

## ADAPTATION TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS: CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ECONOMY ACTORS IN LATVIA

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### Abstract

Covid-19 has affected the whole economy of Latvia, leading to various social and economic problems in the country. Social economy actors applying an innovative approach to solving social problems could make a significant contribution to improvement in social life, especially during the Covid-19 crisis and the post-crisis by supplying various services and products, helping the state to solve gaps that it cannot cope with without the help of the private or non-governmental sector. The research aims to describe the challenges faced by social economy actors in Latvia during Covid-19 and their responses to the crisis. The research employed case study analysis to describe the responses of 9 social economy organizations to mitigate the consequences of the crisis. The research found that Covid-19 had a negative impact on the performance of social economy actors faced by financial, organizational, social and psychological challenges, which overall did not significantly differ from those faced by other market actors in the particular situation. To solve the current problems in society and ensure their self-existence, social economy actors implemented an innovating strategy that focused on three priorities: new digital experiences, products and services in response to changes in customer behaviours and needs; development of new offers for a new or the current target group; new partnerships both within and outside the industry.

**Key words:** social economy, social enterprise, Covid-19, crisis.

### Introduction

The Covid-19 became a great challenge for many organizations, yet social economy organizations are the ones that have been hardest hit by the disruptions (Islam & Habib, 2022). GDP per capita rose from 62% of the OECD average in 2015 to about 71% in 2021. However, impact of the Covid-19 was different on organizations. Some of them got benefits from this situation (e.g., streaming, home delivery, online communication) (Pedersen & Ritter, 2022). Covid-19 has affected the whole economy of Latvia, but especially industries such as tourism, accommodation and restaurants, arts and entertainment, transportation (Hansen, 2021). Those are all industries related to movement and assembly restrictions. The consequences of Covid-19 were immediate and significant and they negatively affected economy in Latvia, including the social economy.

The Covid-19 created the situation when the number of unemployed people rose rapidly. At the same time, job vacancies were rising quickly. The decrease in employment was due to the reduction of workloads and the number of employees as well as unpaid leave granted to employees. This contributed to the aggravation of social and economic problems in society. It is the social economy actors applying an innovative approach to solving social problems that can make a significant contribution to improvement in social life, especially during the Covid-19 crisis and the post-crisis by supplying various services and products, helping the state to solve gaps that it cannot cope with without the help of the private or non-governmental sector. This is also confirmed by the fact that during the crisis, new social enterprises, associations and foundations were established in Latvia, and their activities were aimed at solving social problems in society. In 2022, the number of social enterprises reached 194, while the number of

associations and foundations totalled 25 048. An OECD (2020) research study also states that social economy organizations (associations, co-operatives, mutual organizations, foundations and social enterprises) are significant players in reshaping the economy and society after Covid-19 crisis.

The research aims to describe the challenges faced by social economy actors in Latvia during Covid-19 and their responses to the crisis. The tasks are: 1) to describe the challenges caused by Covid-19 in the social economy in Latvia; 2) to describe the strategy and actions of social economy actors for mitigating the consequences of the crisis.

### Materials and Methods

The present paper is based on a case study analysis that is qualitative research method (Yin, 2014). The methodological goal has been to analyze organizations from the social economy in Latvia to describe their strategy and actions to survive the Covid-19 crisis. The research interest is to understand how social economy organizations survived the Covid-19. The data is collected from four cases that were selected based on their impact and innovation, thus revealing a variety of strategies and adaptation of social economy actors in a crisis situation. The cases were chosen based on experts' recommendations who work with social economy entities – director of Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia and representatives from Ministry of Welfare. The choice for case studies was made based on several criteria: the organization should operate in social economy sector, must contain innovation element in solving a problem, scale of impact in society should be high and strategy in crisis situation should be sustainable.

### Results and Discussion

*1. The nature of crisis and the impacts of Covid-19 on*

*the social economy in Latvia.* Crisis can be a significant threat or an opportunity to organizations (Klyver & Nielsen, 2021). In terms of Covid-19 crisis, it should be stressed that it was sudden, but not unpredictable crisis (Davidsson, Recker, & Von Briel, 2021). When a crisis hits an organization or enterprise, it dominates the agenda and necessitates immediate action to minimize the damage and to restore organizational operations (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). The way an organization responds to a crisis can vary greatly. The present research analyzes the strategies implemented and actions taken by social economy actors in Latvia to overcome the Covid-19 crisis, simultaneously dealing with social problems in society.

Some research studies have been conducted on how social enterprises (SAFEGE Baltija, 2022; Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, 2022), associations and foundations (Civic Alliance Latvia, 2022) were impacted by the Covid-19 situation in Latvia. They revealed that overall, the impacts were negative because the organizations faced financial, organizational, social and psychological challenges. The performance of cooperatives was also negatively impacted, especially that of small agricultural cooperatives, yet the research on them was limited.

