

WORKING PAPER

*Strategic Management in Social Economy -
an overview of Social Solidarity Cooperatives
in Portugal*

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CIRIEC N° 2008/06



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ISSN 2070-8289

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*Strategic Management in Social Economy –
an overview of Social Solidarity Cooperatives in Portugal**

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Working paper CIRIEC N° 2008/06

* Previous version of this paper was presented at the First International CIRIEC Research Conference on the Social Economy in Victoria, BC, Canada, 22-25 October 2007.

The authors are very grateful for the collaboration of the FENACERCI and CERCI organizations. Opinions and conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors.

Abstract

The increasing relevance of Social Economy organizations to societies is indisputable. Consequently, their future and survival becomes crucial. Since no organization can survive to the turbulence of the environment without a long term vision of its path, strategy is an essential pillar to its sustainability and sometimes survival, as well as mission accomplishment. In addition, the reliance on external sources makes these organizations compete for limited financial resources. Thus, they need an accurate strategic planning in order to clarify their future direction and create trust among the stakeholders. Conclusions from the study developed in an important group of social solidarity cooperative in Portugal reveal that despite recognizing its importance, these organizations miss some strategic procedures and long term perspective of their activity. They are mainly managed in the short term perspective. This lack of relationship between the long and short term can be overcome by developing the Balanced Scorecard.

1. Introduction

The Social Economy has an important economic and social role in Portugal and in the world. First, social economy organizations represent an engine for the local development of the regions by generating both direct and indirect income for the population. Secondly, these organizations are essential in the provision of services to the communities. Among the whole Social Economy, the social solidarity field is especially relevant because it deals with specific problems such as extreme poverty, elderly people, abandoned children, and disabled people, for instance. The role these organizations have in those people's lives is indisputable. Their future and survival are essential for these people and for the community in general that benefits from their existence. Thus, considering that organizations cannot truly grow and develop without a long term perspective, strategic management takes a determinant role and by using managerial tools they can overcome some of the constraints they face. However, these organizations are often managed in the short term perspective. It is common to find organizations that limit their management process to annual activity plans, reports and budgets. In fact, according to a recent study in Portugal (Carvalho, 2005), formal strategic planning is not part of many Portuguese social economy organizations in the social field.

This paper presents an empirical study of strategic management practices within a group of social solidarity cooperatives and proposes a management tool that can help them overcome this challenge, presenting an example of application. The organizations studied are social solidarity cooperatives. The cooperative sector has a historical role in Portugal and among the different branches, social solidarity is a particularly interesting branch due to its growth since its creation in 1996. This recent branch comprises several organizations that develop their activity in the social field. Among them, the studied group is in the genesis of this branch, the CERCI - Cooperative of Education and Rehabilitation of Maladjusted Children - that act mostly with disabled people and have a traditional important role in the society. They represent a homogenous and relevant part of the social solidarity cooperatives.

2. Strategic Management in Social Economy Organizations

2.1 Short term and long term management

Organizational success of organizations depends on their capability not only to manage the current activities, but also to define objectives for the future and to shape the way to achieve them. This means that organizations must be managed at operational level and strategic level in a coordinated way. Despite the fact that many social economy organizations are focused on the short term management, the debate on the need for strategy management is not recent and is recurrent (Wortman Jr., 1979; Hatten, 1982; Unterman and Davis, 1982; Gruber and Mohr, 1982; Nutt and Backoff, 1992; Stone, Bigelow and Crittenden, 1999). In fact, these organizations face a changing social and economic context. As they are mission oriented, they have to adjust their offers to the new needs of the society and, being dependent of external sources for support, they have to compete for limited financial resources, both private and public. This makes these organizations vulnerable to the evaluation of stakeholders and puts a stress on image and reputation while users of the social funds. So, it is determinant to have a longer term perspective that helps the organizations think and project their activities beyond the annual budget.

However, previous research identified some internal and external factors that affect the strategic management practices in social economy organizations. For instance, the size of organizations seems to be positively related with strategic planning (Unterman and Davis, 1982; Odom and Boxx, 1988; Webster and Wylie, 1988). The characteristics of boards were also found as an important factor affecting strategic management. Unterman and Davis (1982), for instance, related the lack of planning to boards that were too large, lacked managerial sophistication, and were dominated by their executive directors. Funders' requirements determine the focus of management practices. As Webster and Wylie (1988) stated, they plan when they are requested to do so by external sources (Stone, Bigelow and Crittenden, 1999). Funders' evaluation is very important to these organizations because they rely on them to get future resources and due to the asymmetry of power, the accountability mechanisms are shaped to satisfy the dominant actors (Ebrahim, 2005). Most of the times the evaluation is focused on programs or projects, trying to follow the money and its ability to pursue the mission is often not evaluated, discouraging strategic management practices. In line with this, Crittenden et al. (2004: 81) found that results of their study "suggest that two resource critical contributors - executive directors and donors - may not value formalized decision-making and planning to the extent previously assumed".

