



# Peer-learning Partnerships:

## A people centred approach to internationalisation with feminist principles taking centre stage



This project is funded by the European Union

### What did this partnership address?

Internationalisation can help scale the impact of social and solidarity economy (SSE) organisations. Several efforts have been made to identify internationalisation models and to create optimal conditions for SSE organisations to scale internationally. Yet, compared to conventional businesses, there are still relatively few examples of SSE organisations that have been successfully internationalising.

This peer-learning partnership aimed to identify various elements that are important for the strengthening of the internationalisation process of SSE organisations. Specifically, it highlighted and brought to the forefront Feminist Principles as a way of strengthening this internationalisation process.

The peer-learning was structured around three objectives:

- **Entrepreneurs' Motivations and Strategies:** Identify and capture SSE organisations' specific motivations and strategies to internationalise and the support needs associated with this;
- **Global Replication and Adoption of Solutions:** Propose a roadmap that would make proven local SSE solutions become available to be globally replicated and adopted by identifying key aspects and elements to do so;
- **Feminist Principles:** Identify how women's perspectives can be leveraged to ensure that their values and principles strengthen the resilience of the SSE and its internationalisation processes.

### What did we learn?

Based on analysis of 43 cases, the consortium aimed to provide insights into how to foster the internationalisation of SSE organisations. The partners collaborated in identifying cases that illustrate the specific motivations and strategies that SSE organisations adopt to reach international markets and how women's perspectives could play a strategic role in facilitating the

#### About Peer-learning Partnerships

Peer learning is an innovative and powerful approach to gather practitioners' insights, create communities of practice, and stimulate collective thinking.

As part of the OECD Global Action "Promoting Social and Solidarity Economy Ecosystems", funded by the European Union, six Peer-learning Partnerships have been set up to promote knowledge exchange and experience sharing on policies and practices for social and solidarity economy development.

process of internationalisation. Below are some of the main findings presented along the three learning objectives.

### Learning objective: **Entrepreneurs Motivations and Strategies**

**It is important to build compelling narratives that are locally relevant and globally connected.**

This is particularly true considering the universality of problems such as climate change or health or gender equality, to mention a few. Even though these are global issues, SSE organisations need flexibility to adapt their approach in different locations due to the particular local context. Findings included:

- **A major reason for the internationalisation of SSE organisations is the prevalence of social needs in human society across the globe.** The process of internationalisation demands a global mind-set with a local attitude. As internationalisation across borders is bound to costs and barriers, connecting the SSE solution to the universality of the issue can be a powerful driver of internationalisation. Solutions responding to a social need such as health, food security or access to education are relevant worldwide.
- **Despite an apparent match between the universality of the problem and the solution, many barriers to internationalisation exist and require adaptation within the given local context.** Typically, local challenges are specifically embedded in the dynamics of a local context. That is why sometimes solutions developed for one context might need to be readjusted when applied to a different territory. This was the case of the [Shifo Foundation](#), supporting health professionals to focus on enhancing quality of care and digitising health data. Their initial digital healthcare solution for developing countries failed to work everywhere. The product was therefore adapted to meet essential local requirements of affordability, user friendliness, and independence from the need for equipment and internet in the field, putting quality of data and service delivery at the heart of the solution.

### Learning objective: **Global Replication and Adoption of Solutions**

**Internationalisation needs to be further supported with partnerships for soft landing, improving access to resources, reaching international markets through established networks and tools that facilitate knowledge sharing and foster cross-border collaboration.** Specific findings included:

- **Development of a strong case with a proven social impact can help build legitimacy when moving into a new location.** Prior to the internationalisation, SSE organisations should build their legitimacy and should develop a strong social impact story where a proven local solution is connected to the universality of the issue. For instance, since the start, [Close the Gap](#), a Belgium-based SSE organisation working on bridging the digital divide, has built a strong and clear case providing hardware to various development partners. Even if adoption was needed, their proven track record of social impact allowed them to identify new partners in new locations and enabled expansion into new markets.
- **SSE organisations should not underestimate the importance of building trust-based partnerships with local stakeholders and strategic alliances.** These relations should

help the internationalising organisation in developing a bottom-up approach as well as in overcoming barriers and resistance by learning from stakeholders. A good example is [Semilla de Dioses](#), a women's cooperative in Mexico in the Yucatan Peninsula. Strengthening the relationship with its clients, based on a trustful relationship and the quality and credibility of its products, allows them to continue to grow and sell their products to various national and international institutions at the same time promoting local cultural heritage.

