

Impresa Sociale

Rivista fondata dal Gruppo Cooperativo CGM

Iris Network relaunches journal Impresa Sociale, founded by the CGM Cooperative Group, in a digital format - www.rivistaimpresasociale.it

“During a phase in which the social enterprise field is broadening to include new subjects and models, it is important to have available in-depth and accessible knowledge, able to encourage debate within the academic community and among everyone who promotes and manages this type of enterprise.”

Carlo Borzaga, Co-chief Editor

This document outlines the new editorial project for the Impresa Sociale journal, owned by the CGM Cooperative Group, which as of this year will be managed by Iris Network. After tracing the evolution and current state of research relating to social enterprise, it will explore strategic and operational aspects regarding the journal’s objectives, content, contributors, target readership and the structural characteristics of the publication and its editorial organization.

BACKGROUND*

Over 30 years after the appearance of the first pioneering experiences, now more than ever before the availability of knowledge about social enterprise represents an issue central to the detailed analysis of the characteristics and distinctive features of these enterprises, as well as to testing the theoretical-interpretative models that concern social enterprises and the policies that support their development. The urgency that characterizes the current phase is due to the structural limitations of databases in terms of comprehensiveness and up-to-dateness and the fact that the theoretical frameworks are relatively recent and located at the margins of mainstream academic output. Above all, we must take into account that the social enterprise concept is still expanding when it comes to the organizational types that can fall under its range of meanings.

In the field of research and policy-making, we can detect a kind of trade-off between the evolution of the definitory framework (at both an academic and a regulatory level) relating to what is meant by social enterprise and the amount and quality of available knowledge. The more definitions are structured, the greater the need for information. The more knowledge grows in breadth and depth, the more capacity is demanded from interpretative models.

We are currently seeing an inversion of the cycle. In past years, in fact, definitions have been proposed – particularly that of the EMES European network – that have established the concept of social enterprise not only within the academic community but also with important interlocutors (in the regulatory field, for example) and above all with a vast group of practitioners. Such definitions have been fuelled by a body of knowledge that has progressively stratified itself: from the first case histories, to the databases of exploratory studies based on samples, up to proper censuses relating to the most structured social enterprise populations (social cooperatives) and thematic surveys on stratified samples. Additionally, in this first phase, despite being of modest dimensions, the academic community worked in close contact with social enterprise organizations, accompanying them in their deve-

lopment processes. The new cycle that is now developing puts to the test the established definitions, thanks to the availability of empirical knowledge, though fragmentary, relating to emerging forms of social enterprise and cases of “hidden” social enterprises. It can deal with experiences that develop through approaches and even denominations that only partially draw on the consolidated definitions. But it can also deal with subjects that might not have acquired a clear awareness in this respect, but which in practice act according to the standards that allow the identification of an entrepreneurial initiative with social aims.

The push to look beyond the definitions proposed so far comes from many sources: research carried out in different geographical contexts (for example countries outside of Europe or that have recently joined the EU), research that looks at fields of intervention beyond the traditional ones (like social services), and above all research inspired by theoretical perspectives and, in a broad sense, political and cultural perspectives different from those that initially began dealing with the phenomenon (for example those outlined by expressions like social entrepreneurship and social innovation). Within this evolutionary framework, the same academic community is subjected to changes that push towards a broadening of disciplinary fields and, most of all, a more marked tendency towards specialization of objects of study. The issue is anything but specialist and confined only to the academic sphere, because it concerns the outcomes of the long and delicate process of social enterprise institution building which has by now reached a crucial point. On one side lies the risk of introducing confused elements that prevent the identification of the most authentic expressions of social enterprise. In the worst cases, this could lead to the colonization of an increasingly visible and, for various reasons, attractive field of experiences and meanings. On the other side it appears equally necessary to lay the foundations for the plural growth of the phenomenon around a clear nucleus of shared meanings, avoiding a regression inside sectorial niches which would undermine at the foundations the possibility of recognizing social enterprise as a true innovation within the panorama of economic and social institutions.

*This section draws on Carlo Borzaga’s introductory chapter in the Iris Network’s new report on social enterprise. Cf. Venturi P., Zandonai F. (eds), *L’impresa sociale in Italia. Pluralità dei modelli e contributo alla ripresa*, Iris Network Report, Altreconomia, Milan, 2012.

OBJECTIVES AND CONTENTS

A first response to the trends just described is already visible and consists in the enrichment – in the present and above all in the future – of the academic output regarding social enterprise. This takes place principally through contributions characterized by a high level of specialization in research topics, methodologies and approaches. Additionally, these same contributions are available within publications that, in general, are not directly concerned with social enterprise and are often of international standing. This trend is certainly positive and deserving of encouragement. The main benefits include the possibility of influencing mainstream academic output, escaping from the limits of sectorial studies and the further possibility of giving value to the academic output of researchers who work in this field. On the other hand, this same evolution generates elements of negativity, such as, for example, the scarce availability of policy contributions and the possibility of structuring an effective exchange with a varied world of “insiders”, composed of social enterprise

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staff and managers, as well as representatives from public administration and other private entities like banking foundations and financial institutions, who play a significant role in terms of regulation and promotion. These negative externalities are further emphasized by economic aspects affecting the overall panorama of academic journals and publishing in general. The risk is leaving academic production (or at least a part of it) “undefended” at precisely the moment that we are seeing a growing interest in social enterprise.

Therefore an important opening exists for giving space and visibility to knowledge about social enterprise that revolves around three key words:

- catalytic, with the capacity to attract contributions of varied nature and content, but which share the same focus of interest on those private enterprises that produce goods and services in consideration of objectives of “general interest”.
- activable, able to place itself in direct contact with the development processes that characterize the most innovative experiences of social enterprise in Italy and at an international level.
- accessible, available to a broad and varied public, eliminating, where possible, barriers of language, comprehension and accessibility (in terms of distribution and cost).

CONTRIBUTORS AND TARGET READERSHIP

The journal Impresa Sociale, managed by Iris Network, will draw on contributions from the academic community, particularly in Italy, through the publication of scholarship that offers analysis and reflection relating to social enterprise. It will also offer translations of articles from other contexts and, conversely, translations into English of articles and documents relating to the national sphere, thus encouraging a greater dissemination of the Italian experience abroad. The journal will also be enriched by contributions from professionals – social entrepreneurs, consultants, educators, etc. – who will contribute through commentary on regulatory and policy documents, the communication of case studies and participation in discussion forums. The intention is to create meaningful interaction between the world of scientific production and practitioners working to promote and manage social enterprises, including among the contributors. A similar objective concerns the journal’s readers, who will come from different categories but share an interest in the issues under discussion. To this end, methods for participating in the journal project and developing and acquiring the content have been planned that will allow the progressive structuring of a “community” of contributors and users who, in various ways, will qualify as supporters of the project.

JOURNAL CHARACTERISTICS

Based on the above reflections and analysis of the most relevant and innovative editorial projects in the field of academic communication (in particular in the sectors most similar to that of the present project) and taking into account the limitations and opportunities deriving from the available resources, the essential characteristics of the Impresa Sociale journal managed by Iris Network can be outlined as the following:

- Structure: online journal. Each issue will contain an editorial, two or three scientific papers, one or two case studies, one or two reports on regulatory and policy documents with

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commentary, discussion forums, book reviews and announcements, research reports and papers.

- Frequency: every six months, with the possibility of increasing to every four months after a couple of years.

- Format: the editorial product will be an online journal, consultable via the website www.rivistaimpresasociale.it, with the possibility of downloading the entire issue or parts of the issue in PDF or other formats, ready for printing or for visualizing on digital platforms (computers, tablets, etc.).

- Accessibility: the journal will be free, though users will have to register with the website.

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