

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEMS IN BULGARIA: LEVELS, KEY ACTORS, SUCCESS FACTORS, AND SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

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ABSTRACT: *Social entrepreneurship ecosystems can address society's wicked problems more rapidly and on a larger scale than a single social enterprise working alone. However, research on their types, levels, success factors, and environmental impact remains limited. This paper partially addresses these research gaps through a qualitative case study in Bulgaria, identifying eight types of social entrepreneurship ecosystems – five at the organizational level, one at the regional level, and two at the national level. It maps the main actors and their roles, highlighting 13 collaboration challenges. The study also identifies six social and ten environmental issues tackled by social enterprises and their ecosystems, and 28 factors influencing ecosystem sustainability. By clarifying ecosystem types, operational levels, environmental impact, and success factors, particularly in a country from Eastern Europe, the paper advances understanding of social entrepreneurship ecosystems. The findings provide practical guidance for social entrepreneurs and policymakers relevant to developing effective ecosystems and shaping supportive state policies.*

KEYWORDS: *ecosystems, social entrepreneurship, success factors, environmental problems, Bulgaria*

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INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship (SE) has developed in the academic literature in the past three decades (Macke et al. 2018), while the topic of social entrepreneurship ecosystems (SE ecosystems) has gained popularity since 2010 (Lyons–Roundy 2023; Bozhikin 2023). SE and its ecosystems are seen as essential tools for achieving sustainable development, sustainable consumption, and solving society’s social and environmental problems (Ho–Yoon 2022; Islam 2020). Through SE ecosystems, society’s wicked problems can be overcome much faster and on a much larger scale than by social enterprises and social entrepreneurs alone (Gerli et al. 2021; Bublitz et al. 2021).

By fostering collaboration, innovation, and resource accessibility, SE ecosystems facilitate the development and scaling of social solutions to address societal challenges more rapidly and broadly. According to Lin and Chun (2024), the “SE ecosystem is an innovation system composed of multiple stakeholders, linked by social responsibility, based on cooperation and symbiosis, and aimed at resource complementarity.” The two key drivers of SE and its ecosystems are social entrepreneurs and social enterprises. In Bulgarian legislation (i.e., the *Law on Enterprises of the Social and Solidarity Economy – LESSE*), a social enterprise is defined as

...any social enterprise, regardless of its legal or organizational form, that meets the conditions set out in items 1, 2, and 3, or in items 1, 2, and 4: (1) It carries out social activities that generate social added value, as defined by a methodology issued by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy; (2) It is managed transparently, with the participation of members, employees, or workers in decision-making, in accordance with procedures established in its articles of association, statutes, or other governing documents; (3) More than 50 per cent, and not less than 7,500 BGN, of the enterprise’s positive accounting financial result after taxation for the last reporting period is allocated to the pursuit of its social activity or objective; (4) At least 30 per cent, and not fewer than three persons, of those employed by the enterprise at the time of the establishment of the employment relationship are [part of a certain group of people specified in the law on social enterprises] (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria 2018).

The number of studies on SE ecosystems has grown rapidly over the past decade. Some of these studies concentrate on SE ecosystems related to specific sectors that aim to address particular social issues (Biggs et al. 2010;

Surie 2017; Pathak–Mukherjee 2020). For example, Surie (2017) examines how SE at both firm and institutional levels fosters innovation and economic development. She proposes a framework for building innovation ecosystems through SE, particularly relevant to the creation of new markets in renewable energy for rural and bottom-of-the-pyramid populations. Pathak and Mukherjee (2020) explore SE ecosystems in Gujarat’s craft sector and examine the roles of different stakeholder groups in creating and promoting these ecosystems. Other authors focus on country-level SE ecosystems, such as those in India (Jain et al. 2020), Portugal (Thomaz – Catalão-Lopes 2019), Malaysia with a focus on business incubators and intermediaries (Baskaran et al. 2019), and EU countries (Hazenbergh et al. 2016; European Commission, DGE 2016). For example, Kabbaj et al. (2016) examine the SE ecosystem in Morocco, analyzing its various elements (finance, human capital, educational institutions, support structures, market, and policy) and key stakeholders. In contrast, Mirvis and Googins (2018) investigate the SE ecosystem that supports social entrepreneurs across the African continent. Other studies concentrate on innovation-oriented SE ecosystems (Del Giudice et al. 2019; Gerli et al. 2021), as well as on the roles of public and private educational institutions in fostering SE development and facilitating the creation of new social enterprises (Thomsen et al. 2018; Bublitz 2020). In addition, recent studies have advanced the understanding of SE ecosystems by examining partner selection optimization (Lin–Chun 2024), the impact of regional vulnerability on social policy perception and ecosystem dynamism (Villegas-Mateos – Vázquez-Maguirre 2024), developing new analytical frameworks (Catala et al. 2023), and highlighting the significance of networking knowledge and skills for social enterprise performance (Sannikova et al. 2025).

However, further research is still needed on (a) the different levels of SE ecosystems within a given country, (b) the challenges in building these ecosystems and the partnerships within them, (c) the factors that drive their sustainable and successful management and development, and, last but not least, (d) the types of environmental and social problems they address (Bozhikin 2023). Furthermore, to the best of the author’s knowledge, there is almost a complete absence of studies focusing specifically on the types of ecosystems within a country, the key actors within them, their hierarchical levels and challenges, the environmental issues they address, and the factors contributing to their success. Moreover, little is known about SE ecosystems in Eastern Europe.

The current research seeks to partially address the above-mentioned gaps. Hence, the aims of this paper are as follows. First, to present the different types of SE ecosystems in Bulgaria and their levels of functioning. Second, to discuss the role of key actors in SE ecosystems and to highlight some of the challenges

social entrepreneurs face in collaborating and partnering with them. Third, to present the main social and environmental problems addressed by social enterprises and their ecosystems, as well as to identify the key factors (at the organizational, ecosystem, and macro levels) contributing to their sustainable development. The study's results will contribute to the development of the SE ecosystem literature in the directions outlined above.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, it describes the methodology that was used. Next, the main results of the study are presented and analyzed. Finally, the findings and limitations of the research are discussed.

METHODOLOGY

Case study approach

The case study approach was chosen to ensure that SE ecosystems in Bulgaria were examined in their natural setting (Yin 2014). This approach was also adopted because it is particularly suitable for answering “how,” “why,” and “what” questions. Moreover, SE has been actively developing over the last 15 years in Bulgaria. This has led to a significant increase in the number of self-defined social enterprises, as more than 58 of them were also registered in the national register for social enterprises² as of March 2024. However, more research on SE ecosystems in Bulgaria and Eastern European countries is still needed. This was one of the main reasons why the study was conducted in Bulgaria – an Eastern European country and a member of the European Union. The following research problem guides this exploratory case study research: “How can social entrepreneurs address society’s environmental and social problems more effectively and on a larger scale?” Based on this research problem, the following three research questions were developed:

Q1: What are the different types of SE ecosystems in Bulgaria, and who are the key stakeholders within them?

² Only social enterprises that have applied for inclusion in the register and have met the necessary national requirements for social enterprises (laid down in the *Law on Enterprise of Social and Solidarity Economy*) are presented in the register. See on the dedicated website of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy: <https://seconomy.mlsp.government.bg>.

Q2: Can social and environmental issues be addressed simultaneously by social entrepreneurs, their businesses, and their ecosystems/networks?

Q3: What are the critical factors for developing sustainable and prosperous SE ecosystems?

To mitigate potential self-reporting bias, several measures were taken. Data triangulation was performed by collecting information from multiple sources. Different research methods, such as interviews and document analysis, were combined to reduce reliance on a single type of data. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to encourage honest responses. Structured and clear questions were used to avoid misinterpretation. A diverse sample was included to minimize individual bias, comprising 23 organizations and 25 respondents from multiple cities and regions across Bulgaria. While self-reporting cannot be entirely eliminated, this approach helped to reduce its influence on the results.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to approach the above research problem. This tactic allowed respondents to provide detailed answers to our questions and share their experiences and valuable insights regarding SE ecosystems and their social enterprises (Yin 2014). The interview protocol consisted of ten theory-related questions (Table 1). The face-to-face interviews lasted an average of 62 minutes, with the longest lasting 86 minutes and the shortest 42 minutes. Most interviews were conducted in person; however, three were carried out via mobile phone and three via email. The significant information obtained from these six interviews was also included in the analysis. The interviews took place between May 2023 and May 2024. All interviews (those conducted face-to-face and by telephone) were recorded and later transcribed. In addition, secondary information (e.g., papers, reports, documents, and social enterprise websites) was used to complement the interview data. Thus, the validity and reliability of the study were further established.

