

Expanded abstract

Social Initiative Cooperatives in Spain: Context and Characteristics in 2022

Objectives

Interest in social enterprises and other social economy entities has grown exponentially in recent years. Within the universe of social enterprises, the social cooperative stands out because it is one of the longest-lived forms and has served as a seed for the development of subsequent business forms through its adaptation to different social needs (Hernández-Cáceres, 2023).

The aim of this research is to identify the current state of social cooperatives in Spain, known as social initiative cooperatives, and to define their main characteristics. To this end, the objectives are the following: (i) to determine the situation of social initiative cooperatives in Spain (SICs), and (ii) to show their general characteristics on the basis of the data provided by the Registers of Cooperatives.

The social initiative cooperative (SIC) is a type of social enterprise, that is highlighted in the existing taxonomies of the main studies that focus on the analysis of this type of organization; it is included in the section on social cooperatives (Young & Lecy, 2014; Defourny & Nyssens, 2017). Moreover, in Spain it is considered one of the three types of traditional social enterprises (Foncea & Marcuello, 2014).

The academic literature on this subject is scarce. Most of the published research belongs to the legal, regulatory and institutional field (Prieto, 2001; Arnáez and Atxabal, 2013; Rius, 2021). It is difficult to find empirical studies that focus on social initiative cooperatives.

Design / Methodology / Approach

The research carried out can be considered an empirical contribution of a descriptive nature, focusing on Spanish social initiative cooperatives.

The data used for the analysis comes from information in the registers of cooperatives of the seventeen Spanish Autonomous Communities. They were compiled in order to carry out the research that led to the publication of this article. The set of units studied corresponds to all the active CIS registered in the above-mentioned registers on 31 December 2022.

Findings / Research limitations / Implications

The results can be divided into three levels. Firstly, we quantify the number of SICs that make up the Spanish population. Secondly, we describe their behavior in terms of geographical and sectoral distribution, as well as their initial size. Thirdly, it identifies the common features that characterize the group of SICs.

Spanish population of social initiative cooperatives includes a total of 856 active entities at the end of 2022. In terms of geographical distribution, SICs are spread throughout the country. However, they are much more concentrated in four regions: Catalonia, the Basque Country, Madrid and Andalusia (80.51% of the total). In terms of economic activity, SICs are present in 16 of the 21 sectors defined by the National Classification of Economic Activities (CNAE 2009), concentrating on three of them: health and social services, education and professional, business, scientific and technical activities (which account for 64.7% of the total).

Another variable considered is the size of the CIS at the time of its creation. The results confirm the predominance of small entities (five or fewer founding members). The most common figure is three. In terms of the capital provided at the time of creation, most of the CISs were created with amounts between 2,001 and 3,000 euros.

The limitations of this study derive from the descriptive and exploratory nature of the research carried out, this research constitutes the necessary basis for future work to deepen our knowledge of CISs and their potential in the field of business linked to the social economy.

Practical Conclusions / Original Value

Due to the nature of this empirical and descriptive article, its main contribution is the description of the reality of the current state of social initiative cooperatives in Spain.

It is particularly important to point out that the number of social initiative cooperatives is small compared to other types of organizations in the business sector and in the social economy.

CISs predominate in the regions with the longest cooperative tradition (considered as “cooperative poles”). In addition, the study shows that the CIS predominate in the sectors where the social economy is mainly concentrated: social and health services and education. The study also shows their presence in other areas considered more distant from the third sector. Moreover, the small initial size, the limited number of founders and the reduced initial social capital that characterize them also highlight their parallelism with other entrepreneurial processes.

One of the strengths of this research is the empirical contribution of up-to-date knowledge on social initiative cooperatives in Spain. The collection of information from the registers of cooperatives in all Spanish regions and the creation of a database based on this information has made possible to draw up a picture of the reality of social initiative cooperatives during the period of the study, which is close to the time of publication. This will facilitate future research into the knowledge and potential of this type of social enterprise.