2.2 The challenge of strategic management

Despite the fact that some factors may put restrictions to the development of a long term perspective, the challenge of strategic management is increasingly recognized. Strategic management is a process that must be directed to what is best to the whole organization, involves multiple stakeholders in decision making and incorporates short term and long term objectives. It comprises three highly interdependent processes - strategy analysis, strategy formulation and strategy implementation (Dess, Lumpkin and Taylor, 2004). This integrated process first developed for business, is also helpful to the achievement of good results for social economy organizations. As noted by Nutt and Backoff (1992: 38), the environmental turbulence experienced by social economy organizations oblige them to “periodically appraise events, trends, directions, and issues in order to appreciate the demands being posed by the environment in which these organizations must operate”. Also, it is important to appraise the existing resources and capacities distinguishing those that are crucial in order to formulate a strategy. Strategy formulation involves a process of decision-making and problem-solving and since it is future oriented, it involves taking assumptions that will be the basis for the decisions and plans. It also includes defining or revising vision and mission statements, establishing or revising objectives that convert vision into specific performance outcomes and crafting both collaborative and competitive strategies to achieve those outcomes. Strategy formulation may result into a formal strategic plan. By explicitly formalizing their strategies, organizations have a tool that will allow them to communicate their strategies along the various strategic levels such as corporate, business and operational, avoiding the lack of coherence into the organization. In addition, strategic planning provides a framework that allows identifying new opportunities and threats, seize strengths and correct weaknesses (Nicolau, 2001). The Implementation of the strategy through the definition of short term objectives and establishment of action plans, helps organizations to promote long term objectives, to avoid issues and conflicts that may appear between different functions; to enforce the need for coordination, and to identify measurable outcomes of action plans. Finally, the evaluation and monitoring of the process, allowing the possibility of making corrective adjustments, is an opportunity of constant organizational learning and, consequently, a way to improve performance, both in the short term and in the long term.

2.3 Linking the short term and the long term objectives: the balanced scorecard as a tool of management

The Balanced Scorecard (BSC), a tool developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992) for for-profit organizations is presently recognized as a management tool that helps developing strategic management. It can then help monitoring the activity in the short term as well as support long term strategic decisions, linking the overall organizational mission and objectives (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Thus, this tool can be especially useful in balancing different perspectives with organization's mission. The recognition of the BSC as strategy management tool is recurrent (Van Der Zee and Jong, 1999; Wagner, 2004; Niven, 2005).

For social economy organizations it is important to understand the organization as a whole instead of focusing only in specific programs or initiatives. The BSC provides this framework relating four main perspectives – financial, internal processes, innovation and learning and customer (Kaplan and Norton, 1992; Kaplan, 2001).

Financial perspective develops measures that indicate whether the organizational strategy is contributing to bottom-line improvement. Traditionally used as unique measures of performance, they are clearly insufficient (Hatten, 1982; Mintzberg, 1994; Thompson and Strickland, 1999; Kaplan, 2001) and other contributions must be valued. So, internal processes perspective develops measures to critical internal operations that enable the organization to create value to the customer; innovation and learning perspective develop indicators that measure the organization's ability to innovate, improve and learn and, finally, customer perspective develops specific measures that reflect the aspects that really matter to customer, such as cost, time required to meet the customer's needs; quality of the offer; performance and service of products or services to create value to customer.

The adaptation of the BSC in social economy organizations has already been studied (Kaplan, 2001; Lyons, Gumbus, and Bellhouse, 2003; Niven, 2003). For these organizations, clearly the stress is put on the mission, rather than financial perspective. This is because mission statement is at the core of their existence and therefore should be featured and measured at the highest level of their Scorecards (Kaplan, 2001). Also the customer is usually seen as user because most of the services are paid by third agents, such as governments and donors. Thus, Kaplan (2001) also suggests the placement of the donor perspective in parallel with the customer/recipient perspective.

The BSC can be an extremely useful tool. It leads to a higher transparency and structured information in the organizations. For instance, in cooperatives, a culture of evaluation making more transparent the process and results of management decisions to the stakeholders, would allow the effective application and improvement of the principles and practices of cooperativism, as well as would contribute to more economic efficiency in the allocation of resources.

3. Strategic Management in Portuguese Social Solidarity Cooperatives

3.1 Objective and Methodology

The aim of this study is to analyse the extent to which the social solidarity cooperatives CERCIs think strategically about their future and the degree of formalization of the strategic thinking.

A descriptive research method was chosen, consisting in a diagnosis of the current practices of these cooperatives. The first approach consisted of semi-structured interviews with the top management of FENACERCI - Federation of the Social Solidarity Cooperatives -, as a representative entity of this cooperative branch. This step gave an overview of the reality in these organizations. Afterwards, a questionnaire was carried out between May and July 2006. The questionnaire was designed in order to gather information about the strategic analysis, formulation and implementation of strategy, as well as evaluation and monitoring practices of the organizations. The questionnaire was composed of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The data from the questionnaires were statistically analyzed with the help of both SPSS software and Microsoft Excel.