Table 1. Questionnaire

No.	Question	Aim
1	Who are your organization's main partners? In which sectors and areas do they operate?	This question aims to gather information about the most important social actors in your SE ecosystem (Mitchell et al. 1997).
2	Who are the main economic entities in the segment/sector in which your organization operates? (These key economic entities may or may not be partners in your organization.)	We want to know whether these economic entities operate in the private, public or non-governmental sector (Mitchell et al. 1997).
3	What difficulties does your organization face regarding cooperation with other economic entities?	We want to discover the difficulties in creating collaborations, partnerships, or SE ecosystems (Mitchell et al. 1997).
4	What are the main SE ecosystems in Bulgaria? Can you provide examples of some of them?	This question aims to gather information about Bulgaria's main ecosystems for SE (Bozhikin 2023).
5	What societal or environmental problems does your organization and/or ecosystem solve?	This question aims to gather information about the critical social and environmental problems that social enterprises, social entrepreneurship, and SE ecosystems solve (Macke et al. 2018; Gupta et al. 2020).
6	Can environmental and social problems be simultaneously addressed by social enterprises and/or SE ecosystems? How can this be realized?	This question aims to gather information on the key social and environmental issues that social enterprises, SE, and SE ecosystems can simultaneously solve (Macke et al. 2018; Gupta et al. 2020).
7	What are the most important factors for sustainable and successful social enterprises and SE ecosystems?	Different factors are sought here that can influence different levels – micro level (organizational, management, cultural factors), meso level (ecosystem level factors), and macro level (state, institutions, municipalities) (Bozhikin 2023).
8	What are the most important regulatory mechanisms contributing to the eco-efficiency of SE and SE ecosystems in Bulgaria?	This question aims to provide information on what the most critical and effective regulatory mechanisms (e.g., implemented by government, business, and/or civil society) are in SE and SE ecosystems (Steuer 2013).
9	How can regulatory mechanisms be better used to contribute to the eco-efficiency of SE and SE ecosystems in Bulgaria?	With this question, we want to discover how inefficient regulatory mechanisms can be changed to contribute to the eco-efficiency of SE in Bulgaria. Respondents may also suggest new regulatory mechanisms (Bozhikin et al. 2019).
10	What recommendations would you give to an entrepreneur looking to create a social enterprise and SE ecosystem?	The information gathered with this question will be helpful for budding social entrepreneurs to build sustainable and growing social businesses.

Source: Compiled by the author.

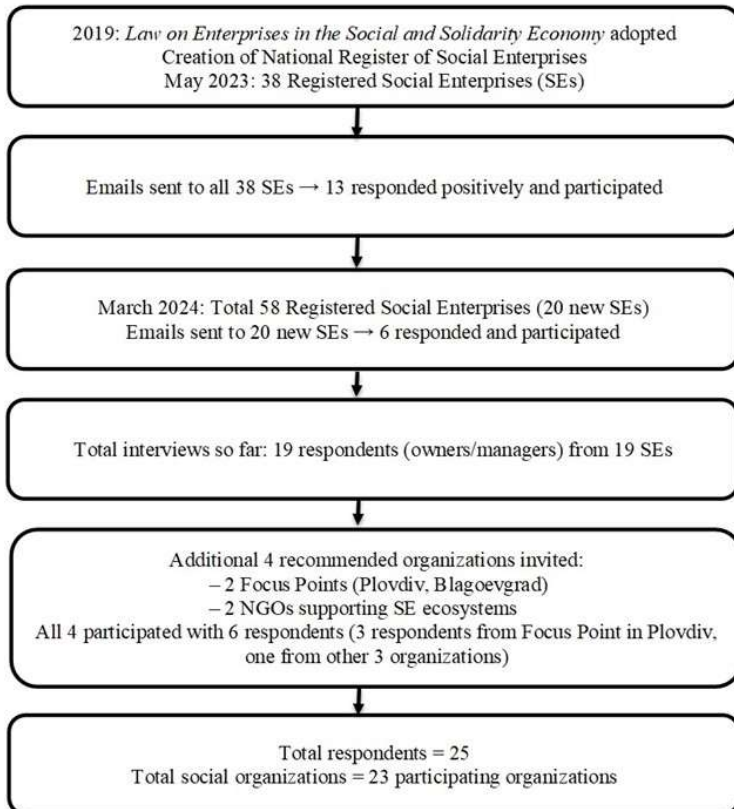
The process of selecting respondents

In 2019, Bulgaria adopted its first *Law on Enterprises of the Social and Solidarity Economy (LESSE)*, establishing the legal framework for social enterprises in the country. The law defines what constitutes a social enterprise and outlines the requirements an organization must meet to qualify as one. Based on this law, a national register of social enterprises was created. Only enterprises that have applied for inclusion in the register and have met the national requirements set out in the *Law on Enterprises of the Social and Solidarity Economy* are listed in it. As of May 2023, the number of registered social enterprises in this nation's register was 38. Consequently, the owner or manager of each of the 38 social organizations received an email containing information about the study, the research protocol, and ten research questions. Thirteen of these enterprises responded to the invitation and agreed to participate in an interview, while the remaining organizations either did not respond or declined to take part in the study. By March 2024, the number of registered social enterprises had increased to 58, meaning that 20 new social enterprises had been added to the register. Hence, we sent additional invitations to these 20 newly registered enterprises to participate in the study. Of them, six social enterprises responded positively, and their owners/managers provided answers to the ten research questions. As a result, 19 interviews were conducted with the owner/social entrepreneur or manager of these 19 organizations. Following these 19 interviews, four additional organizations were recommended for participation in the research. The first two organizations are the "focus points" of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in Plovdiv and Blagoevgrad, which aim to support social enterprises in their respective regions. The other two organizations are NGOs that are often essential participants in social enterprise ecosystems. All four additional organizations agreed to participate in the study and responded to the ten research questions. As a result, the total number of participating social organizations in the research is 23 (See Table A1 in the *Appendix*).

The owner/social entrepreneur or manager of each selected social enterprise/organization was interviewed for three main reasons: (1) they possess comprehensive information about the social actors that partner with their organizations and participate in their ecosystems; (2) they have thorough knowledge about SE, and (3) they have extensive experience in the SE area. Most of our respondents have long experience in SE, hold leading positions within their organizations, and have extensive knowledge in the studied area. The 25 respondents in the study work for 23 social organizations altogether (see Figure 1 and Table A1 in the *Appendix*). The respondents were asked ten similar general questions (Table 1), while specific respondents were asked about some

individual issues. These ten theoretical questions (Glaser–Strauss 1967) were designed to obtain information related to (1) the critical social actors within SE ecosystems, (2) the types of SE ecosystems and the factors contributing to their sustainable development, and (3) social and environmental problem-solving via social enterprises and their ecosystems.

Figure 1. Flow diagram of respondent selection



Source: Compiled by the author.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and later transcribed. The primary and secondary information collected for the study was carefully analyzed, summarized, and organized into three main categories: (1) types of SE ecosystems in Bulgaria and level of functioning, (2) key players within SE ecosystems at the organizational level in Bulgaria and interaction between them, (3) environmental and social problems addressed by social enterprises, as well as the factors contributing to their sustainable development.

RESULTS

Types of SE ecosystems in Bulgaria and the level of functioning

As a result of the research carried out in Bulgaria and the data collected and analyzed, eight types of SE ecosystems were identified (Table 2). These ecosystems are divided into three main groups: organization-level, regional-level, and national-level SE ecosystems. At the organizational level, five types of SE ecosystems can be distinguished according to the activities of social enterprises:

1. SE ecosystems with activity production and delivery of food, products, and catering. A similar type of ecosystem can be found in ORG16 and 17 (INT16, INT17).
2. SE ecosystems with activity production and sale of souvenirs, agricultural produce, and other products. Examples of this type include ORG6, 7, 8, 10, 13, and 15 (INT6, INT7, INT8, INT10, INT13, INT15).
3. SE ecosystems with the activity of providing social services, training, and social announcements. A similar type of ecosystem is characteristic of organizations ORG3, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 19 (INT3, INT9, INT11, INT12, INT14, INT19).
4. Hybrid ecosystems combining activities from the three types described above. Such ecosystems include organizations ORG1, 2, 5, 18, and 20 (INT1, INT2, INT5, INT18, INT20). For example, ORG1 focuses primarily on event food production and catering, while also engaging in the production of souvenirs and products for sale to various customers. Similarly, ORG2 carries out core activities related to chocolate production and event catering, and as a secondary activity, it organizes marathons with social causes and community services.

5. Ecosystems of large companies with a CSR strategy and looking for contacts with social enterprises and social partners to participate in their ecosystems. Survey respondents frequently mention such types of corporate social ecosystems. Examples include HP Inc. (INT6, INT1), McDonald's (INT1), and Starbucks (INT1, INT2). The ecosystems of large CSR-oriented companies support social enterprises and entrepreneurs through various activities, such as purchasing their products (thus promoting responsible consumption), showcasing best practices of social enterprises at corporate events, and providing funding and volunteering support to benefit social enterprises.

