaboratively address social, economic, and environmental challenges. It investigates how these clusters support the growth and development of SEs, with particular focus on three key areas: (1) the implementation of innovative solutions, (2) the management of business operations, and (3) the creation of social and environmental impact. The article assesses how clusters promote collaboration, facilitate knowledge exchange, and enhance the visibility of SEs. The analysis is set within the specific context of Poland, considering national characteristics as well as the opportunities and constraints arising from the country's membership in the EU—particularly access to European funds and support mechanisms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Social Economy Clusters

Clusters are a manifestation and tool of economy networking, i.e. the creation of links between entities based on cooperation, flow of knowledge, information, and innovation. This fits into the concept of network society, which assumes that the modern economy and society function through dynamic networks of relationships instead of rigid hierarchical structures (Castells, 2011). The network approach is a modern strategy for managing an organization in a constantly changing environment (Czakon, 2012). Network thinking and perception make it possible to see new possibilities, opportunities, and perspectives that are invisible with a conventional approach, which sees separation rather than connections. A natural, spontaneously formed network is based on authentic connections and the need to exchange, develop, and cooperate. The research underscores the role of social capital in entrepreneurship development, suggesting that social networks significantly affect entrepreneurial success (Gedajlovic et al., 2013).

Traditional industry clusters are defined by geographic proximity and sectoral specialization, "as geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialised suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries and associated institutions in particular fields that compete but also co-operate" (Porter, 1998a). Cooke underlines that the idea of clustering improves innovation, learning, and competitiveness through spillovers, shared infrastructure, and inter-organizational trust (Cooke, 2001). According to Babiak (2011), a cluster is a network of vertical and horizontal links between enterprises, universities, and other organizations. The main goal of such cooperation is to achieve synergy or integration of the activities of many organizations. This reduces development and promotion costs, positively impacting the profitability of operations and the innovativeness of enterprises by facilitating transfer of information or solutions from science to industry, which contributes to regional prosperity. Successful cluster models improve the productivity of firms both within and outside the cluster, attract talent, increase employment opportunities, improve job quality, and encourage innovation across the cluster. These impacts contribute to regional economic prosperity and economic growth.

The idea of clustering is a new trend and growing social movement in the EU countries in the sector of social economy (European Commission, 2021a). The concept of social economy (SE) has attracted attention of researchers around the world because of its potential to stimulate social innovation, develop solutions to local social and environmental challenges, and mobilize citizens, public policy makers, researchers, and businesses (Compère et al., 2021). In general, social economy is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of concepts that prioritize social and environmental needs over profit, adhering to principles that differ from those associated with capitalist and individualist concepts (Yi, 2023). The heart of the social economy is social entrepreneurship and social enterprise. According to the definition of Defourny and Nyssens (2008), initiatives classified as social entrepreneurship should be characterized by meeting economic and social criteria. The economic criteria include carrying out continuous and regular activities based on economic instruments; independence, sovereignty of the institution in relation to public institutions; bearing economic risks; and having paid staff. In turn, the social criteria include: a clear purpose benefiting the community; the grassroots, civic nature of the initiative; a democratic management system; the participatory nature of the activity; limited distribution of profit. Many of the initiatives undertaken by social economy have proven to be innovative in solving socio-economic and environmental problems. Hence, the innovative nature of the concept is emphasized. Social entrepreneurs create innovative solutions to address important and neglected societal problems, mobilising the ideas, capacities, resources, and social arrangements required for sustainable social transformations (Bornstein, 2004). One of the manifestations of innovative approaches to solving social problems by social economy entities (SEEs) can be clusters.

