

The Sustainable Development Goals in the Social Economy

Vitor Manuel Duarte

Universidade Beira Interior

André Gonçalves

NECE - Research Centre for Business Sciences, Universidade da Beira Interior,
6200-209 Covilhã, Portugal

Arminda Paço

University of Beira Interior

Paulo Duarte

Universidade da Beira Interior

Helena Alves

NECE - Research Centre for Business Sciences, Universidade da Beira Interior,
6200-209 Covilhã, Portugal

Ricardo Rodrigues

NECE - Research Centre for Business Sciences, Universidade da Beira Interior,
6200-209 Covilhã, Portugal

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The Sustainable Development Goals in the Social Economy

Abstract

The contribution of all institutions operating in the scope of the social economy worldwide is central to the full achievement of SDGs at a global scale. The aim of this SLR is to understand the state of research in social economy and the connection with SDGs, highlighting how these concepts and realities have evolved. Sourced from Scopus and Web of Science databases, 182 articles were analyzed, using SciMAT software. Nine general thematic clusters were identified and the evolution of the topic over four periods of time was observed. The clusters identified are University, Global Health, Management and Organization, Household, Governance, Human, NGOs, Sustainability, and Sustainable Development. A time-based analysis of the keywords used reveals a trend towards lines of research in the area of ecosystems, humans, SDGs, and decision-making. The study's contributions to theory and practice and the future lines of research for the development of empirical studies are identified and discussed.

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals; Social Economy; Sustainability.

Tracks & Track Chairs

Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing

1 - Introduction

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to promote the prosperity and protection of the planet, recognizing that poverty eradication must be associated with economic growth strategies in meeting social needs for education, health, social protection, and job opportunities while combating climate change and environmental protection (UN, 2015). These goals were created by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 through the Resolution "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", seeking a common path of progress among nations for the eradication of poverty, hunger, gender inequalities, the anticipation of pandemics and disasters, climate change, imbalances in access to digital transformation and financial systems (Chaves-Avila and Gallego-Bono, 2020).

Achieving these goals requires the active participation of Social Economy Organizations. Social Economy organizations are defined by Chaves-Avila and Monzón (2012a) as being private, autonomous, and formally organized producing goods and providing services, in which decision-making and profit distribution are not directly linked to organizational performance, and their members can participate in decisions through democratic voting. These organizations have been recognized as key players in achieving the 17 SDGs of Agenda 2030 (see for example SDGs 16 and 17). However, according to Jiménez et al. (2020), substantial progress has been made in terms of the economic and environmental dimensions, but not in the social one, which constitutes a serious weakness in supporting the social value that Third Sector entities have for society.

Given the recognized importance of the social economy to achieve the 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda it is important to understand what has already been studied about the topic. Among the five review studies found, none comprehensively addresses the social economy and the SDGs, so it makes sense to advance in the topic. This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is particularly relevant because it will allow us to: (1) find and catalog the lines of research used by the authors, (2) understand the chronological evolution of the topic, (3) the emergence of new areas of research, and (4) establish a research agenda, contributing to leveraging the importance of the social economy and the relationship to the SDGs. Thus, the following research question was defined: *How has the approach to Sustainable Development Goals has been evolved and positioned in the context of the social economy?*

To answer the research problem, the following objectives were outlined:

- Quantify the production of scientific articles related to the SDGs in the social economy;
- Identify the main authors and scientific journals with research publications on the area;

- Describe and visually present the most relevant lines and sub-lines of research on the SDGs in the social economy;

- Propose a future research agenda for academics to assess the importance of the SDGs in the area of the social economy.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to provide a detailed perspective on how the social economy can contribute to the achievement of SDGs, and how institutions and countries are adapting themselves to these goals. It will also provide managers with an insight into what has already been done, and how to best incorporate SDGs into their organizations' strategic plans. From a theoretical perspective, this article provides researchers with an overview of the most relevant journals and topics to consider when researching social economy and SDGs.

2 - Methods

This SLR was performed according to Tranfield et al. (2003) guidelines in a well-defined process to identify, evaluate and interpret all available evidence using a rigorous search protocol, and a standardized, replicable, transparent, objective, and unbiased method.

The search was conducted on April 2022 in the Web of Science and Scopus databases using a combination of the keywords. The query equation for Scopus was: (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Sustainable Development Goals" or "SDG") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social economy" or "non-profit economy" or "social organization*" or "non-profit organization*" OR "NGO" or "Not-for-profit")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "re")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")). For Web of Science, the search equation was used: "Sustainable Development Goals" or "SDG" (Topic) AND "social economy" or "non-profit economy" or "social organization*" or "non-profit organization*" or "NGO" or "Not-for-profit" and TYPE: (Article OR Review) and LANGUAGE: (English).