We can say that large companies, in line with their corporate social responsibility, include social enterprises in their ecosystems and work with and support them. (INT1)

In recent years, efforts have been made to build SE ecosystems at the regional level. For example, the Active Varna platform, created by the Social Teahouse Foundation, represents a type of regional SE ecosystem. Its main goal is to present and promote events in Varna with a social cause, as well as to bring together the non-profit sector and social entrepreneurs in the city within a single, easily accessible platform. In addition, the platform seeks to create conditions for knowledge sharing among participating organizations, to disseminate good practices, and to provide various forms of support – both financial and non-financial.

Within the borders of Varna, we worked on a project about empowering the civil sector, and we tried to create an ecosystem of organizations in the municipality of Varna – not only social enterprises but also NGOs and other organizations. The purpose of the ecosystem or network is to share know-how, good practices, and support. We also created a platform, “Active Varna,” which is in a test period. (INT14)

Regarding SE ecosystems at the national level, two main types can be identified, depending on whether the initiative originates from the private/non-profit or public sector. Over the past year, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) has sought to establish regional focal points/organizations for SE and social enterprises. This government-led ecosystem aims to provide various types of assistance to social enterprises, including financial support for job creation, consulting services, advertising, and other activities (INT22, INT23, INT24, INT25). At this stage, the ecosystem mainly covers social enterprises

registered in the national register. However, in the future, it aims to expand its scope to include a larger number of social enterprises and to provide more substantial support and expert services. Some of the survey respondents also confirmed this.

The state ecosystem for supporting social enterprises of the MLSP (and its focus points) is the main ecosystem for social entrepreneurship in Bulgaria. (INT23)

Two other types of SE ecosystems at the national level to support social entrepreneurs and their enterprises are as follows: (a) the SE ecosystem of the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law and its online platform “DarPazar” (INT4) and (b) the SE ecosystem of Reach for Change and RINKER (INT4, INT21). These ecosystems operate at the national level and are developed by the private/non-profit sector.

I can share with you an ecosystem that I hope has a good future, namely Shtrak and “DarPazar.” They should be promoted. (INT2)

The ecosystem I can think of at the national level is DarPazar. (INT6)

These two ecosystems aim to support social entrepreneurs and social enterprises in realizing their ideas by providing mentorship programs, consultations, network-building opportunities for social enterprises, participation in competitions, financial support, selling the products of social businesses on their platforms (thereby supporting responsible consumption by private companies), promoting their activities, and providing contacts with businesses and supporting organizations.

We work with a Bulgarian center for non-profit law, and one of their activities is focused entirely on social enterprises. They also have a platform, “DarPazar.” They have a community created by social entrepreneurs, and actually, we launched it thanks to their support and because they helped us believe in our idea. This ecosystem works at the national level. (INT10)

Table 2. *Types of ecosystems for social entrepreneurship in Bulgaria and level of operation*

No.	Ecosystem type and level of operation	Examples
<i>SE ecosystems at the organizational level</i>		
1	SE ecosystems with economic activity production and delivery of food, products, and catering	Organizations 16, 17
2	SE ecosystems with economic activity production and sale of souvenirs, agricultural produce, and other products	Organizations 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 15
3	SE ecosystem with economic activity provision of social services, training, and social announcements	Organizations 3, 9, 11, 12, 14, 19
4	Hybrid ecosystems combining some of the economic activities of the above three SE ecosystems	Organizations 1, 2, 5, 18, 20
5	Ecosystems of large companies that have a CSR strategy and are looking for contacts with social enterprises and social partners to participate in their ecosystems	Kaufland, McDonald's, HP Inc., Starbucks
<i>SE ecosystems at the regional level</i>		
6	An ecosystem for social entrepreneurship and social causes created by the private/non-profit sector	Platform "Active Varna," created by the "Social Teahouse" Foundation
<i>SE ecosystems at the national level</i>		
7	The regional focus points for supporting SE and social enterprises established by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) • Organizations 22 and 23
8	A SE ecosystem supporting social entrepreneurs and their businesses created by the private/non-profit sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SE ecosystem created by the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law and their the platform "Dar Pazar" • SE ecosystem created by Reach for Change and RINKER Organizations 4 and 21

Source: Compiled by the author.

Key actors in organization-level SE ecosystems in Bulgaria and their interactions

Bulgaria's social entrepreneurs and social enterprises interact and operate with various economic entities (European Commission 2016). The country's leading critical players in SE ecosystems are the state, local authorities, research and educational institutions, social partners, representatives of various organizations such as NGOs and cooperatives, donors, and financial authorities (ibid). The essential economic actors in the different types and sub-types of organization-level SE ecosystems of the studied social organizations are presented in Table A2 in the *Appendix*. These economic players are divided

into three main sectors: private, public, and non-governmental. This division provides a better understanding of whether the given organization interacts and builds its ecosystem through social actors belonging to the private, public, or non-governmental sectors.

A large proportion of social enterprises build their ecosystems with economic entities from all three economic sectors, highlighting the importance of these collaborations. There is often a balance between actors from these sectors, demonstrating the significance of each sector's contribution. There are also ecosystems of social enterprises in which participants from the private and non-governmental sectors take a leading role (for example, ORG1, ORG2), while in others, those from the public sector do so (for example, ORG15, ORG9). The creation of SE ecosystems involving different actors from the public, private, and non-governmental sectors leads to more sustainable social businesses that are able to operate not only in the short term but also in the medium and long term. For example, ORG1 partners with numerous organizations from the public, private, and non-governmental sectors in the implementation of its activities. These partnerships and collaborations occur at various levels and in different forms, ensuring the sustainability of its social business.

Without our partners, we would hardly exist. They form our SE ecosystem. (INT7)

ORG1 cooperates with various large private enterprises and NGOs that are, on the one hand, their donors (i.e., providing financial support) and, on the other hand, their key customers (purchasing their products and using their catering services) (INT1). In this way, private organizations are committed to social causes and demonstrate responsible consumption behavior. In addition, the organization cooperates with private companies in a number of other areas, such as providing employment opportunities in their companies for employees with intellectual disabilities, supporting social enterprise management by providing ideas, and other forms of assistance. All these collaborations and partnerships with private and non-governmental sector actors greatly support its ecosystem and the sustainability of the social enterprise, highlighting the benefits of these relationships. The following subsections outline the main roles of key economic players in social enterprise ecosystems.

The role of key actors from the public sector in social enterprise ecosystems

The European Union and embassies

The European Union is also often mentioned as an essential component of the ecosystems of social enterprises. European programs fund social entrepreneurs' ideas, projects, and activities. The programs that most often provide funding in this field are the Operational Program Human Resources Development and the Operational Program Innovation and Competitiveness (INT2, 3, 12, 14).

Our main partner is the European Commission... We also work on projects submitted by the European Commission. (INT14)

Embassies are part of the ecosystem of some social enterprises. They support social enterprises in various ways, such as publicizing their social causes, purchasing their products, inviting social entrepreneurs to their events, and providing connections to potential clients.

I [can] name partners and several embassies that help to publicize our social causes. We have been invited to the embassy several times to discuss our activities. They buy our chocolate products. (INT2)

The state and the ministries

All organizations participating in the study, except ORG14, interact with the MLSP. This interaction mainly concerns the registration of social enterprises in the national register and the subsequent reporting of their activities. Some organizations also cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Culture on social and solidarity economy policies (INT4). In mid-2023, the six regional focal points of the MLSP began operating (INT22, 23, 24, 25). They engage with registered social enterprises to provide services and various forms of support, including marketing, expert training, and consultancy (INT8). Additionally, some social enterprises collaborate with the Ministry of Education and Science on educational programs related to SE and the deaf community (INT11).

We interact with the MLSP...and sometimes participate in some projects. For example, once we got funding for one project, but it was not in [connection] with social enterprises, but with business initiatives. (INT1)

We cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Culture and actively dialogue with MLSP. We assist them in updating their policies so that they are adequate and adequately meet the needs of the deaf community. (INT11)

Other ministries in Bulgaria (e.g., the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economy and Energy) are indirectly involved in the SE field (European Commission 2016). However, they are not identified as key actors within social enterprise ecosystems. ORG4 cooperates with the state in the allocation of funds under the OP Human Resources Development (2021–2027) and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (INT4). State institutions also interact with social enterprises by facilitating access to vulnerable groups, allowing the use of public premises as focal points for SE products and services, organizing bazaars, and purchasing SE products for donation purposes (INT1, INT2, INT8). Some government agencies and funds, such as the Agency for People with Disabilities and the Social Protection Fund, also play important roles in certain SE ecosystems (INT8, INT10, INT2). Social enterprises often partner with these bodies, as they employ people with disabilities and benefit from financial incentives supporting their operations. The Social Protection Fund also serves as an alternative source of project financing for social enterprises' activities.

We partner with the Agency for People with Disabilities because we are a registered enterprise with people with disabilities. (INT8)

We have applied for programs of the MLSP, the 'Social Protection' Fund, and the Association for the Development of Sofia; we have described the project and received corresponding points and targeted funding. (INT2)

Municipalities and the local community

Municipalities are also part of the ecosystems of most social enterprises. In some cases, they play a leading role (e.g., ORG10, 12, 14, 15), while in others they provide various forms of support to the enterprises' ecosystems and social activities (e.g., ORG1, 2, 3). Municipalities can assist social enterprises financially, materially, or otherwise (INT1, 2, 3, 7, 12, 15). They may offer the use of municipal buildings for free or at a symbolic rent, thus providing both material and financial support. Such examples can be found in practice.