SECs or "cluster of social and ecological innovation" are defined as "groups of social economy enterprises and other related supporting and economic actors that cooperate in a particular location to increase their joint social and ecologic impact by enhancing their cooperation, pooling resources and innovation capacity" (ECCP, 2025). The concept of SECs refers to organized, place-based networks of interrelated SEs and support actors (Fig. 1), including: NGOs, cooperatives, foundations, public institutions, academia, and financial entities that cooperate to address shared social and environmental challenges. Unlike traditional industrial clusters, which focus on profit, SECs emphasize values such as solidarity, inclusion, democratic governance, and sustainability. They provide a structured framework for cooperation that enhances collective capacity, accelerates social innovation, and facilitates territorial development, especially in regions with structural disadvantages (Borzaga and Bodini, 2014). The implementation of social innovation within SECs is significant as a process of seeking opportunities to provide solutions to existing social problems.

Figure 1: The entities of SECs

Source: own elaboration based on: Tanimoto, 2008, p. 12.

According to Polish law there is no official definition of a cluster. This results in a flexible understanding of the concept of clusters and impacts the creation of conditions that enable their operation and development (Piotrowski, 2019). This makes it difficult to conduct empirical analyses, especially for clusters in the field of social economy, as initiatives of this kind are recognized and named in different ways, including SECs, social economy initiatives cluster, social innovation cluster, etc. In this article, we define a SEC as a cluster of SEEs, operating within one sector or similar sectors that are in close geographic proximity and cooperate closely. It is important to emphasize that SEEs can also join other cluster-type networks, which are created with the participation of private enterprises and public entities. Examples of such networks in Poland, which are also joined by SEEs, are: regional product clusters, renewable energy clusters, and tourism clusters.

2.2 Social Economy Clusters' Role in Fostering Sustainable Development

The role and significance of clusters have been emphasized by many researchers. Bărbulescu et al. (2021) point out that innovation clusters, especially in the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) sector, play a key role in the development of entrepreneurship ecosystems. They facilitate cooperation between different stakeholders, leading to increased innovation and sustainable development. According to the OECD report (OECD, 2009) clusters contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship by fostering collaboration between companies, research institutions and governments, strengthening knowledge sharing and driving regional economic growth.

The importance of integration and clustering in creating sustainable economic growth is emphasized by Popkova et al. (2017). An analysis of how developed countries promote cluster initiatives in entrepreneurship shows that today's innovative economy operates through business networks. The cluster strategy in contemporary global practice is an important tool of public policy to increase the competitiveness of national economies. This means that the most competitive spheres develop based on the principle of clusters, and support for the construction of clusters increases the country's economic competitiveness. Sánchez-García et al. (2023) proved a positive and significant relationship between industrial agglomeration in territorial clusters and the innovative performance of firms. The improvement in innovativeness' level is partly due to the positive influence of social networks and collaboration within the clusters. Therefore, locating a business in a specialized, industry-focused area is strategically important, particularly for boosting innovation. Spencer et al. (2009) show that when industries locate in an urban region with a critical mass of related industries, they tend to generate both higher incomes and rates of employment growth. They prove the overall prevalence of clustering within a city-region is positively associated with income levels and employment growth. Understanding a cluster involves analyzing vertical and horizontal linkages between firms and industries, as well as institutional and regulatory influences. Strong clusters promote productivity, innovation, and competitiveness by enabling knowledge spillovers and efficient supply chains. Their boundaries are fluid and evolve with technological, regulatory and market changes. Clusters serve to enhance regional competitiveness and drive sustainable economic growth through collaboration, specialization, and continuous innovation (Porter, 1998b).

On the other hand, Rocha et al. (2019) noted that previous studies focused more on the economic performance of clusters and less on regional social cohesion. Initially clusters can reduce poverty and increase employment, but over time, the influx of specialized workers from outside the region can disrupt social ties, weaken informal networks, and undermine cohesion, which in turn limits knowledge sharing, innovation and ultimately undermines economic growth.

Therefore, for SECs to enhance rather than undermine regional social cohesion, they must be managed with a strong focus on social integration and inclusivity. Unlike traditional clusters that prioritize economic efficiency, SECs emphasize participation, equity, and the reinvestment of surpluses into communities' development. They play a significant role in fostering sustainable development through social sustainability within social entrepreneurship. Key strategies for achieving social sustainability include value creation, forming partnerships, and fostering social innovation. Moreover, social economy business models are particularly well suited to creating local and collective initiatives that generate environmental and social benefits within the framework of social cluster initiatives contributing to SDGs.