*Individual social, health and psychological challenges.* One of the main challenges were difficulties to combine work and family life (SAFEGE Baltija, 2022). Other dominant challenges were related to social isolation and fact that employees felt fear of getting sick from Covid-19 at work (SAFEGE Baltija, 2022).

Research from other countries on the impact of Covid-19 also revealed similar trends. As pointed out by Vowels *et al.* (2022) Covid-19 has affected people in the whole world. It became harder to distinguish work and family life, social distancing affected emotional situation (Restubog, Ocampo, & Wang, 2020). As a result, people felt more stress and burnout (Sonntag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010).

*Financial challenges.* In Latvia, the social economy actors have indicated that they faced financial instability, which was influenced by the fact that their revenues declined during the crisis (SAFEGE Baltija, 2022). Some of the organizations were anxious about future operations because they did not have any financial reserves to cover an increase in expected costs (Civic Alliance Latvia, 2022). As a result, this caused difficulty in covering the obligations. About half of the organizations involved in the study admitted that they still regularly had unexpected expenses and were unable to fully fulfil the organization's mission, goals and tasks (Civic Alliance Latvia, 2022). A similar situation was also identified by the Latvian Social Enterprise Monitor 2021/2022, which reported that the social economy actors noted that the biggest challenge for them was sales decrease (47.6%). Also, the lack of money to pay employees and cover fixed costs was a problem for 37.8% respondents (Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, 2022).

A similar situation was observed in the social economy of other countries. According to the OECD (2020)

research study, social economy organizations faced with reduced cash flows and a drop in sales. As a result, many social economy organizations had to change their business models, stop doing some of their usual activities in order to survive in the Covid-19 situation (OECD, 2020).

*Organizational challenges.* During the crisis in Latvia, the social economy actors worked in limited mode; as a result, they were forced to release employees (SAFEGE Baltija, 2022). At the same time, some organizations have stated that their workload has increased and their working conditions have deteriorated. This covers aspects such as working hours, workloads, salaries, social guarantees, tax payment, the working environment, etc. (Civic Alliance Latvia, 2022). An informative report from the Ministry of Welfare indicated that social enterprises had difficulty in finding employees (especially those that increased in size). However, the performance of cooperatives (especially small agricultural cooperatives) was significantly affected by a lack of professional managers who could find a solution in the crisis; as a result, the operation of several small agricultural cooperatives was endangered. The challenges related to employees were also emphasized by the OECD (2020) research study, indicating that the social economy actors were faced with disruptions with personnel management.

Besides, the social economy actors mentioned that they feel uncertainty about planning future products because it can be affected by government decisions related to restrictions and limitations of activities.

It could be concluded that the social economy actors faced different challenges, yet in general the challenges did not differ significantly from those faced by the other actors of the economy in the particular situation.

*2. Social economy strategies implemented during the crisis.* The Covid-19 is a big challenge for companies and organizations in all industries, yet this challenge is even bigger for social economy actors because they need to be able not only to ensure their own existence but also to find solutions to social problems in society. In the scientific literature, various research studies are available on company strategies implemented during the crisis (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Pedersen & Riiter, 2022). The most researches have been conceptual (e.g., Chesbrough, 2020; Davidsson, Recker, & Von Briel, 2021; Giones *et al.*, 2020), but some are empirical (e.g., Kuckertz *et al.*, 2020; Thorgren & Williams, 2020). However, there are relatively few research studies on the behaviour of social economy actors during the crisis. Therefore, the present research describes the strategies implemented by social economy actors to overcome the crisis in Latvia. This is essential because social economy organizations often provide significant services and prevent negative effects of the crisis. These organizations are usually those which employ disadvantaged people (OECD, 2020).

In the academic literature, several recommendations have

been suggested for organizations on how to overcome Covid-19 crisis, e.g. business model adaption, innovation, and pivoting (Chesbrough, 2020), (coping) strategies (Giones *et al.*, 2020), learning (Lee, Lampel, & Shapira, 2020), and technology solutions (Brem, Viardot, & Nylund, 2021). From the risk management perspective, companies should base their activities on resilience, while from the strategic management perspective – on responsiveness. Based on the strategy literature, Klyver and Nielsen (2021) identify three strategies: retrenchment, persevering and innovation strategies. Other authors identify four strategies: retrenchment, persevering, innovating, and exit (Wenzel, Stanske, & Lieberman, 2020). Retrenchment refers to reductions in costs, assets, products, product lines, and overhead and it mainly can help organizations in the short term while persevering can be useful response in the medium term. Innovating means that organizations search for new alternatives in the crisis situation. Exit refers to the discontinuation of an organization's business activities in response to a crisis. The present research focuses on innovating – what social economy actors did during the crisis to ensure the organization's survival in the long term.