No restriction was used regarding knowledge areas or thematic categories, and no time limit was set. A total of 260 articles were obtained, 168 in Scopus and 92 in Web of Science, of which 78 articles were duplicates; thus, a total of 182 articles were analyzed. Data analysis was performed using SciMAT software, version v1.1.04 (Cobo et al., 2011) to analyze the social, intellectual, and conceptual framework of the specific field.

A word co-occurrence analysis was conducted to identify emerging topics related to the SDGs in the social economy. Keyword co-occurrence analysis applies text mining techniques to titles, abstracts, and keywords that lead to the drawing, based on key bibliometric indicators such as the number of publications, of a strategic diagram illustrating the main topics of interest,

(Cobo et al., 2012). To find the main topics obtained from the analysis, the steps outlined by Cobo et al. (2011) were followed, consisting of an initial manual elimination of documents not directly related to the focal topic, followed by the collection of relevant information through the analysis of the co-occurrence of the keywords and the similarities between the items collected, and ending with the identification of clusters (groups and subgroups) based on the linkage of keywords pointing out to topics of interest. Also, following the method of Cobo et al. (2011), the Simple Center Algorithm (with the values of 2 and 8, defining the minimum and maximum network sizes) was applied to find the relevant topics. Finally, the "number of citations" and the "number of documents" were used to assess the quality of the strategic diagram.

3 - Results

The descriptive analysis suggests that study topics related to the SDGs in the social economy are recent. The first publication appeared in 2004, then until 2012 no publication appeared, and only in 2016 did the number of publications gain robustness, reaching 59 publications in 2020. There is a growing interest in the topic over the years, a trend that may also continue in the last biennium (2021-2022).

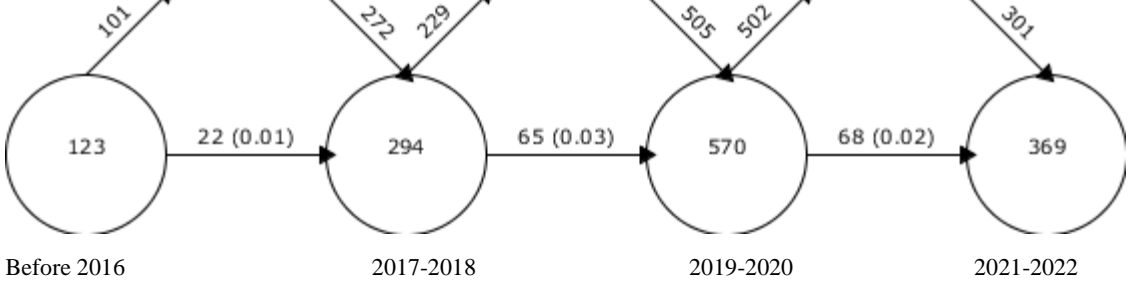
The publications were grouped into different periods. Given the small number of publications until 2016, and the publication of the SDGs in September 2015, the first period encompasses publications until 2016. The following periods correspond to consecutive biennia. The articles were published in 129 journals. The journal "Sustainability" published most of the articles (35), the journal "CIRIEC-España Revista de Economía Pública, Social y Cooperativa" published 4 articles, and the "International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health" published 3 articles.

3.1 Evolution of the main research topics in social economy and SDGs

The evolution of the research field is studied through publications in different periods and different subject areas. Regarding the number of keywords, the expressions relating to the SDGs in the social economy field changed over time, using different terms to describe the content of documents. New topics appear with new associated keywords and others disappear, but there is a subset of keywords that have remained unchanged (Cobo et al., 2012). Figure 1 displays the evolution of keywords in the four defined periods. The circles represent the periods, and within them is the number of terms used. The arrows between consecutive periods represent the number of shared keywords and, in parentheses, the Similarity Index. The incoming arrows

represent the number of new keywords in the period and the outgoing arrows, the keywords discontinued in the following period (Cobo et al., 2012).