3. Development of Social Economy Clusters in Poland and the Role of EU Funds

The social economy has been developing in Poland since the 1990s, but it gained prominence only upon accession to the EU in 2004 (Ciepielewska-Kowalik, 2020). The support for its development has been provided by public policy and access to public funding sources, particularly EU funds. These funds provide each member state with the opportunity to build or supplement the system for financing SEs, to gradually strive to create a comprehensive offer consisting of effective financial tools, that are adequate to their business profiles, size, stages and development plans and needs. On the other hand, the legal conditions for granting such assistance allow the implementation of policy priorities important to the financing organization and can also drive changes in the operation of those interested in support.

The potential and importance of SEEs in solving social problems and contributing to sustainable economic growth has long been recognized. The European Commission has put forward a series of policy documents aimed at creating a favorable climate for SEs, in close cooperation with member states and various stakeholders. Some of the most important were the Social Business Initiative (SBI) adopted in 2011 (European Commission, 2011) and Social Economy Action Plan adopted in 2021 (European Commission, 2021b). The Commission emphasizes the need to support activities and provide opportunities for innovative business practices, cooperation and clusters, as well as the development of new economic sectors. Assistance is provided through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the Just Transition Fund to enable local and regional governments to enhance collaboration with social economy stakeholders. The largest source of funding for these activities has been so far the ESF. Promoting the social economy has been one of the EFS's priorities in previous programming periods and is one of the specific objectives of ESF+ today and supporting the development of SEs and the emergence of a social investment market - the operational objective of this fund. Poland is the largest beneficiary of EU cohesion policy funds, which creates a special context also for the development of the social economy. Support for the creation of a network of SEEs has been possible in recent years both directly (programs directly supporting SEEs) and indirectly (programs aimed at entities coordinating the development of the social economy sector in the regions).

Research indicates that the propensity of Polish enterprises to cooperate, as well as with the sphere of science and the business environment, is relatively low, mainly due to cultural factors (Hołub-Iwan and Małachowska, 2008). The formation of cooperative ties between enterprises and scientific units began only in 2004 with Poland's accession to the EU and access to EU funds (Fig. 2).

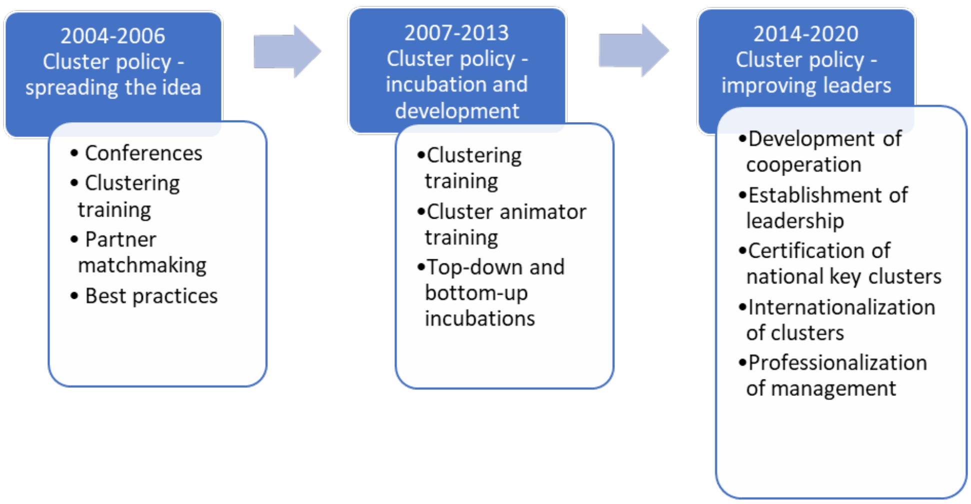

Figure 2: Development of cluster policy in Poland

Source: Choińska et al, 2020, p. 23.