Innovation is significant solution for the organizations in crisis situations. It can help to establish a competitive advantage over competitors (Arenhardt, Simonetto, & Rodrigues, 2018) by introducing new techniques, products and strategies (Vaillant & Lafuente, 2019). Besides, it is the open innovation activities that are important in the context of the social economy because such activities can minimize the impact of Covid-19 on the society and economy (Almeida, 2021). The main innovating strategies identified by the research are as follows: 1) new digital experiences, products, and services in response to changes in customer behaviors and needs; 2) development of new offers for a new or the current target group; 3) new partnerships.

In Latvia, the actions of social economy actors were consistent with the mentioned strategies. As stated by the Latvian Social Enterprise Monitor 2021/2022, 36.6% of the respondents involved in the study were able to develop new offers for their clients, 29.3% digitized their current services and products, while 18.3% developed offers for new clients (Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, 2022).

*New digital experiences, products and services in response to changes in customer behaviors and needs.* Covid-19 crisis has forced many organizations to search for digital solutions (Modgil *et al.*, 2022) because this is one of the solutions for strengthening activities of organization. Digitalization very often comes with innovative solutions that are important in solving problems of society (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

As stated by some of the social entrepreneurs surveyed in Latvia and Lithuania (SAFEGE Baltija, 2022), they also were looking for alternative sources of income. They had to search for new areas of activity, e.g. on-line learning. The social enterprise *Laboratorium.lv* started to provide their services online (organized an online 'scientific school' for children), also

organizations working in the cultural sector started to organize online events. The Latvian Association of Museums developed tools to promote availability of the museum to visitors. A catalogue and programme of 175 Latvian museums was created, providing cultural activities for school-aged children. Some enterprises tried to work on a regular basis but it wasn't successful because clients' behavior has been changed. They were not sure about their incomes in the future and didn't want to spend the same amount of money.

However, the foundation 'Plecs' created EMU: School – a modern digital tool for monitoring and supporting schoolchildren with emotional and behavioural difficulties for educational institutions during Covid-19 for EMU. The necessity for the tool was determined by the fact that up to a third of children potentially had significant emotional and/or behavioural problems due to which they might need additional support at or outside school (especially during distance learning) (Dambe *et al.*, 2021). It is important to notice and deal with these problems early to prevent further problems. The innovative digital tool EMU: School was created based on the mentioned facts. The goal of the EMU: School approach is to be a digital tool that supports classroom teachers and support teams in educational work, as well as school management teams in evaluating the quality and efficiency of the school support system and resource planning.

Another example of orientation towards digital solutions was the fact that during the Covid-19 pandemic, people preferred online platforms instead of visiting local stores because of safety issues. The researches show that privacy, security, flexibility and reliability have a significantly positive effect on consumers' intention to use contactless delivery services (Jiang *et al.*, 2023) that have become more popular (Johnston, 2021; Jiang *et al.*, 2023). In Latvia, an example of such economic activity is the social enterprise *Svaigi.lv*. It is a virtual organic food market that helps small rural farmers to deliver their products directly to customers. They worked to process all orders and deliver food to customers' doorsteps. *Svaigi.lv* offered contactless delivery and had almost doubled the size of the team in order to provide everyone with the opportunity not only to get the ordered products on time but also to provide work for those who have lost it due to the crisis. The work of *Svaigi.lv* was essential for small farms that had lost almost all other ways to sell their products.

However, some organizations also have indicated that the introduction of digital technologies had negative consequences – those representatives of target groups of organizations that did not use modern technologies were no longer accessible and inclusive during the crisis years (for example, seniors or young people who had financial difficulties). Besides, after two years of intensive use of digital technologies, both representatives of organizations and representatives of their target groups were tired of digital technologies and did not want to actively stay in the digital environment (Civic Alliance Latvia, 2022).

*Development of new offers for a new or the current*

*target group*. Crisis can affect the opportunities available for market shaping, e.g. new supply chain standards, development of new solutions etc. (Pedersen & Ritter, 2022). Besides, it might include search for new target groups or development of new services and products. Examples of such actions could also be observed in the social economy sector in Latvia during the crisis, which was also confirmed by the Latvian Social Enterprise Monitor 2021/2022. More than half of respondents (62.2%) stated they chose a new or innovative approach for their products and services (Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, 2022). The social enterprise ‘Sonido’ created a support telephone line ‘Uzklausīsim!’ (‘Let’s listen!’), so that anyone who felt angry, disappointed, etc. during the Covid-19 pandemic, could call and express their negative feelings. It was important because during the Covid-19 pandemic, the emotional tension in society increased significantly – people vented their anger in Internet comments and on their fellows: colleagues, family members or random passers-by. Taking into account previous positive experience with the conversation line for lonely people ‘Parunāsim?’ (‘Let’s talk?’), ‘Sonido’ offered a solution to this problem – to call on the phone and unload the accumulated emotions in a safe way.

Another example of innovative activity during the crisis was the association ‘Camp Mellene’ organizing walking excursions for children and families through the forest. Given the strict restrictions on indoor gatherings and a lack of physical activities, the

association organized physical activities. The participants had an opportunity to do Nordic walking outdoors in 12 sessions within three months. Playing sports together improved the physical and emotional well-being of the participants. In addition to the outdoor activities, various thematic online lectures were also delivered. Online lecture cycles were focused on the interests of parents, talking about the topics that improve the emotional well-being of the parents, thereby leaving a positive impact on the well-being of the family, finding like-minded people and communicating with other families as well as developing skills and ideas for leisure opportunities.

*New partnerships*. According to scientific researches, organizations gain a competitive advantage by making partnerships. They can adopt strategies to capitalize on their knowledge resources, e.g., organizational culture, managerial decision-making and innovative new processes (Fernandes *et al.*, 2022). New partnerships were established also within the social economy in Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic, e.g. the organization Hospis LV cooperated with almost 20 restaurants to provide about 1,000 meals to hospital personnel and medical emergency service personnel around the country. In the same time, they provided the restaurants with much needed business. All the funding for meals came from individual donations from within Latvia. Strategies and actions whereby the social economy tackled the Covid-19 crisis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

**Strategies and actions whereby the social economy tackled the Covid-19 crisis**

Strategies	Name and legal form of organisation	Problems tackled	Innovative solution to problems
Development of new offers for a new or the current target group	Social enterprise ‘Sonido’	Emotional tension.	It created a support telephone line ‘Uzklausīsim!’ (‘Let’s listen!’) so that anyone who felt angry, disappointed, etc. during the Covid-19 pandemic could call and express their negative feelings. People could choose the most suitable form of emotional release – swearing or complaining.
	Association ‘Camp Mellene’	Lack of in-person activities due to Covid-19 restrictions.	They started to organize walking excursions for children with families through the forest.
New partnerships	Public benefit organization <i>Hospis LV</i> in cooperation with almost 20 restaurants	Lack of jobs for restaurants and heavy workloads for medical personnel.	The organization on a daily basis provided about 1,000 meals to hospital personnel and medical emergency service personnel and provide the restaurants with incomes.
New digital experiences, products, and services in response to changes in customer behaviours and needs	Social enterprise <i>Laboratorium.lv</i>	Lack of scientific events, isolation for teenagers.	They organized an online ‘scientific school’ for children.

The social economy actors primarily solved current problems in society during the crisis and also proved that they represented an important part of the economy that could solve the current problems in society, including during the crisis. This was also confirmed by the OECD study (2020), which emphasizes that social economy organisations are significant players in solving negative effects of the pandemic situation.

### Conclusions

1. Covid-19 has affected the whole economy of Latvia; as a result, various social and economic problems in society deteriorated: an increase in the unemployment rate, a decrease in incomes, as well as an increase in social and emotional tension.
2. The social economy actors applying an innovative approach to solving social problems made a significant contribution to improvement in social life, especially during the Covid-19 crisis and the post-crisis, by supplying various services and products, helping the state to solve gaps that it could not cope with without the help of the private or non-governmental sector.
3. Covid-19 had a negative impact on the performance of social economy actors faced by financial, organizational, social and psychological challenges, which overall did not significantly differ from those faced by other market actors in the particular situation. The most significant social challenges related to the possibilities of combining work with family life, social isolation and the fear of getting infected with the Covid-19 virus. The most significant financial challenges identified were as follows: a decrease in revenues and the inability to cover rising costs, which resulted in

risks and difficulty in meeting the current obligations. However, significant risks of an organizational nature related to the dismissal of employees due to the limited (smaller) volume of economic activity or, on the contrary, difficulty in finding employees due to the increasing volume of work. A challenge was also the skills of managers and their ability to find an optimal solution in a crisis situation.

4. To solve the current problems in society and ensure their self-existence, social economy actors implemented an innovating strategy that focused on three priorities: new digital experiences, products and services in response to changes in customer behaviors and needs; development of new offers for a new or the current target group; new partnerships.
5. The social economy actors used digital tools to hold training in an online environment, as well as to provide contactless deliveries, thus solving the problem of social isolation and safe delivery of products. To reduce the social and emotional tension in society, a telephone line 'Let's listen!' was established, while at the same time providing the company with new customers. An innovative example of partnership establishment revealed that the problem of unemployment could be solved, while at the same time reducing the overload in another field of economic activity.
6. The challenges faced and actions done during the Covid-19 crisis, which were described by the present research, could be generalized and used to overcome other crisis situations, yet it should be considered that the actions might have a different impact on the problem to be solved.

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