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MedRiSSE

Promoting Social Entrepreneurship within Tunisia's Educational System

Enhancing cooperation between higher education, social entrepreneurs, and the SSE sphere
Policy Brief

MedRiSSE project

Replicable Innovations of **SSE** in the **provision of services** & creation of **decent jobs** in the **post covid-19** crisis **recovery**

31 August 2023

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> **Key concepts**: social entrepreneurship, educational standards, training of trainers, youth, employment, higher education curricula, experiential learning, public-SSE collaboration

Abbreviations:

SE: social enterprise

SSE: Social and Solidarity Economy

SESO: Social Enterprise Support Organization

1. Executive Summary

This policy note offers to put forth the need for a greater more obvious recognition of social entrepreneurship within Tunisia's higher education system. It advocates for instilling entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship concepts across business and non-business curricula and faculties through a soft approach based on institutionalized collaboration between SSE players and higher education institutions. Who better than the SSE players themselves to promote SE principles and rally both, youth, and the teaching and administrative staff, to the realm of social entrepreneurship? The ultimate goal is for social entrepreneurship to be nurtured at the heart of the educational system. Fresh social entrepreneurs would be pre-incubated within the course of their studies, already being immersed in the sphere of social entrepreneurship thanks to the active collaboration and the hands-on practical programs that their alma mater would have designed and rolled out with partners from the SSE.

The change process thus instigated is likely to have short and medium term repercussions on several fronts:

- Better knowledge of social entrepreneurship and dissemination of its fundamental concepts

- Higher educational standards (more knowledgeable and efficient teachers, stronger entrepreneurship teaching and educational standards that are closer to top-tier international standards, greater international recognition, graduates with a higher quality educational baggage)

- Positive impact on the job market

- Positive impact on the community, etc.

2. Introduction: social entrepreneurship between academic theory and reality needs

Feedback from the field and existing research both showcase that Tunisia has some catching up to do in terms 1) of higher education curricula on entrepreneurship (and particularly social entrepreneurship) as well as 2) in terms of knowledgeability and capacity of teachers and trainers to deliver pertinent subject matter.

Although social entrepreneurship has been embraced by Tunisian public policy[1] in the backdrop of rough economic slowdown and high unemployment rates – especially among the youth – and whereas a growing number of universities and higher education institutions have integrated social entrepreneurship in their programs, there still is much room for improvement in terms of topic approach, educational content and quality of curricula delivery.

Practically, the academic approach to social entrepreneurship is very close to that of classic entrepreneurship, conveying little differentiation between mainstream business curricula and social entrepreneurship curricula. Subject matter is rarely corroborated with real-life experience and does not efficiently relay the message that social entrepreneurship is first and foremost an entrepreneur's innovative solution to a social issue. The concept of social entrepreneurship is not systematically tackled in relevant university curricula (business, economics, law, social sciences, public health, political science, and the list can extend much further). Feedback from both teachers and students relays the impression that teachers lack the mastery of the topic and their teaching remains very theoretical. Students, on the other hand, lack the intellectual and practical support to ideate, design and grow their initiatives ; the teaching they get is focused on theory and remains disconnected from field reality.

Social entrepreneurship can play a key role in Tunisia's much needed economic and social recovery. Higher education offers a privileged framework for raising awareness among the youth, on the principles underlying social entrepreneurship, as well as on

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[1] Law no. 2020-30 of June 30, 2020 on the Social and Solidarity Economy in Tunisia

fostering social enterprises in the backdrop of a challenging economic and social situation.

Universities and specialized higher education institutions, both public and private have the opportunity to instil social entrepreneurship approaches across a range of educational majors – going beyond business and entrepreneurship curricula. By doing so, they can effectively leverage their outreach and educational capacity to boost both entrepreneurship and social initiatives across sectors. Indeed, such initiatives are direly needed to put back the country on the path to sustainable growth.

SSE players can arguably play a key role in bridging between field realities (real needs, social and economic challenges, policy frameworks, support mechanisms) and higher education curricula that mainly deliver theoretical knowledge through traditional teaching methods, with weak connection to real-life experience and to the ecosystem in general.

3. Social entrepreneurship in higher education: beyond courses, it's about anchoring across disciplines, real-life experience and a nurturing environment

3.1. Social entrepreneurship in leading universities around the world

Social entrepreneurship is included in the curricula of many leading universities, under a variety of majors, including business, public policy, international development, but also education, and social work. Social entrepreneurship is today fully recognized as being a set of skills and approaches that an entrepreneur needs to start and run a business that has a positive social and environmental impact. It touches on many connex topics such as poverty alleviation, social justice, equitable access to social services, change, impact, and environmental sustainability.

Box 1. Social entrepreneurship in the top international universities

Many top ranked universities offer social entrepreneurship curricula: Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Oxford, LSE, MIT, ... Several universities have set up dedicated research and support centers – usually within their business schools, to support social entrepreneurship initiatives. e.g. Oxford University's Skoll Center for Social Entrepreneurship, Stanford University's Center for Social Innovation within the School of Business.

Social entrepreneurship curricula at big universities include classes on the following topics:

- Introduction to social entrepreneurship: a foundational course providing an overview of the concepts and principles related to social entrepreneurship;
- Social innovation and design thinking: exploring design thinking methodologies to develop innovative solutions to social problems;
- Business models for social entrepreneurship: understanding the different business models used by social entrepreneurs such as social enterprises, NGOs, etc. including revenue generation strategies, impact measurement, and financial sustainability;
- Evaluation and impact measurement: learning how to measure, assess, and communicate the social impact of social ventures;
- Ethical and legal dimensions of social entrepreneurship;
- Financing social enterprises: understanding the funding landscape and exploring different financing options available to social entrepreneurs;
- Social entrepreneurship and policy: analyzing the relationship between social entrepreneurship and public policy, including advocacy strategies to influence policy change;
- Leadership and management in social enterprises: covers issues such as governance, team building, stakeholder engagement, social impact communication, and strategic planning;

- Case studies: analyzing real-world social enterprises in their different settings.

Many leading universities call on social entrepreneurs to deliver social entrepreneurship courses. This pedagogical approach offers the students the advantage of real-life stories and experiences. Social entrepreneurs can convey valuable insights, inspire students and supply advice and networking opportunities to new comers. This is an invaluable asset both for the students and the institution.

Box 2. Active involvement of students in the learning experience: at the heart of the world's leading universities' Social Entrepreneurship curricula

Leading universities have long since adopted a number of special approaches and tools to teach the basics of social entrepreneurship. These pedagogical approaches set hands-on experience at the heart of the knowledge transmission process, and involve the student actively in the learning experience. The teacher plays a critical role in animating the class, relaying theoretical but especially practical knowledge, and inspiring future social entrepreneurs. Below are some of the tools used in US, UK and other universities worldwide, to nurture new generations of social entrepreneurs.

Experiential learning: it's a learning by doing approach. Students actively participate in real-world experiences where their theoretical knowledge is challenged by real-life challenges.

Case studies: they have always represented a great teaching technique as the students learn from analyzing others' experiences, whether successful or unsuccessful.

Simulations: they give the chance to students to face and solve challenges usually faced in real life, in a secure 'testing' environment. Simulations help students learn by doing, albeit without paying the price of real-life mistakes.

Mentorship: getting help, guidance and advice form an experienced professional can be a real game-changer in an entrepreneur's life. Indeed, mentorship has become mainstream in international aid programs dedicated to supporting MSMEs, from ideation stage through startups and scale-up stages. Mentorship components are also usually part of broader incubation and support programs for entrepreneurs.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching social entrepreneurship. However, the approaches and tools mentioned in Box 2. can be a pertinent and realistic starting point for higher education systems that are looking to offer the social entrepreneurship realm the basic knowledge it needs to thrive. Overall, the didactic approach relies on the knowledge and experience of real-life social entrepreneurs and/or support

structures for social entrepreneurs. Their involvement is indeed key to a successful curriculum, both in terms of content and delivery.

3.2.   A rapid assessment of social entrepreneurship programs in Tunisia's higher education

Basically, social entrepreneurship can be described as a pragmatic approach contributing to solve some of societies' most pressing problems. Because of the recognized positive spillovers of social enterprises on the environments and communities they operate in, the fundamentals of social entrepreneurship should be highlighted, valued and disseminated within Tunisia's higher education curricula, across an array of disciplines.

On the one hand, social entrepreneurship curricula should be within the reach of any student interested in pursuing an idea that has the potential of solving a community problem (therefore not only accessible to students engaged in a business major or alternatively in a social entrepreneurship major). On the other, higher education institutions should be able to provide quality social entrepreneurship teaching, both in terms of course content and in terms of approach and methodology.

A rapid assessment of the Tunisian situation for the purpose of this policy brief has led to the following observations:

Student orientation

Students who are being oriented towards social entrepreneurship programs are generally those students who have failed enrolment in other majors, among which business. In other words, the few social entrepreneurship programs that actually exist, are not being promoted as credible and valuable educational disciplines or professional orientations.

Teaching staff

A significant share of social entrepreneurship teachers admit to their limited knowledge of the subject matter and call for specialized training in order to be able to deliver social entrepreneurship curricula with greater confidence. The vast majority of teachers

involved in business and entrepreneurship curricula in general, have the needed academic background but very few have actual experience in entrepreneurship. Most teachers lack the necessary knowledge base required to best convey the concepts and principles of entrepreneurship to their students, and they are challenged by youth who showcase a need for practical feedback from real-life experiences.

This issue is identified as a major weakness in the pedagogical offer and a challenge for higher education institutions as they are faced with the necessity to update their programs in line with market needs and international trends, whereas they encounter strong resistance to change from faculty staff that does not feel confident to walk that extra mile given their limited knowledge in certain fields, of which social entrepreneurship.

Despite this drawback, there seems to be significant enthusiasm and willingness of teaching staff for specialized training and capacity building workshops. Both the existing knowledge gap and the apparent eagerness to boost their teaching capabilities, confirm that higher education teachers are one of the pertinent potential starting points to start instilling social entrepreneurship awareness and knowledge through Tunisia's higher education system.

Curricula

Despite the fact that entrepreneurship has been integrated in several curricula at the level of higher education, nevertheless, it is still not given the weight it deserves as an essential transversal topic. Social entrepreneurship curricula are actually generally designed as an outgrowth of business curricula, with insufficient focus on the essence of social entrepreneurship and the fundamental issues revolving around it.

A social entrepreneurship curriculum would be built around several modules, each designed to answer specific needs and requirements. Among other topics, it would include information and insights on the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Tunisia and elsewhere around the world, what qualities and skills make for a good entrepreneur (and a social one in particular), business models, and tools to engage students in innovation (e.g. critical thinking). It can also offer a major plus through mentorship and on-to-one advice brought by experienced social entrepreneurs.

Higher education institutions

Only a few have recently engaged in developing partnerships with actors from the ecosystem who know the reality of the field, with its challenges, its opportunities, and its constraints. No substantial feedback has yet derived from such collaborations. However, a priori, no hindrances have been identified that stand in the way of partnerships that a higher education institution could implement with an organization from the third sector.

3.3. What can be done to promote robust social entrepreneurship programs within Tunisia's higher education sphere?

Aside from considerations regarding the stakeholders and the resources involved in such a process, higher education institutions in Tunisia can resort to a multitude of mechanisms and approaches that could help boost social entrepreneurship programs within their establishments, and hence cater to the professional needs of Tunisia's youth, as well as to the country's growing list of social challenges and unmet social needs.

In order to create a more supportive environment for social entrepreneurship in higher education, higher education establishments can envisage the following approaches and initiatives to go forth:

- Extend social entrepreneurship teaching to new disciplines: courses on social entrepreneurship could be offered both at the undergraduate and graduate level, across a broad range of disciplines. Social entrepreneurship courses can cover a variety of topics, from the history of social entrepreneurship to the business models that can be envisaged for a social enterprise, design thinking, social impact measuring, financials, etc.

- Add social entrepreneurship components to existing curricula (business, law, economics, other social sciences…): disseminate knowledge on the topic and highlight the opportunities of social entrepreneurship in disciplines that do not

traditionally refer to it. This can be an eye-opener for students in disciplines where innovative solutions can be brought to real-life problems.

- Create a social entrepreneurship center: set up a social entrepreneurship center on campus, which can provide students, teachers and service providers with a space to learn, to exchange, to collaborate, and to network. Such an initiative helps make social entrepreneurship visible on campus and allows for housing a series of relevant initiatives (events, competitions, partnership programs, extra-curricular activities built around the concepts of social entrepreneurship, etc.)

- Host guest speakers and events on the topic: animating events around social entrepreneurship is a great way to bring expert experience and feedback from real-life entrepreneurs on campus. Such events can raise awareness on a range of social issues and entrepreneurship challenges, inspire students across disciplines, attract external participants, and create great networking opportunities.

- Partner with SEs and SESOs: by connecting with social enterprises and social entrepreneurship support organizations, universities bring their students closer to the reality of the business and social spheres. Such partnerships can help students identify opportunities and understand the challenges facing SEs. This collaboration can also create opportunities for institutionalizing mentorship programs, sponsoring prospects, and allow for offering the students hands-on experience through internship and fellowship programs with partnering SEs.

Despite their realism, such initiatives to promote social entrepreneurship in Tunisia's higher education system are most likely to succeed if the SSE sector itself is involved from process inception.

One of the conditions for success for effectively developing social entrepreneurship in higher education establishments is to secure buy-in from faculty members and staff. They too need to go through an 'upgrade' in order to match the requirements of the transformational approach. Educating them by offering them training on social entrepreneurship and involving them in the events and projects related to the social entrepreneurship endeavour, are key for enabling social entrepreneurship to emerge as a dynamic pole in a higher education institution, or in the system overall. The teaching community is perceived as a partner, a stakeholder and a collateral beneficiary of the development of a more robust teaching of social entrepreneurship in Tunisia's universities.

3.4. The key role of the SSE in enhancing social entrepreneurship in higher education

In the backdrop of a mutually beneficial approach, the SSE community in Tunisia is expected to showcase high interest in embarking on the process of boosting social entrepreneurship in general, and the education on social entrepreneurship in particular.

Practical collaboration between the SSE ecosystem and universities can take a variety of forms and can be tailored to the needs, goals and resources available. The ultimate aim is to provide the sustainable quality upgrade needed for delivering robust social

entrepreneurship curricula for students, and real opportunities for them to enter the labour market and make impact.

Such collaboration would be a co-production experiment in itself, involving stakeholders from the SSE and public establishments (but also possibly private) to reach the goal of betterment of the educational baggage offered to Tunisian youth.

Below are a few examples of the partnership frameworks that can be developed between SSE stakeholders and universities:

> SSE-Higher Education partnerships are a win-win collaboration that fosters (both ways) access to talent (employment), research, networks, and funding. Besides, the positive spillovers on society are forthright.

- Partnerships between universities and social enterprises: they can involve course delivery on relevant subject matter, experience sharing by the entrepreneurs themselves, internship and job opportunities for the students, mentorship and advisory services to students who are setting up their own SE, as well as referrals within the SSE ecosystem.

- Collaborations with non-profit organizations: such partnerships can also offer opportunities for professional development, whether through volunteer work on social projects or through on-the-job training experiences that offer the students full immersion experiences in contexts that are often challenging in economic and social terms, thus building students' awareness regarding the social difficulties that surround them and the potential solutions that would be needed to make impact, to alleviate social challenges and help increase resilience and coping mechanisms.

- Collaborations with organizations that support social and solidarity businesses (SESOs): as service providers to the SSE community, these organizations (incubators, SSE hubs, accelerators, impact funds, etc.) can help co-develop robust teaching curricula, supply experienced teachers and trainers, help create and join networks, disseminate best practices in the SSE realm, mobilize resources – including investors and other financial resources – and drive momentum within the social entrepreneur community.

Such one-to-one partnerships can normally be developed without the intervention or the pre-approval of public central administrations involved in the national or regional management of higher education establishments. They do not represent fundamental changes in the content or delivery channels of institutions but rather a new pragmatic approach to a newly adopted topic for which universities lack the skills to design curricula and teach efficiently, with reference to international standards.

4. Recommendations

Social entrepreneurship should be credited with greater visibility and occupy a larger space within Tunisia's higher education system. The rewards can indeed be high and worth the effort:

- the country can only benefit from social initiatives in the backdrop of a challenging socio-economic crisis,
- social enterprises can be great job creators,
- social enterprises have the capacity to attract donor funding and new investors, thus accelerating the economic momentum around their businesses,
- in a general manner, social enterprises have the potential to create very positive spillovers within the communities they operate in,
- by giving more importance to social enterprises, the educational system as a whole opens up to new development opportunities: international exposure, local and international partnerships, donor funding, collaboration programs, etc.

Avoiding a top-down approach where advocacy efforts would focus on influencing the relevant education authorities to modify higher education curricula, it is recommendable to proceed with a soft approach focusing on rallying the main groups of stakeholders (the SSE community and the higher education community) in the aim of advocating for collaboration between them.

The goal of this collaboration (or pilots for collaboration) would be to raise social entrepreneurship higher in Tunisia's university education, and efficiently disseminate social entrepreneurship concepts across the largest possible number of majors and disciplines taught by the universities, thus optimizing outreach and training within the realm of higher education in Tunisia.

Thanks to its knowledge of Tunisia's social issues and challenges, and its entrepreneurship ecosystem, and thanks to hands-on experience, the SSE community is in a favorable position and can leverage its assets in order to kick-start this process.

It is reasonable that SESOs be the best positioned entities for initiating awareness raising and dialogue around the issue of building relationships to bring closer higher education institutions with stakeholders from the SSE sphere, in the aim of mainstreaming social entrepreneurship in higher education.

For a smooth, efficient and transparent process, it is best if the mobilization and advocacy efforts rallied the broadest possible range of stakeholders: higher education institutions (administration, faculty deans as well as teaching staff such as heads of departments), public authorities dealing with higher education (ministries, directorates, councils, etc.). and major SSE players.

In the aftermath of this mobilization effort (potentially lead by one or several SESOs), it is highly likely that one-to-one dialogue be generated, thus progressively leading to the design of pilot projects for cooperation between university establishments and SSE partner(s). MoUs would be signed between the two (or more) parties embarking on the partnership. The terms of the partnerships would obviously vary according to the needs, goals and resources of each partnership, but this will definitely create sound competition dynamics within Tunisia's higher education ecosystem.

Box 3. What the partnerships between universities and SSE partners could encompass

The partnership (which could take the form of a Memorandum of Understanding) would be designed as a win-win collaboration framework where the experience of the SSE partner(s) involved would be capitalized on in order to (but not necessarily):

- hire a curriculum consultant to work hand-in-hand with faculty staff and the SSE partner(s) to upgrade and re-design the main curricula where social entrepreneurship can be introduced and/or enhanced – and have the new curricula approved by the institution's administration;

- assess the skills and knowledge needed by the teaching staff in order to deliver social entrepreneurship curriculum content, and build a relationship of trust with the staff;

- supply the professionals to deliver hands-on courses and training on social entrepreneurship in a real-life context (both, to teachers and to students independently);

- mobilize the largest possible share of resources to achieve the previous tasks and invest in growing social entrepreneurship initiatives and secure on-campus structures to support them.

This should be realistic and feasible, as the approach could fit concurrently under several umbrellas, e.g. supporting the educational system in Tunisia, capacity building in higher education in Tunisia with a focus on entrepreneurship, support to social entrepreneurship, fighting unemployment through democratizing entrepreneurship, promoting public-SSE partnerships for promoting social wellbeing, etc.