The development of cluster policies for SEEs has followed this general trend albeit with a noticeable delay. However, according to recent studies, 40% of SEs now belong to various networks, agreements, and coalitions. Notably, this percentage includes both formal and informal associations (Bednarek et al., 2024). These data come from a report based on research conducted among a representative group of SEs in 2024 by the Klon/Jawor Association, which has been studying NGOs in Poland, including SEEs, since 2000. This research shows that entities with longer operational history (over 10 years) and those with annual revenues exceeding PLN 500,000 are much more likely to associate. This suggests that association is a certain later stage in the development of an enterprise, once it has gained more resources and experience. Most often, SEs organize themselves in networks of a territorial nature: local, regional or national; much less often in sectoral (branch) networks or networks of SEs. The low percentage of branch networks may be a consequence of the high fragmentation of the main areas of operation among SEs. During interviews with social enterprise leaders, most of them were positive about their experiences in networks so far, and they pointed to the many benefits that networking gives them. However, they also mentioned missed experiences with association, and these were mainly related to networking under a particular project, which was not necessarily based on a real need of the actors in question. It is worth noting that the creation of branch networks and clusters was included in the National Program for the Development of the Social Economy as a priority measure to strengthen the economic and social potential of SEEs (KPRES, 2022).

The need to establish SECs emerges from the challenges facing SEs in Poland. These include a reluctance among non-profit organizations to engage in business activity, limited demand for goods and services provided by SEs from public authorities, market competition and individual clients, poor managerial skills among managers of SEs, poor economic condition of SEs, weak intermediary structures and networks representing SEs as well as negative public perception of SEs (European Commission, 2020). To increase the efficiency of their activities and overcome the barriers, Bembenek and Kowalska (2015) advocate building grassroots social cluster initiatives to increase the intensity of their cooperation with the local actors operating in the social economy, as well as with R&D entities and local authorities. They confirm that the operation of these types of clusters positively strengthens cross-sector partnerships and fosters efficient problem solving. The development of economic clusters requires appropriate conditions and formal environment, as well as a stable political will, supported by real financial and non-financial support for entities coordinating and animating the processes of modernization and development of industrial territories (Lechwar and Wisz, 2018).

Poland still lacks comprehensive national and regional policies to support the creation and development of social clusters. The EU has been actively financing the development of SEEs and social innovation for many years, and it also supports the emergence of cluster initiatives among SEEs. The stimulation of with EU funding addresses several key stakeholders, including social entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations, regional social policy agencies, universities, and other institutions. Through targeted funding programmes, the EU actively supports the development of SECs, enabling them to scale their impact, increase knowledge exchange and strengthen the social economy ecosystem. EU support for SECs is in line with its broader policy goals of social cohesion, green transformation and inclusive growth, making such funding a strategic tool for systemic social innovation.

4. Cluster of Social Economy Initiatives - a Case Study

This case study was developed using a qualitative research approach based on the analysis of project documentation, implementation reports and materials related to the Cluster of Social Economy Initiatives (Klaster Inicjatyw Ekonomii Społecznej - KIES), which was created under the project "Jump to the Network", co-financed by the ESF. The case study provides a structured overview of the objectives, activities and results elaborated by KIES under the project to present it as a good example of clustering initiative in the social economy sector in Poland. The case study outlines the cluster’s current and future goals, focusing on strategic management development and cross-regional cooperation among social economy organizations. The presented data reflects the progress of the ongoing project and its anticipated activities and results.

4.1 About *KIES*

KIES was established under the project "Jump to the Network", which was implemented by the Wałbrzych Regional Fund within the framework of the Operational Programme "Development of Knowledge and Education" (PO WER), Priority Axis II: Effective Public Policies for the Labour Market, Economy and Education, Measure 2.9: Development of social economy. The concept of the project was developed by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy of Poland. The project had a total value of over 2 million PLN and was fully financed by the EU (Jump in the network, 2025).