The building in which the organization is located was given to us for minimal rent by the municipality of Varna. This is how this partnership expresses itself. (INT14)

Municipalities may provide interest-free or low-interest loans to social enterprises, offering access to financing often unavailable from commercial banks due to their credit policies.

We took an interest-free loan from the municipality and paid it back within 5 months. (INT7)

Municipalities may also serve as clients of social enterprises, purchasing their products, promoting their initiatives, and including them in local events. Several municipalities, such as Rakovski, Plovdiv, Pleven, and Stolichna, demonstrate comparable engagement with the SE mission (INT2, 7, 15, 11).

Pleven municipality helps us informationally by spreading [helping disseminate] our causes and activities. (INT2)

There are cases in the country where social enterprises maintain poor relations with local authorities due to mayors' limited awareness of their potential to address regional social and environmental challenges (INT5). Respondent of INT14 emphasized the need for greater state and municipal engagement with social enterprises.

Universities, schools, and kindergartens

Universities play a key role in the SE ecosystem by disseminating knowledge, sharing best practices, and offering academic programs related to SE and the deaf community (INT11, INT2, INT1). Social entrepreneurs often serve as guest speakers at public universities, presenting their work and experiences (INT2, INT1). Similarly, schools and kindergartens are important actors within several SE ecosystems. They function both as partners and customers, particularly in purchasing food products for their institutions. Thus, these organizations are vital to the sustainability of certain social enterprises (e.g., ORG5 and ORG8).

Schools and kindergartens are one of our main customers. The fact that they prefer us is also a kind of partnership. (INT8)

We visit public and private schools... talk about social entrepreneurs and our work. (INT2)

The role of key actors from the private sector in social enterprise ecosystems

Private and corporate firms are integral to every social enterprise ecosystem and play a key role (see Table A2). They serve as both customers and suppliers of social enterprises, often purchasing products and services for Christmas campaigns and other events throughout the year.

We work a lot with corporate companies like HP, Devin, etc., i.e., big corporate customers, and we produce products for their Christmas companies. (INT15)

Many businesses have CSR, and therefore we can engage them with our activity. (INT14)

On the other hand, private companies participate in some social enterprise ecosystems in terms of labor relations and the employment of people with disabilities or mental/intellectual impairments (INT1).

We have held meetings and round tables with companies from the real economic sector and Smolyan Chamber of Commerce and Industry members. The meetings have led to the sporadic hiring of individuals representing the economy with a cause. [...] Stigma is an obstacle to the realization of [the potential of] persons with mental illnesses on the labor market. (INT9)

They can organize meetings and team-building activities with social entrepreneurs, distribute their products, and share best practices (INT6). Through cooperation with social enterprises, they may also integrate social services into their operations, such as support for deaf individuals.

We also partner with large corporations from various fields who buy our products. We are often invited to talk about our work. (INT2)

Private companies may also support social enterprises financially, representing another form of their engagement in social enterprise ecosystems. Such assistance may take the form of donations, project funding, covering operational costs, competitive grants, or selling social enterprise products with reduced or no commission through their retail networks (INT7, 8, 10).

Sofia[-based] companies look for us to organize events, to make donations – material and financial... and as a market and [form of] support, we meet a lot in [...] person. (INT10)

Some companies and corporations agree to a minimal or no commission to take our products and offer them in their store network. In this way, they support our activity. (INT8)

Another example of a successful collaboration between social enterprises and private companies is the partnership between ORG1 and local catering firms. In these arrangements, event catering is jointly managed by ORG1 and a partner company (INT1). Such partnerships broaden the organization's market reach and increase access to larger events.

The key actors from the NGO sector in social enterprise ecosystems

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are crucial actors in the social enterprise ecosystem, playing an essential role in advancing SE in Bulgaria and shaping the social and solidarity economy. They engage in ecosystems in various ways. For instance, the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law (BCNL) has developed a national ecosystem to support social enterprises through funding, mentorship, training, and other forms of assistance (INT4).

Our partner is the Bulgarian Center for Non-profit Law. They help us position our enterprise and products on their platform, DarPazar, to connect with corporate clients. We share common events and provide us moral support. (INT8)

Various donor organizations and foundations (see Table A2 in the *Appendix*) financially support social enterprises by providing donations and funds to purchase new equipment and use common premises (INT10 and INT8). Often, NGOs join forces to strengthen sales campaigns for the products and services of social enterprises (INT2).

We also work with the America for Bulgaria Foundation, which provided us with good financing for purchasing new, more professional equipment [so we could] develop. (INT10)

The non-governmental sector helps us with fundraising – the bigger organizations. Our projects are funded by organizations such as the America for Bulgaria and the dōTERRA Foundation. (INT7)

Difficulties in partnering with different economic entities

The study's respondents reported difficulties in collaborating with various economic entities (Table A3 in the *Appendix*). The *primary difficulty* for most social enterprises is maintaining a sustainable balance between social and economic goals. When a social enterprise focuses solely on its social mission, it often loses long-term sustainability and financial stability (INT4).

The *second group* of difficulties concerns building partnerships and developing an effective ecosystem. This challenge stems partly from limited staff capacity for inter-organizational cooperation (INT1) and partly from restricted access to networks with large companies and other economic actors (INT6, INT20). Additionally, identifying partners in the start-up phase and organizing partnership logistics are also seen as significant obstacles (INT13).

The *third group* of difficulties is related to customer relationships. The main challenges concern:

- (a) motivating businesses and consumers to purchase from social enterprises (INT2, INT20);
- (b) changing attitudes toward people with disabilities among economic actors (INT11, INT20);
- (c) offering price discounts to corporate clients, as social enterprises often lack competitiveness, limiting their ability to attract customers through lower prices (INT8); and
- (d) predicting customer and corporate interest in social enterprise products (INT1).

The *fourth group* covers personnel-related challenges. These include retaining employees between projects when the social enterprise relies on project-based funding (INT9). The shortage of experts to assist with project financing also hinders the creation of additional project-funded social enterprises (INT7, 17, 20). Moreover, the departure of key employees can disrupt existing partnerships and collaborations (INT4).

The *final group* of difficulties relates to the limited awareness among economic actors regarding the social role of enterprises. The lack of understanding among companies and public institutions about what social enterprises are and why

they merit support impedes their development and the formation of a sustainable social enterprise ecosystem (INT4 and INT5).

Environmental and social problems addressed partly by social enterprises and their ecosystems, and factors in the sustainable development of SE ecosystems

Environmental and social problems addressed partly by social enterprises and their ecosystems

The social enterprises participating in the study contribute to addressing major social and environmental challenges (Table A4 in the *Appendix*). Each enterprise contributes to solving at least one issue affecting vulnerable groups by:

1. providing social services for deaf people (INT11);
2. employing and supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities (INT1, 7, 20);
3. empowering at-risk youth and facilitating their labor market integration (INT14, 19);
4. improving the quality of life and employment opportunities of vulnerable groups (INT2, 6, 8, 16, 19);
5. creating jobs for people with disabilities, including those of pre-retirement and retirement age (INT2, 3, 10, 15, 20);
6. offering products and social services to the elderly (INT5).

The research also identified several environmental problems (Table A4) that social enterprises partly mitigate through their activities. These problems mainly concern energy, water, waste management, cleanliness, and environmental protection. Several social enterprises

1. use energy-efficient machines, lighting, and renewable energy sources in production activities (INT1, 2, 5, 20);
2. compost food waste, reduce production waste, separate and recycle materials, and clean public areas (INT1, 2, 4, 15, 20);
3. apply green supply, production, and service management to avoid environmental harm (INT4, 14, 19, 20);
4. use natural or recycled materials in production (INT4, INT15); and
5. manage irrigation water sustainably (INT1, INT7).

Through these activities, they contribute to addressing specific social and ecological challenges, either partially or entirely. Examples include organizations ORG1, 2, 7, 14, and 15.

For instance, ORG1 employs and supports individuals with intellectual disabilities while composting food waste and promoting sustainable water management. ORG2 enhances the quality of life of vulnerable groups by employing them and managing resources and production in an environmentally responsible way. These efforts include waste separation, recycling, and eco-friendly packaging. All survey respondents noted that social enterprises and their ecosystems can contribute to addressing both social and environmental challenges simultaneously, as demonstrated by the examples above.

Social enterprises, by [nature], work more sustainably and responsibly. We operate by avoiding pollution and improving how processes work, so we leave a smaller footprint on nature. From the point of view of the use of green energy by social enterprises, it is not related to the desire of the social entrepreneur but to the possibility of investing in this area. From the point of view of the waste and pollution that can be generated, I think every single social enterprise tries to recycle and collect separately. In many cases, we are also talking about businesses that compost. (INT5)

In addition, social enterprises can influence the behavior of various economic actors within their ecosystems. Companies and organizations that collaborate with and support social enterprises in achieving their social mission may also adopt environmentally friendly practices. Consequently, the impact of the social enterprise is amplified, allowing more environmental and social issues to be addressed. Larger, stable, socially significant, and sustainable social enterprises have greater potential to shape the behavior of partners, including in partner selection (INT10, INT5). Conversely, more vulnerable social enterprises find it harder to promote environmentally responsible behavior and sustainable consumption among stakeholders (INT10, and INT5).

Factors in the sustainable and successful management of the social enterprise and its ecosystem

The research identifies various factors relevant to sustainable and successful social enterprise management and its ecosystem (Table 3). These factors are divided into three primary levels, namely, the organizational level, ecosystem level, and macro level.

Table 3. *Factors for sustainable and successful management of the social enterprise and its ecosystem*

No.	Important factors	Interviews
<i>At the organizational level</i>		
1	Organization of social enterprise processes and good governance. Flexibility to the changing environment and customer preferences.	Interviews 13, 7, 2, 1
2	Access to quality specialists and experts in any specific field.	Interview 5
3	Trained staff to manage social enterprises	Interviews 14, 6, 21
4	Training staff to work with the vulnerable group that the social enterprise works with	Interviews 15, 14
5	Skills and understanding of how social impact is made, how to create and how to make systemic change	Interview 11
6	Good financial policy and financial management	Interview 2
7	Creating a good marketable product	Interviews 7, 2
8	Stubborn and the team is passionate about the social goal	Interviews 7, 3
9	Entrepreneurial experience and background at the level of strategic planning.	Interviews 8, 2
10	Pricing skills that require expertise.	Interview 8
11	Creating a good management team, especially in marketing and sales.	Interview 6
12	Good working conditions and a pleasant atmosphere in the social enterprise.	Interview 3
<i>At the ecosystem level</i>		
1	Organizing and managing the ecosystem well	Interview 13
2	General public awareness of social entrepreneurship, including the difference between fundraising and social enterprise revenue.	Interview 13
3	The need for a good leader and then a good manager to encourage people and organizations to believe in the social mission.	Interview 11
4	Good partnerships and good media work.	Interviews 7, 6, 20
5	The support from the local community and businesses, especially in terms of sales and responsible consumption.	Interviews 7, 6
6	To be sustainable, a social enterprise must have sustainable partnerships. Partnerships must have mutual interest and goals.	Interview 2
7	External funding is needed if there is no in-house funding for a social enterprise to be sustainable.	Interview 1
8	Communication between organizations and good culture between companies	Interview 1

No.	Important factors	Interviews
<i>At the macro level</i>		
1	The legislation	Interviews 9, 15, 6, 4, 1
2	Institutional support (through taxes, subsidies, etc.)	Interviews 9, 15, 14, 10, 6, 5, 4, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25
3	Subsidized employment	Interviews 9, 20
4	Longer funding for social enterprises employing vulnerable and disabled people.	Interviews 15, 6, 3, 20
5	Awareness and publicity through all known channels for social entrepreneurship and its ecosystems. Participation of the state in this process.	Interviews 9, 13, 3, 14, 11, 10, 8, 5, 21
6	Organization of exchanges, real and online, for the realization of the production of social entrepreneurs	Interview 9
7	Possibility of project financing from the state in the first phase of development of the social enterprise and its ecosystems.	Interview 13
8	Programs in which public-private partnerships occur, which will lead to a dialogue between business and the state in the promotion of social entrepreneurship.	Interview 11

Source: Compiled by the author.

Respondents identified 12 critical factors *at the organizational level*. Some relate to the enterprise's personnel, while others concern the social enterprise's strategic management. (See Table 3.) For the sustainable development of a social enterprise, it is essential that (a) the enterprise employs trained staff to work with vulnerable populations (INT15, 14); (b) the team is passionately committed to the social mission (INT7, INT3), and (c) the enterprise provides good working conditions and a pleasant atmosphere (INT3). Additionally, external access to quality specialists and experts can support the enterprise's work and help solve diverse problems that may arise (INT5). A frequently mentioned factor at the organizational level is effective management and process organization (INT13, 7, 2, 1, 21). Owners/managers must possess the skills and understanding to create social impact and systemic change, being well-trained in this area (INT11, 21, 14, 6). Managers should adapt to changing environments and customer preferences (INT1), implement sound financial policies (INT2), develop marketable products (INT7, INT2), demonstrate persistence (INT7), and possess entrepreneurial experience and strategic planning skills (INT8, INT2). They also need pricing skills (INT8) and must build effective marketing and sales management teams (INT6).

At the ecosystem level, respondents identified eight key factors for the sustainable and effective management of social enterprises and their ecosystems,

which should be considered alongside organizational-level factors (see Table). These include:

1. Effective ecosystem governance (INT13);
2. Public awareness of the SE ecosystem, including knowing what the difference is between fundraising and social enterprise revenue (INT13);
3. The presence of strong leadership and competent management to foster belief in the social mission (INT11);
4. Good and sustainable partnerships in the ecosystem that are built on mutual interest and goals (INT7, 6, 2, 20);
5. Collaboration with the media to promote social causes and SE (INT7, INT6);
6. Support from local communities and businesses, especially regarding sales and responsible consumption (INT7, INT6);
7. Access to external funding from the ecosystem when internal resources are limited (INT1); and
8. Communication between organizations in the ecosystem and a good culture between companies (INT1).

At the macro level, respondents shared *eight key factors* that support the sustainable development of social enterprises and their ecosystems, mainly linked to the role of government. Effective legislation applicable to social enterprises, their ecosystems, and the social and solidarity economy is crucial (INT9, 15, 6, 4, 1, 21). Most respondents emphasized the importance of institutional support (INT9, 15, 14, 10, 6, 5, 4, 17, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25), which may include tax reductions (e.g., VAT and profit tax) (INT 17), government subsidies, subsidized employment (INT9, 17, 20, 21), and state-funded project opportunities (INT13). Some participants suggested that financial support for start-up social enterprises employing people with disabilities should extend beyond the standard 3–5 years (INT15, 6, 3). Another critical factor is the dissemination of information about SE and its ecosystems through various media channels (INT9, 13, 3, 14, 11, 10, 8, 5, 21). Additionally, the creation of physical and online exchanges for social enterprise products and public-private partnership programs was cited as a means of fostering dialogue between business and the state to promote SE (INT9, 11).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to the limited literature on SE ecosystems (Bozhikin 2023) by:

1. Examining the types and levels of SE ecosystems in Bulgaria and the economic actors that constitute them;
2. Identifying the strategies of social enterprises and their ecosystems aimed at partly addressing some of the environmental and social problems;
3. Outlining key factors at the organizational, ecosystem, and macro levels that support the sustainable management and success of social enterprises and their ecosystems; and
4. Identifying difficulties in partnering with different economic entities within the SE ecosystem.

It is revealed that there are (a) five types of SE ecosystems at the organizational/social enterprise level, (b) one at the regional level, and (c) two at the national level, depending on whether the initiative originates from the private/non-profit or public sector. This multi-level classification contributes to and complements existing research, which primarily focuses on SE ecosystems related to educational organizations (Thomsen et al. 2018; Bublitz 2020), innovation and technology (Del Giudice et al. 2019; Gerli et al. 2021), freshwater management (Biggs et al. 2010), renewable energy (Surie 2017), the craft sector (Pathak–Mukherjee 2020), and supportive/national frameworks (Islam 2020).

In addition, key players in Bulgaria's SE ecosystems at the organizational level and their interactions are discussed. They are divided into three groups based on the sector in which they operate: private, public, and non-governmental. This division clarifies whether the social enterprise engages primarily with actors from the private, public, or non-governmental sectors, or maintains a balance among all three. The main actors in Bulgaria's SE ecosystems include the European Union and embassies, the state and ministries, municipalities and local communities, universities, schools and kindergartens, private companies, and non-governmental organizations. These participants are also frequently mentioned in previous studies (Ho–Yoon 2022; Cheah–Ho 2019; Villegas-Mateos – Vázquez-Maguirre 2020). The role of the above actors in SE ecosystems is thoroughly examined in this research.

Difficulties in partnering with various economic entities are identified and categorized into five groups. Most social enterprises initially struggle to balance social and economic objectives sustainably. The second group concerns problems in forming partnerships with economic entities and developing their ecosystems. The third group addresses issues in customer relationships, while

the fourth relates to personnel-related challenges. The final group involves the limited awareness among social actors regarding the social missions of social enterprises.

