

Social Innovation in France

Prepared by Stefane Vincent, La 27e Region

In France, the social innovation sector is mostly known as the « social and solidarity economy » (SSE).

SSE is a strong sector:

- It generates 10% of national employment ;
- It grows from 4 to 5% per year, and has shown better resilience than other sectors suffering from the crisis (for example: traditional companies and public administration) ;
- It represents 203 000 employers, and 2,1 millions salaries ;
- 78% are employed by NGO-association, 13,8% by cooperatives, 5,5% by mutuels, and 2,7% by foundations ;
- 65-70% of employees in this sector are women (except in cooperatives where the ratio is closer to 1:1) ;
- Around 20% of organizations employ 50 people or more.

Main sectors within SSE

Around 95% of employees are working in services, and most of them work in social activities (36,8%) with smaller groups working in education (15,8%), financial services (11,8%), health (7,7%), services for business (4,4%), and sport and leisure (3,8%).

Associations are still strong and gather most of the employees, but cooperatives have experienced a great success (employees in the sector have grown by 8% per year in services for business, for example). Mutuels (in insurance and financial services) are merging, and foundations remain a minority.

Innovative projects have grown in the following areas:

- Innovative consumption: A network of 500 social and solidarity stores called "Epicerie solidaires", (<http://www.epicerie-solidaires.org/english.shtml>).
- Food and Exclusion: "Les restos du coeur", founded by the French humourist Coluche in 1992. They have 117 local NGOs, 52 000 volunteers. In 2009, 100 millions meals were distributed to 800 000 people.
- Local production of organic food: AMAP (Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne) is a very successful network (with 1000 AMAP growing in France), (<http://www.reseau-amap.org/>).
- Education: many programs have developed, such as "Les petits débrouillards", dedicated to popular education in sciences and technology. They are present in all the regions, and are represented by 90 NGOs, 160 employees, and 2000 volunteers (www.lespetitsdebrouillards.org/).
- Employment sharing: Several employers share one or more salaries. This practice has spread to 5 100 groups in France, representing 35 500 salaries.
- Employment Activity Cooperatives: in this innovative business structure, you are

able run your own activity but you're employed by a collective structure (<http://www.entreprises.coop/>).

- Local Development, Social Inclusion: Familles Rurales is composed of 3000 local NGOs, 180 000 families, 45 000 volunteers, 20 000 salaries. This group is 60 years old and still a very strong lobby (<http://www.famillesrurales.org>). For further French innovations in Local Development and Social Inclusion, see UNAF, the Union Nationale des Associations Familiales, created after World War II (www.unaf.fr).
- Local exchange trading systems: Systèmes d'Echanges Locaux (SEL, or SOL). There are now approximately 300 SEL in France.
- Cross-generation Interaction: Accordages, is an NGO with many good practices (<http://www.accordages-intergeneration.com>).
- Incubators for social innovation: These are "third places," like The Hub in London. The leading incubators in France are La Ruche, which is dedicated to social entrepreneurship (<http://www.la-ruche.net>), and La Cantine, dedicated to technology & social innovation, (<http://lacantine.org/>).
- Promising projects on the internet: The neighbourhood solidarity project, (<http://www.voisinssolidaires.fr>).
- OpenData Initiatives: The work of Regards Citoyens parallels the model of MySociety in the UK and develops it for a French context (<http://www.regardscitoyens.org>)

National agencies, funders and banks have also emerged with dedications to social innovation and entrepreneurship:

- AVISE is a national agency dedicated to social entrepreneurship created in 2002 (it is the equivalent of the Social Enterprise Coalition in the UK).
- ANSA is the Agence Nationale des Solidarités Actives, an organization dedicated to deploying social innovation and social experimentation to combat poverty and exclusion;
- Several banks, or "Mutuelles" finance the sector. These include the Caisse des Dépôts, MACIF, MAIF, Crédit Coopératif, IDES and France Active ;
- In the last few years, Regional councils have launched many programs dedicated to SI and SSE; more information is available at <http://www.essenregion.org/>.
- Further, there is a Chamber for Social and Solidarity Economy in most of the French Regions, with a national body gathering them;

Main challenges and obstacles facing social innovators

The traditional sector is getting older, and there will be many retirements before 2020.

Around 520 000 people will retire before 2020 (this number represents 24% of all employees in SSE). Nevertheless, there are many initiatives to develop SSE and social innovation in management and business schools. The sector needs innovation and new methods.

There is a huge disparity in wages between this sector and traditional sectors.
55% of jobs in this sector are full-time.

Different values co-exist within the same sector.

For instance democracy in governance is the accepted mode of operations in cooperatives, whereas more liberal approaches are dominant in social businesses.

Vocabulary

The terms « social innovation » and « social and solidarity economy » are still seen to address the treatment of poverty.