4.2 About the Project

The project was aimed at strengthening the socioeconomic potential of SEEs by expanding advisory and training support related to creating and developing regional and supra-regional networks of SEEs, including partnerships, clusters, and cooperative consortia.

The project targeted 80 SEEs, including 40 SEs, 20 entrepreneurs from four regions in Poland: Lower Silesia, Wielkopolska, Lubuskie and Opole. The project focused on helping SEs join existing business clusters and on building a supra-regional sectoral network of SMEs.

The project activities began with a needs assessment of the target group. This analysis formed the basis for providing tailored advisory and training support. Networking meetings were organized to encourage the creation of partnerships, networks, clusters and consortia, and to promote the integration of SMEs into existing business clusters. A key element was creation of a supra-regional sectoral network. The network received support to ensure the sustainability of the collaboration by increasing visibility and branding. The exchange of good practices related to clustering and sectoral networking was also facilitated. Participants received ongoing support from social economy experts, as well as guidance, marketing support and access to training, networking opportunities, study visits, a database of good practices and the opportunity to participate in national and international trade fairs.

The project increased the networking capacity of the target group. One interregional sectoral network, KIES, was established, bringing together more than 12 social economy entities, including one cooperative consortium and one non-social economy entrepreneur. Additionally, five SEEs were successfully integrated into existing interregional business clusters (Jump to the Network, 2025). Furthermore, a model was developed to assist other SEEs in forming and developing regional and interregional networks, including clusters and cooperative consortia.

4.3 *KIES* Goals

The cluster establishes partnerships among SEEs, the academic institutions, businesses and public organizations. The cluster undertakes lobbying activities and supports its members in legal, economic and organizational matters. The cluster actively encourages entrepreneurship and standardization of services, connecting SEEs to strengthen cooperation. The cluster promotes its members' offering and seeks financing for development. It also represents its members' interests.

The cluster cooperates with public administration to improve conditions for social entrepreneurship combining knowledge resources within and outside the network. It also implements joint marketing strategies to increase the visibility and reach of the initiative. The cluster carries out educational, cultural and social initiatives, promoting sustainable development in all areas of activity.

4.4 Model of Support for Social Economy Clusters

The model developed under the "Jump to the Network" project contains a detailed guide with practical instructions on creating a cluster and integrating new members into existing clusters in the social economy sector. The model solution (Fig. 3) includes the following elements (Rychły-Mierzwa, 2022):

1. Initial definition of partnerships – this phase focuses on defining the scope and purpose of the network. A diagnosis assessed the needs and potential of participating social economy actors and SEs, including their willingness to co-create new networks. This helped to clarify the potential for innovation and identify barriers to cooperation.
2. Facilitating cooperation - participants were given a list of potential partners and took part in networking events which helped to initiate direct contact and foster early partnerships. Preparatory and marketing tools increased participants' confidence and visibility, strengthening their willingness to collaborate and exchange knowledge.
3. Networking and integration with existing clusters - workshops and working groups developed a common vision and organizational framework for the emerging network. This resulted in the creation of a cluster of SE initiatives, the establishment of a cluster governance body, the strengthening of strategic coordination of business operations, and the enabling of co-creation of social innovation initiatives.

4. Supporting the sustainability and growth of the network - promotional strategies and visual identification strengthened the network's image. Experts supported the cluster's strategic development, focusing on brand visibility and partner engagement. These efforts aimed at sustaining the cluster's long-term social and environmental impact by encouraging collaboration, pooling resources, and community-driven innovation.