Social enterprises and their ecosystems can contribute to addressing society's social and environmental challenges. All the social enterprises in this study help solve at least one social problem, primarily affecting vulnerable populations. While addressing social issues, some also partially tackle environmental problems related to energy, water, waste, and overall environmental quality. This commitment to mitigating environmental issues through the responsible consumption of green energy, water, and other resources, as well as recycling, reflects their social and environmental responsibility. Moreover, social enterprises can influence the behavior of other economic actors in their ecosystems. Companies and organizations that collaborate with and support social enterprises may also adopt eco-friendly practices in their operations, amplifying the social enterprise's impact. Additionally, consumers who purchase their products demonstrate responsible consumption.

Based on the research, 28 factors contributing to the sustainable and successful management of social enterprises and their ecosystems (Table 3) are identified, which should be considered collectively to support the development of SE ecosystems. These factors are grouped into three levels: organizational (12 factors), ecosystem (8 factors), and macro (8 factors). Some are also discussed in previous studies (Spigel–Harrison 2017; Mirvis–Googins 2018; Jain et al. 2020). Other factors highlighted in the literature include building trust with partners and forming new alliances (Guerrero et al. 2021), infrastructural resources (Cheah–Ho 2019), and a culture that promotes risk-taking, trust, learning, and ecosystem development (Spigel–Harrison 2017). These can complement the factors identified in this study.

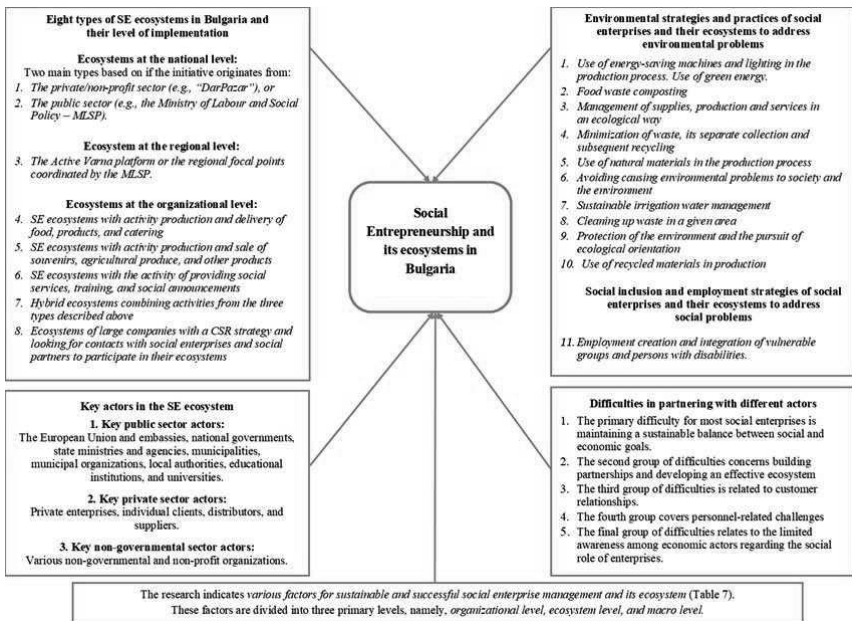
The overall research framework of the study is presented in Figure 2. It can serve as a foundation for scholars to further deepen their research on the levels of SE ecosystems and the economic actors participating in them from the three main sectors of the economy: public, private, and non-governmental. This may enhance the analysis of situations and activities in which it is advisable for economic actors from the public or private sector to have a stronger presence within a given ecosystem, as well as those where a balanced participation of actors from all three economic sectors is most effective. Furthermore, it would be of interest to explore additional strategies of social enterprises and their SE ecosystems related to addressing various environmental and social challenges of society through an ecosystem-based approach. Moreover, further research is required to identify the key preconditions enabling social enterprises to

influence economic actors within their ecosystems and to motivate them toward more ecological and sustainable development.

The present results can assist social enterprises in Bulgaria – and beyond – in better managing their ecosystems and avoiding potential conflicts and challenges. Following the success factors identified in the study and becoming familiar with possible difficulties in partnering with other economic actors may enable them to prevent such issues. Additionally, the examples of economic actors from the public, private, and non-governmental sectors (see Table A2 in the *Appendix*) may help them seek partnerships and build more resilient and sustainable ecosystems.

In conclusion, the present study has several limitations related to its scope. It includes only social enterprises registered in Bulgaria’s national social enterprise register. Similar research could be conducted in other Eastern European countries, and beyond, including a wider range of social enterprises across sectors. This could reveal more types of ecosystems at the organizational, regional, and national levels.

Figure 2. Research framework



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APPENDIX

Table A1. Information about the organizations and respondents

Organi- zation no.	Class of SE ³	Information about the organization	City	Interview number	Position in the organization	Experience in the social sphere
ORG1	A	They engage in social initiatives to create positive impact, including social catering, ready-made food delivery, and a social restaurant to train and employ the long-term unemployed.	Sofia	INT1	Manager	Over 15 years of experience, especially with SE policies
ORG2	A	Production and trade of chocolate and related products, organization of chocolate, sporting, and other events to generate measurable positive social impact.	Sofia and Pleven	INT2	Owner, manager	Over 10 years of experience in the field
ORG3	A	They provide financial advice to individuals and businesses. They construct, maintain, and manage websites and online media services. They engage in e-commerce and operate online stores. They also handle prepress preparation and photo printing.	Sofia	INT3	Owner, manager	Over 15 years of experience in the social sphere and with people with disabilities
ORG4	–	The organization was established in 2001 as a foundation for public benefit. It is affiliated with the International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL) and the European Center for Non-Profit Law (ECNL), which operate in over 100 countries to protect freedom of association and strengthen the legal framework for civil society. The organization's mission is to reform Bulgaria's laws and environment to enable free association and civic engagement. Its primary focus is the support of civic organizations.	Sofia	INT4	Coordinator "Entrepreneur- ship for NGOs"	Over 10 years of experience in the civil sector
ORG5	A+	Organized and established a patronage kitchen in Lyutibrod, providing prepared meals to older adults and people with disabilities in over six villages of Mezdra and Vratsa municipalities, where municipal services are unavailable.	Lyutibrod	INT5	Owner, manager	Over 20 years of experience in the social sphere and CSR
ORG6	A+	The social enterprise offers employment to people from target groups – individuals with disabilities and those disadvantaged in the labor market. It provides psycho-social support in the workplace for these groups and offers training to enhance civic skills and philanthropic engagement. It also raises societal awareness of the challenges faced by these groups.	Rakovski, Plovdiv	INT6	CEO/ Manager	Over 10 years in the field of social services and donations
ORG7	A	The enterprise is part of the economic initiatives of the "St. Nicholas the Wonderworker" Foundation, which has promoted policies for people with intellectual disabilities for 23 years.	Dobrich	INT7	Owner, manager	Over 26 years in the field of SE and policies for people with intellectual disabilities

3 Classification according to the *Law on Enterprises of Social and Solidarity Economy (LESSE.)*

Table A1. (continued)

Organi- zation no.	Class of SE ³	Information about the organization	City	Interview number	Position in the organization	Experience in the social sphere
ORG8	A	The firm is involved in producing children's educational materials for children and children with special needs and providing employment for people with disabilities.	Varna	INT8	Co-founder, manager	Over 6 years in the field of SE
ORG9	A	The firm provides qualification and retraining of persons from vulnerable groups of the labor market, performing social activities and social support of socially vulnerable persons.	Smolyan	INT9	Manager	Over 6 years in the field of SE
ORG10	A	Production of cookies and other confectionery	Kazanlak	INT10	CEO/ Manager	Over 10 years in the field of SE
ORG11	A	Training in Bulgarian sign language and translation services from and into Bulgarian sign language.	Sofia	INT11	Social entrepreneur, representative of the organization	Over 15 years of experience in the social sphere and with people with disabilities
ORG12	A	The facility provides specialized services and behavioral therapies to children with autistic disorders. They are facilitating access to employment and supporting the social inclusion of disadvantaged persons.	Sofia	INT12	Manager	Over 10 years of experience in the social sphere
ORG13	A	Activities for support, training, and employment of young people to achieve self-reliance. Production and sale of objects and souvenirs. Preschool education of children in an early childhood development center or private kindergarten.	Sofia	INT13	Manager	Over 15 years of experience in the social sphere
ORG14	A	The organization was established in 2014. In 2015, with the support of numerous volunteers and partners, the social enterprise opened as an alternative space offering young people with limited labor market access their first job.	Varna	INT14	Coordinator/ Manager of events	Over 8 years of experience in SE
ORG15	A	The company's activities are as follows: (1) production and sale of advertising materials promoting the city of Plovdiv; (2) production of textiles, leather, ceramics, glass, and other materials, including for the needs of the Municipality of Plovdiv or other municipal enterprises.	Plovdiv	INT15	Manager	Over 20 years of experience in business and the social sphere
ORG16	A	Production of bread, pastries, and other food products. The company's main goal is to create a measurable, positive social impact through charitable initiatives and employment for vulnerable groups.	Burgas	INT16	Manager	Over 5 years of experience in the field of social entrepreneurship
ORG17	A	The company's activity is retail trade in food products. The main social activity of the enterprise is providing employment to persons with permanent disabilities.	Burgas	INT17	Manager	Over 4 years of experience in the field of social entrepreneurship
ORG18	A	The social goal of the company is to improve the quality of life of people in an unequal position on the labor market.	Sofia	INT18	Executive director	Over 10 years of experience in the social field