- **In the SSE there is a greater willingness to share knowledge, models and intellectual property than in traditional businesses.** Moreover, SSE organisations tend to support their peers and often create tools that facilitate information sharing. [Coopedia Knowledge Base](#) is an example of an online knowledge platform that gathers, reviews and openly shares valuable resources (guides, articles, videos and more) on cooperative entrepreneurship. It can be helpful for organisations searching for good practice examples.
- **Umbrella organisations, international networks and universities are important players that can support internationalisation of SSE organisations.** Acting in different capacities, enablers can collaborate on access to knowledge (e.g. universities and hubs), they can provide business support such as coaching and mentoring (e.g. entrepreneurship support organisations), they can provide access to markets (e.g. public procurement), or access to local beneficiaries and infrastructure. Developing strong local partnerships can help SSE organisations to succeed. For instance, a good example is the [Impact Hub network](#), which provides supportive infrastructure for internationalising SSE organisations. Building on its global network of impact-driven entrepreneurs, comprising over 100 local communities in 60 countries and 5 continents, it enables SSE actors to use this network's knowledge when internationalising.

### Learning objective: Feminist Principles

**Characteristics identified within women-led SSE organisations can support development of soft skills relevant for internationalisation and open new opportunities for SSE organisations in an internationalisation process.** Principles such as collaboration, culture of listening, bottom-up approach and flexibility, can help build successful local partnerships, adapt solutions to local needs and build relevant narratives that can inspire others.

- **Female-led SSE organisations, as investigated by this partnership, can strengthen the SSE as a whole by fostering the values of collaboration, wellbeing, horizontal decision-making, and contributing a sense of listening and care for others, for the planet and for core values that drive impact.** The learning from case studies resulted in ten 'female principles' which emphasised the social and ecological justice that SSE embodies. These principles could help SSE organisations better understand local

contexts, build successful local partnerships and act accordingly while internationalising.



- **These ten principles should not be considered as simple 'measures for women' but rather as a call for action to nurture a healthier economy and society as a whole.** They can contribute to making human and just economies that allow for the recovery and wellbeing of communities and the planet. Interestingly, the key factors highlighted from the selected cases show that successful internationalisation processes take into account approaches that are strongly present in female-led initiatives, such as the [SHEROES](#).
- **The female-led SSE organisations tend to put women and the aim for gender equality at the centre of the organisation, supporting other women to break barriers and advance socially and economically.** They also play a role in challenging gender norms and changing perspectives about women's roles, which are also strengthening factors both for the organisation and the SSE as a whole. This was demonstrated by [Semilla de Dioses](#), a women's cooperative in Mexico.

### **Case study: Semilla de Dioses, Mexico**

Semilla de Dioses dates back to 1996, when María Elide, one of the members of the cooperative started selling “*achiote*” (a Mayan condiment) that her mother had taught her to prepare. She began offering the product door-to-door. Later, it expanded its range to other Yucatecan condiments.

Since 2008 Semilla de Dioses is a women's cooperative that offers local products such as red and black “*recado*” (another condiment of Mayan origin), spices, condiments with habanero chili, sweets and snacks - all made with ingredients acquired from local producers. They stand out due to their traditional knowledge, as well as their ability to organise themselves. Their distribution has expanded nationwide through, attending numerous gastronomic fairs and offering workshops in various meetings with Mexican and international chefs to whom they have exposed the culinary traditions of Yucatecan food. Currently, approximately 50 families and 80 women participate and work at Semilla de Dioses. In addition, there are 110 suppliers of raw materials belonging to different states and municipalities as part of their wider production capacity.