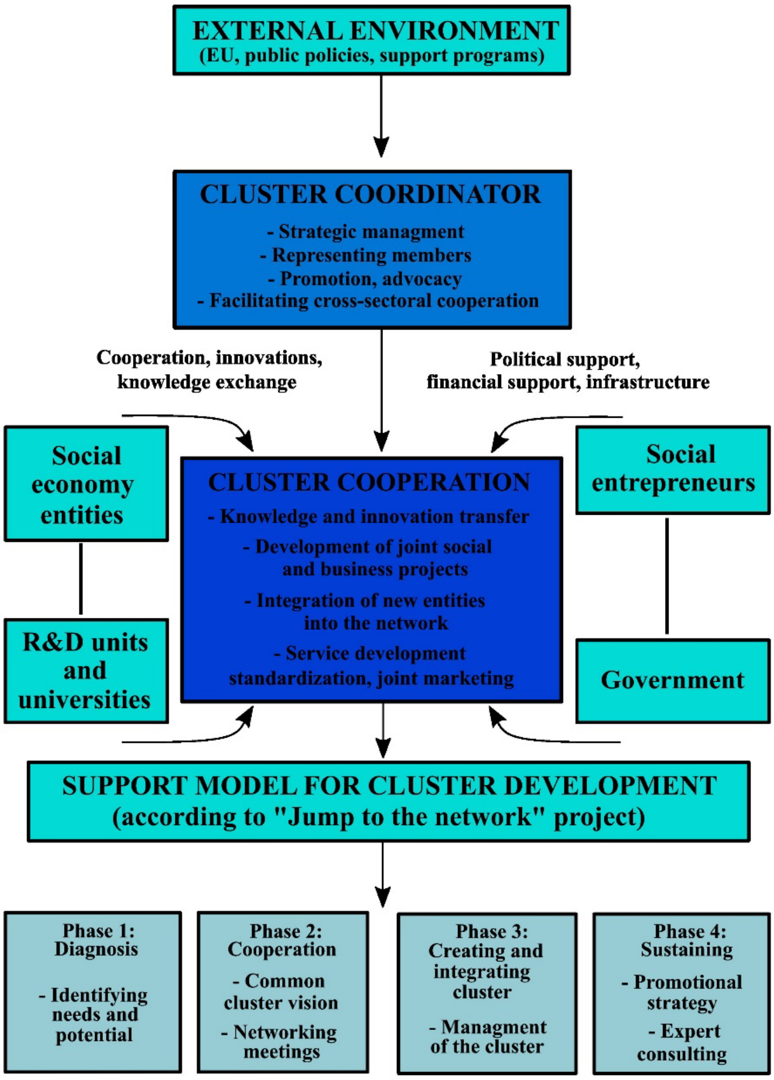

Figure 3: Model of support for SECs elaborated by KIES

Source: own elaboration based on: Rychły-Mierzwa, 2022.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

SECs, such as the KIES, demonstrate how strategic cooperation among SEEs can significantly increase their impact, efficiency, and sustainability. Clusters provide a robust framework for empowering SEs and driving inclusive, sustainable regional development by establishing structured governance, encouraging cross-sectoral collaboration, and fostering innovation. SECs play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development by creating synergies between social and environmental goals, managing resources effectively, and promoting economic and social inclusivity.

Successful SEC implementation largely depends on strategic management practices that integrate and align different actors toward common goals. This process presents significant opportunities and challenges, which align with findings in the literature. As Bărbulescu et al. (2021) concluded, our case confirms that SECs can play a transformative role in regional entrepreneurship ecosystems by enhancing social innovation and inclusion. The KIES shows that clusters tailored to the needs of SEEs facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration, capacity development and social value creation.

In the Polish context, while EU funds have been instrumental in launching SECs, their long-term viability depends on local leadership and an enabling environment (Ciepielewska-Kowalik, 2020). Without systemic support, clusters may not reach their full potential or meaningfully contribute to regional inclusive development. Clusters should be incorporated into broader sustainable development strategies, and place-based policies that prioritize innovation and community integration should be implemented. These findings suggest that more attention should be given to the development of clusters in the social economy, which focuses on strengthening social cohesion.

Further research is needed to analyze the long-term effects of SECs on social cohesion in different regional contexts. Examining the effectiveness of different types of clusters could provide insight into the most influential organizational forms.

Ethic Declaration

Ethical approval is not required since the research is not interventional, does not operate on sensitive data and does not have a clinical nature.

AI Declaration

AI tools weren't used in the creation of the paper.

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