Table A1. (continued)

Organi- zation no.	Class of SE ³	Information about the organization	City	Interview number	Position in the organization	Experience in the social sphere
ORG19	A	The organization provides non-formal education in the field of sports and active recreation	Sofia	INT19	Manager	Over 10 years of experience in the social field
ORG20	A	The object of the organization's activity is to unite the efforts of its members to protect people with varying degrees of disability in their integration into public life. Providing social and other services for children, adolescents, young people and their families.	Plovdiv	INT20	Manager	Over 20 years of experience in the social field
ORG21	-	The Foundation encourages individuals, organizations, and communities to transform lives through philanthropy and social investment. Since 2014, it has operated a Center for Entrepreneurship and Training, designed to promote education, lifelong learning, and support for (social) entrepreneurship in Bulgaria. It also launched the coalition Forum "Social Enterprises in Bulgaria."	Sofia	INT21	Social entrepreneurship expert, program director and trainer at RINKER	Over 10 years of experience in social entrepreneurship and startup accelerators
ORG22	-	Social Entrepreneurship Focus Point at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) in Blagoevgrad. Its primary aim is to promote the social economy. It serves the entire South-West region (Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Pernik, Sofia region, and Sofia city) and coordinates the technical and logistical support for developing social enterprise networks and distributing their products.	Blagoevgrad	INT22	Coordinator of the Blagoevgrad focal point at the MLSP	Over 12 years of experience in the social field
ORG23	-	Focus point for social entrepreneurship at the MLSP. It supports every social enterprise and social entrepreneurship in the Plovdiv Region, Pazardzhik Region, Smolyan Region, Kardzhali Region, Haskovo Region.	Plovdiv	INT23	Associate in Management of European Programs and Projects at the MLSP	Over 10 years of experience in the social sphere and social entrepreneurship
				INT24	2. Senior Associate in Management of European Programs and Projects at the MLSP, Regional Center – Plovdiv	
				INT25	3. Senior Associate in Management of European Programs and Projects at the MLSP	

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table A2. Key players from the public, private and NGO sectors in organization-level SE ecosystems in Bulgaria

A type of SE ecosystem	Organization no.	A sub-type of SE ecosystem	Key players from		
			Public sector	Private sector	NGO sector
SE ecosystems with economic activity production and delivery of food, products and catering services	ORG16	Food production and delivery activities	MLSP	Private cafes or small family hotels	–
	ORG17	Retail food and food delivery activities.	Regional Coordination Center of Social Enterprises in Burgas, MLSP, Agency for People with Disabilities	Private companies	–
	ORG6	Production and sale of souvenirs and other products	Operational program “Development of human resources,” Ministries (MLSP), Municipalities (Rakovski Municipality)	Suppliers, large companies (INSAOIL), various corporate clients.	Bulgarian Center for Non-profit Law, DarPazar, Caritas Network (Active Citizens Bulgaria Fund, CRS, Caritas Europe, Caritas Spain, Caritas Italy, Caritas Bulgaria)
	ORG7	Production and sale of agri-cultural produce and other products	Municipality of Dobrich, public clients and citizens, the local community, MLSP, Employment Agency	Large and small private companies (Esetere Bulgaria EOOD, Syngenta, LIDL, Starbucks, Vivacom), local gas stations, banks (Unicredit Bank, Post-bank), private customers	Foundations (St. Nicholas the Wonder-worker Foundation, America for Bulgaria Foundation, dšTERRA Foundation), Bulgarian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (BALIZ), Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFZ), Bulgarian Donor Forum, local clients
SE ecosystems with economic activity production and sale of souvenirs, agricultural produce and other products	ORG8	Production and sale of souvenirs and other products	The EU through the European Social Fund, the schools and kindergartens, the Agency for People with Disabilities, the MLSP and their focal point for social entrepreneurship in Varna	Private customers, companies and corporations, supermarkets	The Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law, DarPazar, Association “Nothing is Impossible”, clients
	ORG10	Production and sale of sweet products and catering	“Kazanlak” Municipality, MLSP, Agency for People with Disabilities	Large companies and corporate clients, companies operating in Sofia	The “DarPazar” social platform, the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law, the “America for Bulgaria” Foundation.
	ORG13	Production and sale of souvenirs and other products	MLSP	Companies selling souvenirs, using ceramics for painting, using souvenirs for gifts, design companies that commission the production of products according to their model and specification	Partners from the NGO sector
	ORG15	Production and sale of souvenirs and other products	Municipality of Plovdiv, MLSP, other representatives from the state sector and municipal structures such as hospitals, social homes, municipal enterprises	Large corporate clients like HP, Devin, etc.	Citizens, customers

Table A2. (continued)

A type of SE ecosystem	Organiza- tion no.	A sub-type of SE ecosystem	Key players from		
			Public sector	Private sector	NGO sector
SE ecosystem with economic activity provi- sion of social services, train- ings and social announce- ments	ORG3	Social entre- preneurship with the activity of provid- ing social services and social ads	MLSP, Municipalities, Employment Agency, Labor Offices, OP "Innovations and Competitiveness," Fund "Social Protection," KNSB, National Organization "Little Bulgarian People," Association SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria, Bulgari- an Red Cross, Hospitals (Pirogov), Universities (SU, NBU), Libraries (National Library "Saints Cyril and Methodius").	Cooperative Movement in Bulgaria, National Consumer Cooperative of the Blind in Bulgaria, private companies and businesses (who want to hire people with disabilities), platforms for job announce- ments (JOBS.BG).	Union of the Disabled in Bulgaria, Union of the Blind in Bulgaria, "Eyes on Four Paws" Foundation, Karidas-Sofia, etc.
	ORG9	Activity of provid- ing social services and training	Various municipalities, MLSP, EU (OP "Develop- ment of Human Resources")	Companies that are members of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the city of Smolyan	Foundations
	ORG11	Activity of provid- ing social services and training	Ministries (Ministry of Edu- cation and Science, MLSP), state institutions (National Revenue Agency, NOL, Regional Center for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education), Municipality of Sofia, Universities (Sofia University, UNWE, Hum- boldt University of Berlin, Gallaudet University), Edu- cational organizations (Sign Language Institute Canada, Fulbright Bulgaria).	Training academies (Telerik Academy), big companies (Fantastico, Google, Disney, Allianz, etc.).	Deaf Without Borders, "America for Bulgaria" Foundation, Meeting points, PRO European Network, Impact Drive, Listen to me with the heart, National Patient Organization.
	ORG12	Activity of provid- ing social services and training	MLSP, Municipalities (Capital Municipality) – provision of a building for use, Social Protection Fund, EU (OP "Human Resources Development")	Private companies, corporate donors	Public figures and donors
	ORG14	Providing social services, training, and organizing events	Municipality of Varna, European Commission	Rabotospodobni.bg, 7Elements consulting, large companies (Coca Cola, IKEA, UniCredit Bulbank, Isobar Commerce, BOSCH)	Foundation "Workshop for Civic Initiatives," TUI Care Foundation, Reach for Change, Kahane Foun- dation, Lumos Foundation, Da Otvorim Krga, Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law, Balkan Kids Foundation, citizens.
	ORG19	Providing social services and training.	MLSP, the European Commission, and European projects, schools, and universities	-	It partners with various non-gov- ernmental organizations from Bulgaria and abroad (Romania, Greece, Serbia, etc.).

Table A2. (continued)

A type of SE ecosystem	Organiza- tion no.	A sub-type of SE ecosystem	Key players from		
			Public sector	Private sector	NGO sector
Hybrid ecosystems combining some of the economic activities of the above three SE ecosystems	ORG1	Activity of catering and production of souvenirs	Individual donors (public figures and citizens), municipalities, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP), museums, cultural organizations, kindergartens, schools, universities	Strategic partner (Globul), media partners (Nova, BTV, BNR, DARIC, etc.), donor companies (Devin, NIVEA, AROMA, Raiffeisen Bank, and many others), corporate clients (Bosch Bulgaria, VM Ware, Bulstrad, Association for the development of Sofia, Coca Cola, Telus International), suppliers, catering companies and others, including many private individuals	Bulgarian Donor Forum, Bulgarian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, "De Passarel Bulgaria" Foundation, The Funding Network, CSR Bulgaria, YAI Network - USA, EPI - Switzerland, Bulgarian Food Bank, Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law, Institute for Social Services in the community, Caritas Bulgaria, National Network for Children, Reach for Change, Special Olympics – Bulgaria, Time Heroes.org, National Alliance for Social Responsibility, etc.
	ORG2	Chocolate production and delivery, catering and sporting events with a social cause	Municipalities (Municipality of Pleven), MLSP, European Funds, Social Protection Fund, Development Association of Sofia, Embassies, public schools, universities (SU and UNWE)	British Bulgarian Business Association, private companies (Nestle, Devin, Metro, Balis and others), parts of schools (Anglo-American school), sports clubs (Sports clubs "Begach").	Foundations (Maria's World Foundation, Synergia Foundation, BCause Foundation), Alliances (National Alliance for Social Responsibility), Multi Kulti Collective (MKC), Bulgarian Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities, JAMBA, "1000 km Balkan Charity Challenge" and others.
	ORG5	Production and delivery of food and provision of social services	The municipality and local government, state institutions, MLSP	Corporate partners.	Various NGOs.
	ORG18	Food production and delivery and provision of social services	MLSP	Companies in the restaurant industry	Caritas Network (Caritas Europe, Caritas Spain, Caritas Italy, Caritas Bulgaria), Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law, "DarPazar".
	ORG20	Providing social services, training, production, and sale of souvenirs	Student Council at the University of Technology, Focus Point – Plovdiv, MLSP	PAPIR BG, "Green Health" EOOD, MediaCafe.bg	IT partners with various non-governmental organizations from Bulgaria and donors.