In order to ensure their social mission, they opted for a model when new women could join their cooperative. This ensured a horizontal structure where everyone had the same responsibilities and benefits. Having female leadership helps to increase the inclusion of other women since they are prioritised during recruitment processes.

Semilla de Dioses is an internationally recognised brand. It has been able to benefit from the digitalisation of trade and selling traditional products internationally. Secret to their success is the ability to innovate without losing their traditional flavours, respecting the original recipes and manufacturing processes of their products. Another important success factor is the ability to build their brand through multi-stakeholder partnerships that have enabled a wave of enthusiasm from the general public.

Sources: (Impact Hub, 2022), <https://lacoperacha.org.mx/cooperativa-semilla-de-dioses/>

### Case study: SHEROES, India

SHEROES is a platform to build a community for women by offering support, resources, opportunities, and interactions via their web portal and mobile application.

Launched in 2014, mainly as a career community for women, the initial traction of 250K users was from women internet users mostly from metropolitan cities in India. By 2016, the platform had 20K companies seeking potential employees and became the 3rd largest job portal. With the advent of low-cost mobile data plans in India, and as smartphone prices went down, more women from non-metropolitan cities began to access online services. With this change in user profile, SHEROES pivoted into a social network for women and launched its app.

Over the years, SHEROES has invested heavily in its brand and has now built a digital ecosystem for women, with community at the heart of it. It has come to be known as the Women's Internet – a safe, high-trust and constructive online ecosystem for women, that serves the universal interests of women and helps reduce the gender gap at scale. In the coming five years, SHEROES aims to put more than 100 million women on the growth road map across the world.

SHEROES had a successful internationalisation strategy. Initially based in India, SHEROES services women across 123 countries, including the USA, the UK, Middle East and Singapore. This example provides a perspective on how the “women principles” could be applied and how they can create value for female-led SSE organisations.

Sources: (Impact Hub, 2022), <https://sheroes.com>

## Peer-learning approach

**Peer-learning was enhanced through a collaborative approach relying on the range and diversity of the consortium partners in terms of geographic presence, working language, cultural formation, role within the SSE ecosystem and visions for the future of the SSE.** The process was designed to empower project partners to offer their individual perspectives and converge insights through knowledge exchanges and facilitated group workshops, subgroups and peer assessment exercises.

**The first group workshop allowed all partners to share comments and opinions around six initial guiding questions and gather general understanding over the process.** These questions covered exploration of the opportunities for the SSE organisations when internationalising, the models applied and trying to identify the common patterns. The questions also addressed the gender gap and the social economic diversity within the SSE.

**This analysis of key concepts allowed the consortium to define three key learning objectives (KLOs).** Each consortium member was invited to share relevant case studies that would offer learning opportunities for the KLOs. The consortium identified 43 different cases. Each case was

### Outputs:

Peer-learning outcome report: [Social and Solidarity Economy: A people centred approach to internationalisation with feminist principles taking centre stage.](#)

Project webpage: <https://impacthub.net/impact-hub-oecd-peer-learning-partnership/>

integrated into the database with a summary indicating which KLO it relates to, its geographic location and links to full reports and additional case information.

**The peer-learning partners formed subgroups around each KLO with the mission to select from the database.** The subgroups dove deeper into the cases with further research, group discussion, and interviews with key stakeholders in order to identify relevant learnings. This process resulted in the identification of eight champion cases based on criteria such as: potential of contribution and alignment with the KLO, maturity and success of the organisation and diversity of geographic locations, industries, products and services. Findings from these cases were summarised in the consortium outcome report.

**This peer-learning approach allowed for collaborative exploration of shared challenges around the SSE ecosystem, identification of interesting cases and, based on further analysis, capture of relevant learnings.**

## Peer-learning consortium

[Impact Hub](#) has been leading a consortium of 18 organisations from 11 countries:

