

# Expanded abstract

## 20 years of research in Social Economy in Spain through doctoral theses (2003-2023)

### Objectives

This paper aims to analyze and describe the characteristics of scientific output stemming from doctoral theses in the field of Social Economy and related disciplines, defended in Spain between 2003 and 2023.

### The role of the University in the ecosystem of the social economy

Drawing on the theoretical framework by Chaves Ávila (2004), the study highlights the multi-faceted role of universities in the Social Economy ecosystem. Universities contribute primarily through “supply-side policies” that influence the cognitive and institutional dimensions of Social Economy organizations. They function as key sites of epistemological construction by generating scientific knowledge -especially through doctoral research- and by sustaining active research networks and scholarly communities (e.g., CIRIEC-Spain, ENUIES). These efforts have enhanced the identity, visibility, and legitimacy of the sector, while fostering concrete support services such as training, consulting, and applied research.

### Methodology

The research is based on an analysis of doctoral theses included in the TESEO database, which registers dissertations defended in Spanish universities since 1976. The study examines all theses from 2003 to 2023 that include selected keywords -based on the typology developed by Chaves et al. (2004)- in their titles and/or abstracts. The keywords are grouped into thematic blocks including Social Economy, Cooperativism, Non-profit Sector, Associations, Foundations, Labor Integration, Social Enterprises, and Emerging Concepts (e.g., social innovation, CSR, solidarity economy). These classifications enabled thematic mapping of the field over the last two decades.

### Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of data on doctoral theses in Spain. After reviewing the overall data, we examine the data from a thematic, temporal, and geographic perspective, cross-referencing the data to obtain a complete picture of research in social economics. Finally, we address the gender perspective.

**A time perspective:** Between 2003 and 2023, a total of 1,114 doctoral theses were defended in Spain in the field of social economy and other related fields, developed at 69 public and private universities, of which 11% obtained a European or international doctorate.

To put this data into context, during the same period in Spain, a total of 214,638 theses were read, with the field of social economy representing 0.52% of the total theses defended and read. However, the increase in the relevance of this field of research is observed in the 4.4 times higher volume of theses read in the last 20 years compared to the theses read in the period from 1976 to 2002 (30 years) collected by Chaves et al. (2004), when 252 theses in Social Economy were read.

Delving into the time evolution of theses defended, the number of theses evolved from 29 in 2003 to 61 defended in 2022, with a steady increase observed throughout the period. It is worth noting that 2016 saw the peak number of theses defended, with 140, with the adjacent years (2015 and 2017) achieving the next highest levels (80 and 103, respectively).

**A thematic perspective:** Over the last twenty years, research in Social Economy in Spain has undergone a notable evolution, reflected in the thematic diversity of the theses defended. One of the most notable elements is the central role of the “Other Social Economy” category (civil society, social movements, volunteering, etc.), which has been the thematic grouping that includes the most theses in the four stages of the period. Its growth is evident, reaching its peak in the 2015-2018 period, with more than 100 theses dedicated to this category. However, in the most recent period analyzed, 2019-2022, a decline in production is observed, although it remains one of the areas with the greatest weight. Another area of great relevance over time is “Cooperativism,” which has remained one of the main lines of research within the field of Social Economy. From 2003-2008, when 27 theses on the topic were registered, to its peak in 2015-2018, with 53 works, this category has maintained constant growth.

**Geographical Perspective:** It should be noted that 83% of universities (69 of the 83) published at least one thesis over the period, while only 14 universities did not publish any theses in this field. Finally, it should be noted there are another 27 universities with at least one thesis published in the field of social economy, which individually represent less than 2% of those published in the field of social economy in Spain.

**Analysis by Area of Knowledge:** The current state shows that, although this is a multidisciplinary field, its greatest development is concentrated in certain areas of knowledge. There is a clear predominance of Economics and Business Administration (37% of theses in the social economy) and Social, Political, Behavioral, and Educational Sciences (33%), followed by Law (12%) and History, Geography, and the Arts (9%), indicating a focus on legal regulation and the historical evolution of these initiatives. These areas account for the greatest academic output, demonstrating that the social economy is primarily studied from the perspective of its economic, legal, and social impact.

**Gender perspective:** This is an area that requires research attention to reduce the gender gap that still exists. It is observed that over the course of two decades, the presence of women authoring and supervising doctoral theses in the social economy in Spain has shown significant evolution. Regarding women authors, in the early years of the period analyzed, their per-

centage stood at 41.4% in 2003, with a slight decrease to 39.3% in 2004. However, in 2005, a notable increase was observed to 56.3%, which represented an important milestone in female participation in research production. Since then, these figures have fluctuated, with periods of stability around 50%, evidencing a general trend of consolidating the role of women in the authorship of doctoral theses.

On the other hand, the path has been more challenging regarding thesis supervision. In 2003, only 10% of theses were supervised by women, a significantly lower figure than the representation of female authors. However, the percentage has steadily increased over the period, albeit with significant variations. For some years, the participation of female supervisors has fluctuated between 20% and 35%, reflecting the persistence of inequalities in access to leadership roles in academia, although in 2023 it reached the highest figure in the period (47%).

In short, over the period, the gap between the two metrics has narrowed, resulting in greater inclusion of women in research supervision. Although female authorship has been more frequent since the beginning, the upward trend in thesis supervision suggests that, over time, more female researchers are assuming leadership roles in the field of social economy.

## Limitations

The study relies exclusively on the TESEO database, which limits insight into the quality and academic impact of the theses. Inconsistent abstract content and keyword variability also pose classification challenges. Future research should incorporate qualitative approaches and follow-up on researchers' academic contributions to assess the field's long-term development.

## Implications

This work provides an updated, data-driven overview of doctoral research on Social Economy in Spain. It underscores the field's consolidation as an academic discipline and identifies emerging areas of inquiry that warrant further exploration.

## Conclusions

The analysis of doctoral theses in Social Economy defended in Spain between 2003 and 2023 reveals a consistent growth trend and progressive thematic diversification, underscoring the academic consolidation of this field. In comparison with the seminal work of Chaves et al. (2004), which covered the period from 1976 to 2003 and identified 252 theses, the current study records a fourfold increase in the number of theses over the subsequent two decades. This trajectory reflects both institutional strengthening and heightened scientific interest in Social Economy as a legitimate academic discipline.

At the institutional level, there is considerable variation in the research output among universities. While some institutions -such as the Universidad Complutense de Madrid or the Universitat de València- have led the field with sustained and diverse production across thematic areas, others display a strong specialization in particular topics. For instance, Mondragón

Unibertsitatea stands out for its focus on cooperativism, Universidad Pontificia de Comillas for social enterprises, and Universidad de Sevilla for foundations.

From a thematic standpoint, although traditional lines of inquiry such as cooperativism, foundations, and civil society remain central, the last two decades have seen the emergence of new areas, including social innovation, corporate social responsibility, and social entrepreneurship. These evolving research lines reflect the intersection of Social Economy with contemporary socio-economic challenges and trends, and emphasize the need for updated analytical frameworks.

Moreover, the field continues to be predominantly analyzed through the lenses of Economics and Business Administration and the Social and Political Sciences. This concentration raises important questions about the disciplinary framing of “Social Economy” in particular, whether the economic connotation of the term deters engagement from other areas of knowledge. This issue invites reflection on the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary potential of Social Economy research and the institutional mechanisms needed to foster greater cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Finally, regarding gender equity, the data show a significant increase in the participation of women as doctoral authors, reaching near parity with men. However, disparities persist in thesis supervision, where female representation, while improving, still lags behind. This highlights ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in academic leadership and underlines the need to further promote equality in research mentoring and institutional governance.

## Original value

This paper offers the first comprehensive longitudinal review of doctoral theses on Social Economy in Spain since the foundational work of Chaves et al. (2004), providing valuable insights for scholars, institutions, and policymakers.