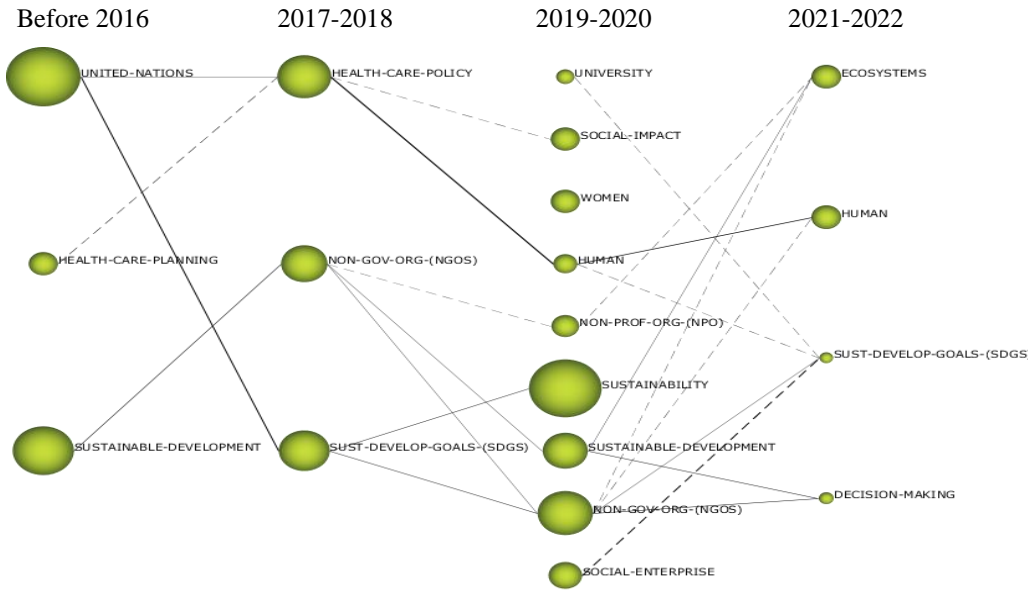
Figure 1
Evolution of the number of keywords in the different periods (SDGs in the social economy area)



Thus, in the first period studied (up to 2016), there are 123 keywords, of which 22 remain for the following period (2017-2018) and 101 were discontinued. The similarity indices between the periods are low, ranging from 0.01 to 0.03, suggesting that this is novel and, therefore, a dynamic field. The number of new and transitional keywords is high, so there is a substantial number of cross-cutting keywords that are only used in each of the periods.

The evolution of the research field, through the analysis of thematic areas, can be seen in Figure 2. The strength of the topics is based on the total number of citations (Cobo et al., 2012).

Figure 2
Thematic evolution of the SDGs in the area of social economy



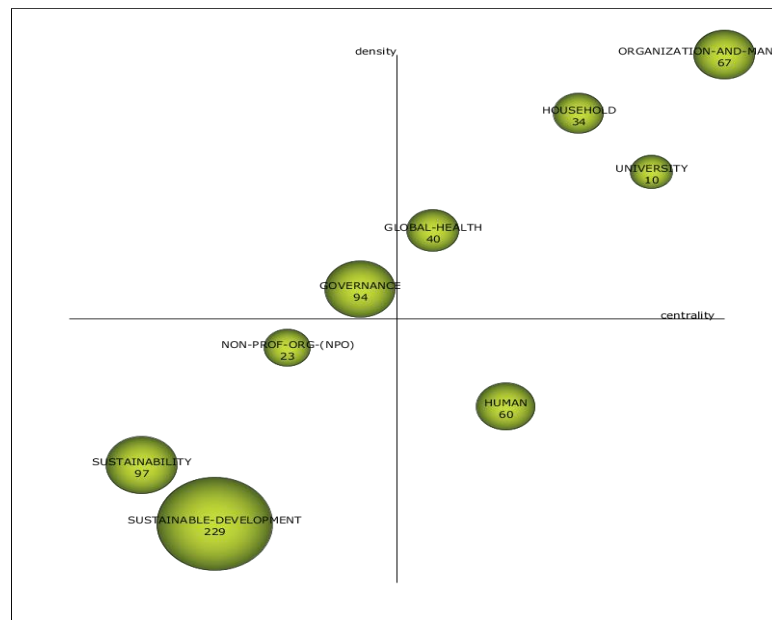
The most used words in the first period were United Nations, health care policy, and sustainable development. SDGs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) gained relevance in the 2017-2018 period. In the 2019-2020 period, a large number of topics emerged, matching the largest number of published articles. The 2021-2022 biennium is still in progress, with the ecosystems and human themes standing out for now.

3.2 - Main themes and sub-themes in the area of social economy and SDGs

According to Cobo et al. (2011) themes are represented in two-dimensional graphs called strategy diagrams, based on the density and centrality of the themes.

In a global analysis of the themes of the social economy and SDGs, a total of nine thematic clusters were identified (Figure 3). According to the classification applied by Cobo et al. (2012), the driving clusters of the theme of this SLR are Management and Organization, Household, University, and Global Health. The Governance theme area is a relatively well-developed cluster but separated from the others. The Human cluster appears as central and fundamental, while the others (Non-Profit Organizations, Sustainability, and Sustainable Development), given their relevance, can be considered emerging areas.

Figure 3
Overall strategy diagram (total number of citations)



One of the driving themes in the literature of studies related to the social economy and SDGs is University. This theme encompasses remarkably diverse subjects such as risk

assessment, human rights, culture, financial management, and others. Among the many benefits associated with promoting the "internationalization" of schools and universities, is empowering students with attributes of global citizenship associated with the principles of tolerance, respect, and harmony between nations and cultures, linking this theme to cultural and human rights domains.