Source: Table is compiled by the author based on interviews conducted and additional information collected from social enterprise website.

Table A3. Difficulties in partnering with different social actors

Kind of difficulty	Quotes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulties when social enterprise focuses only on achieving its social purpose. 	<p>INT4: "Difficulty when a social enterprise focuses only on the social purpose, which may affect its sustainable development in the future."</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited capacity to act and collaborate with multiple organizations Finding partners when starting a social enterprise and organizing the processes and logistics in these partnerships is difficult. Difficulties in finding contacts and connections with large companies 	<p>INT1: "Our difficulties are related to capacity, i.e., there are many opportunities that the partnership brings, but we cannot use it to the full because we have limited capacity, limited human resources to act, and this inevitably affects." INT13: "The difficulties we face are finding partners... and organizing the processes and logistics in these partnerships." INT8: "Difficulties are contacting companies and creating a partnership with them. Partnering with larger private sector companies is hard without someone providing us with a contact point. An intermediary is needed for these collaborations." INT6: "The difficulty is to have someone to connect us with the big companies and other economic entities. Mediation is needed, which we hope will happen through the MLSP and the regional support centers for social enterprises. At this stage, such mediation is provided by the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law."</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty with private companies buying their goods instead of paying a fine to the state for not hiring one disabled employee under state law. Difficulties in predicting the interest of customers – large companies Difficulties with the attitudes of economic entities towards people with disabilities. Difficulties related to the possibility of providing discounts to corporate customers Lack of a strong connection between people with disabilities and business 	<p>INT2: "Years ago, there was a change in the law, whereby a company with more than 50 employees should employ one person with disabilities. If not, then contributions are paid... In Bulgaria, many such enterprises do not have such employees, and the company pays these contributions to the state budget. However, if they buy goods and services from a social enterprise equal to two minimum wages per month, then there is a procedure by which they deduct these contributions from the state budget... It is tough for companies to implement this second option... It is a necessary simplification of the procedure and precise instructions on how to deduct contributions to the state when the enterprise buys goods from a social enterprise." INT1: "Big companies (customers) change their interest and are not permanent." INT14: "Difficult for people to recognize our cause... and so we are trying to spread information about us on social media to reach more people." INT11: "One of the main difficulties is attitudes... There is a lack of culture for diversity... Attitudes towards the deaf community or the different communities in society must be changed." INT4: "Change in the narrative of large companies." INT3: "Business perceptions of the disability community are out of step with reality. People with disabilities are people with a document. Among them, there are people with severe disabilities who cannot work. They are subjects of social policy, etc. But the main mass of them, over 80%, are fully non-disabled people of working age. And this is what business should embrace." INT8: "As a social enterprise, we have a very high cost of our products, and it is difficult to provide any discount to the corporate clients we work with." INT3: "The state should create a stronger connection between business and people with disabilities."</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty retaining workers at the end of one project and moving to another. Difficulties when a key employee leaves the social enterprise Lack of experts to support the project financing of social entrepreneurs. 	<p>INT9: "When we work on a project and it ends, we have to release the disabled people and hire new ones for the new project. Which creates a difficulty." INT4: "Difficulties when a key employee leaves the social enterprise." INT7: "It is difficult to be a social entrepreneur in Bulgaria, as there are no financing instruments. There is a lack of experts to support the project financing of social entrepreneurs."</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of public institutions on the subject of SE and SE ecosystems Need for more information about a social enterprise and why private companies and consumers should support it. 	<p>INT4: "In terms of institutions, the topic of social entrepreneurship is still new, and there is no well-built capacity to understand it along the lines of building an ecosystem." INT15: "The difficulty with corporate clients is related to not knowing what a social enterprise is and then starting to support it."</p>

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table A4. *Social and environmental problems solved by social enterprises and their SE ecosystems*

Environmental strategies and practices	Interviews and quotes
1. Use of energy-saving machines and lighting in the production process. Use of green energy	INT15: "We use energy-saving machines and lighting where is possible." INT2: "We've optimized the electricity as much as possible." INT1: "We would also use solar panels for green energy in the future."
2. Food waste composting	INT1: "We compost our food waste from the kitchens."
3. Management of supplies, production and services in an ecological way	INT2: "We are part of Oxford's next to zero initiative, which commits us to managing our supply, production and services in the most environ-mentally friendly way possible. 100% of our chocolate raw material suppliers are certified for responsible agriculture." INT15: "We generally do not generate any serious waste. If it larger, we transport it for recycling."
4. Minimization of waste, its separate collection and subsequent recycling	INT2: "The separate collection and sorting of waste is mandatory here... And for now, ecological packaging is at 70%, i.e. we try to use biodegrade-able packaging. We use less and less plastic. We aim our packaging to be 100% ecological after four years."
5. Use of natural materials in the production process	INT15: "Generally, we work with natural materials like clay."
6. Avoiding causing environmental problems to society and the environment	INT14: "We try not to cause environmental problems."
7. Sustainable irrigation water management	INT7: "We built our water feature for our garden." INT1: "We maintain an organic garden, i.e., we are into urban farming ... want to make containers and start rainwater irrigation..."
8. Cleaning up waste in a given area	INT7: "It took us a lot of effort and resources to clear the place, remove the garbage from the soil and make a garden... We had to clear tons of garbage in this hidden dump." INT14: "We have done workshops with the youth from the centers, which were oriented towards cleaning the Black Sea in certain areas and improving the environment around us."
9. Protection of the environment and the pursuit of ecological orientation	INT4: "Social enterprises are mostly in the field of environmental protection, ecological focus, solving social problems and challenges for people in difficult situations, the observance of traditions, cultural organizations and development of knowledge and education. Most often, these are the profiles of the social enterprises we work with."
10. Use of recycled materials in production	INT4: "One company produces a social product, but another supports it with greener packaging, often made from recycled materials."
Social inclusion and employment strategies	Interviews and quotes
1. Provision of social services to deaf people in the country. The first type is related to translation services from and into Bulgarian sign language, and the second type is training services in sign language	INT11: "Our social enterprise provides two types of services. The first type of service is related to translation services from and into Bulgarian sign language, and the other services are training services in sign language."
2. Employment and support of people with intellectual disabilities	INT7: "We have only one target group, and that is the intellectually disabled." INT1: "Our mission is to support people with intellectual disabilities to have a better quality of life."
3. Provision of work in a protected working environment and training for children in social institutions. Empowerment of youth at risk and their integration into the labor market.	INT14: "Through our mentoring program, we aim to contact children in social institutions so that when they feel ready and are 18 years old, they can start working in a protected environment."

Table A4. (continued)

Social inclusion and employment strategies	Interviews and quotes
4. Improving the quality of life of people from vulnerable groups and their employment	<p>INT2: "Our main goal is to produce products or services that have a social return. And to improve the quality of life of people from vulnerable groups."</p> <p>INT6: "We aim to provide work to people from vulnerable groups who would otherwise find it difficult to find one."</p> <p>INT8: "Our main goal is to employ people from vulnerable groups, mainly people with disabilities."</p>
5. Finding free positions/jobs for people with disabilities of working age, as well as of pre-retirement and retirement age through the platform Rabotosoposni.bg	<p>INT3: "Our main work is related to the project Rabotosoposni.bg. This is the only social career platform of its kind in Bulgaria, which is designed to serve as a bridge between businesses and people with disabilities of working age."</p> <p>INT15: "We have provided employment and some stability for disabled people who are otherwise doomed to stay at home."</p> <p>INT10: "We have made a protected space where people with disabilities can develop their skills and realize themselves."</p> <p>INT2: "We give jobs to people with disabilities...to have access to work, not to be socially isolated. In the work process, we support them with professional development and emotional and psychological support. We do it in partnership with many organizations. Through our activities, we strive to change society's attitudes towards people with disabilities."</p>
6. Employment of people with disabilities	<p>INT5: "Our organization provides products and services related to improving the quality of life of the elderly and people with intellectual disabilities."</p>

Source: Compiled by the author.