Global Health is also a driving theme in the literature related to the social economy and the SDGs. Covers topics like children, environmental protection, health, poverty, economy, and developing countries. Another thematic area that stands out as a driving theme is Management and Organization, encompassing topics such as policies, disparities, and planning in health and rural areas. There is again a particular focus on health and social protection issues in developing countries, from an organizational and problem-solving management perspective. The Household theme is one of four driving themes in the literature, bringing together issues such as climate change, ecosystems, women, government, and water. Issues related to the rational management of water and the preservation of marine ecosystems are highlighted in the context of the SDGs.

The only theme framed as highly developed is Governance, which covers development, sanitation, public policy, and the environment. The quality of sanitation and open defecation in developing countries features highly.

In the Human theme, framed in the overall diagram as basic or cross-cutting, the authors address the themes of the United Nations, health systems, education, stakeholder involvement, and waste management. Sustainability, a central thematic area and much studied by the authors, is considered emerging. It addresses topics such as non-sustainable development goals, water management, social responsibility, development, innovation, social economy, and cooperatives. As a related area, many of the studies address the topic of Sustainable Development, an emerging area of study, which encompasses the themes of social entrepreneurship, emerging economies, resilience, SDGs, and non-governmental organizations. NGOs are also widely studied and considered structural to the achievement of the SDGs. Framed as an emerging theme, it addresses health policies, civil society, globalization, the African continent, the environment, and stakeholders. The definition of a distinct cluster concerning NGOs demonstrates the prominent role these organizations are having as a driver for achieving the SDGs, through several examples presented in the literature.

4 - Conclusions, implications, limitations, and future lines of research

In the context of achieving the SDGs by 2030, Social Economy Organizations assume a key role in a global context still dominated, in certain latitudes, by governance models with a strong orientation towards economic performance, and in which the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of sustainability is not yet a priority (Jiménez et al., 2020).

This work analyzed 182 scientific articles, published between 2004 and 2022, using a methodological approach that allowed a comprehensive integration of studies and approaches to provide an analysis of the evolution of the theme over the years. A bibliometric study of all the documents indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus on social economy and SDGs was carried out considering the different perspectives from which the topic is addressed.

4.1 Theoretical implications

As a contribution to theory, this SLR identified how the scientific community has addressed this issue over the past few years identifying the themes and approaches that have been most focused on in the literature. We conclude that there was an increase in the number of publications and number of keywords associated with the topic over time, a trend that reversed slightly in the 2021-2022 biennium, probably as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regarding the journals in which the articles were published, it can be seen these themes are explored in publications with a high impact factor. The highest number of citations belongs to articles published in more recent years, especially from 2018, showing that this is a dynamic and emerging theme, quickly evolving.

4.2 - Practical implications

This SLR can serve as a basis to help governments, institutions, and scientists around the world to target the problems identified in the nine research areas, acting in a more surgical way to solve the main obstacles to the achievement of the goals. Politicians, institutions, and society, in general, can use this mapping to allocate their efforts to crucial or lagging areas, accelerating processes, and contextualizing geographically, politically, and economically the current state of the path to achieving the SDGs. In practice, it is intended to contribute to the identification of the key points for action regarding the social economy for the effective fulfillment of the 17 objectives, at a time when we are roughly halfway through the time defined for their achievement.

4.3 – Limitations and future lines of research

The main constraints of this study are related to the thematic dispersion and the study of many particular cases. The importance of the topic would require a larger number of works that look at the theme from national, continental, and intercontinental perspectives, with enough impact to influence governments and societies.

Identifying publication trends in social economy and SDGs can help researchers direct their research toward recent and emerging topics and update the existing literature. Likewise, it can assist academics in identifying future research gaps and trends. Table 1 presents some research lines underdeveloped within each of the identified themes, which represent research opportunities.

Table 1
Research lines under development within each of the identified themes

Theme	Research lines
University	Risk assessment; Human rights; Culture; Financial management; Tourism
Global Health	Children; Environmental protection; Poverty; Economy; Developing countries
Organization and Management	Policies; Disparities; Health planning; Rural areas
Household	Climate Change, Ecosystems, Women, Government; Water
Governance	Development; Sanitation; Public Policies; Environment
Human	United Nations; Health systems; Education; Waste management
Non-Profit Organizations	Health policies; Civil society; Globalization; Africa
Sustainability	Non-sustainable development; Water management; Social responsibility; Development; Innovation; Social economy; Cooperatives
Sustainable Development	Social entrepreneurship; Emerging economies; Resilience; SDGs; NGOs

It is also proposed to replicate this study in the future to monitor the evolution of the topic in the scientific literature. Additionally, it is also suggested that studies be conducted to approach the subject from a broader perspective, monitoring the achievement of the 17 objectives at a global level and pointing out innovative ways to achieve them, always integrating the several social and economic agents in this equation.

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