The sample consisted in the 51 CERCI within a universe of 145 social solidarity cooperatives existing in Portugal¹. The criterion to delimitate the sample was the associates of the FENACERCI due to their specificities, homogeneity in purpose and field of activity and importance in this branch. A pilot study was conducted and the final version was sent by mail to the organizations, with their permission given by a previous phone contact. There was a satisfactory response rate of 49%.

¹ According to INSCOOP, there were 145 social solidarity cooperatives in 2005, available in www.inscoop.pt/sectorcooperativo/estatisticas, at 26/10/06.

3.2 Characterization of the sample

Age, size and financing

Most of the CERCI that answered the questionnaire were founded between 1975 and 1980. In general, they are small organizations considering the number of members, employees, areas of intervention and available budget. Most of them have less than 100 members and 44% have less than 50 employees. They act mainly in a local basis, having an important role in the regions where they are located. They develop several areas of intervention, being the most common the Occupational Activities Centre, Education and Professional Training. The available budget is somehow related to the number of areas developed and almost 90% of the organizations have budgets below 2.000.000 euros. In general, these organizations are mostly funded by the Portuguese Government, followed by the European Union. Clients only account for a minimum part of the revenues.

Human resources and Boards

These organizations mostly employ young adults and women. The level of education of employees is diverse, being more representatives the lower academic qualifications. In spite of that, 25% have superior qualification. The voluntary work accounts for less than 10% of the staff.

Boards are composed, on average, of 6 members, varying from 3 to 9 people. The Board members are mostly aged from 40 to 60 years old. However, the fact that 25% of the directors are younger than 40 years old reveals the effort that these organizations have been showing lately in rejuvenating the Board of Directors. Most of them have superior qualification but only around 7% have a degree in management or economics.

3.3 Findings

Strategic analysis

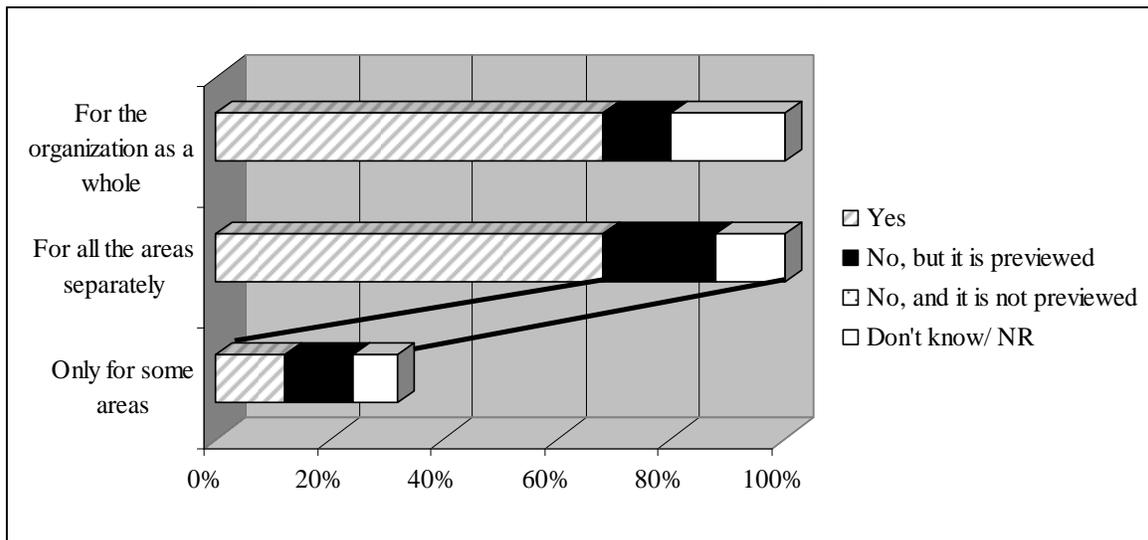
The organizations frequently develop the analysis of the general environment, which includes economic, political, demographic or social factors, among others, that can both restrain and boost the activity of these organizations. When it comes to the specific environment, the analysis

developed is more often related to the context of each area of intervention than for the context of the whole organization. Little attention is paid to competitors and similar organizations which may be related to the fallacious belief that there is not really competition in the Social Economy. The scenario is quite different when questioned about the analysis of the clients or users and their families' needs. They analyse these stakeholders' needs at least sometimes and around 80% declare to usually or always do it. Internal analysis to their human, tangible and intangible resources is frequently developed.

Strategic formulation

Despite being mission-oriented by nature, more than one fourth do not have mission statements and more than half of them have no vision statement. Almost 70% of the organizations have declared to have medium or long term objectives defined for both the organization as a whole and for all the areas separately (Graph I). However, there are 12% of the organizations that only have objectives for some of the areas and another 12% despite not having, intends to do it. This reveals internal differences among areas in the strategic management procedures, inside the same organization, not all the areas have strategic objectives defined.

Graph I – Existence of medium and long term objectives

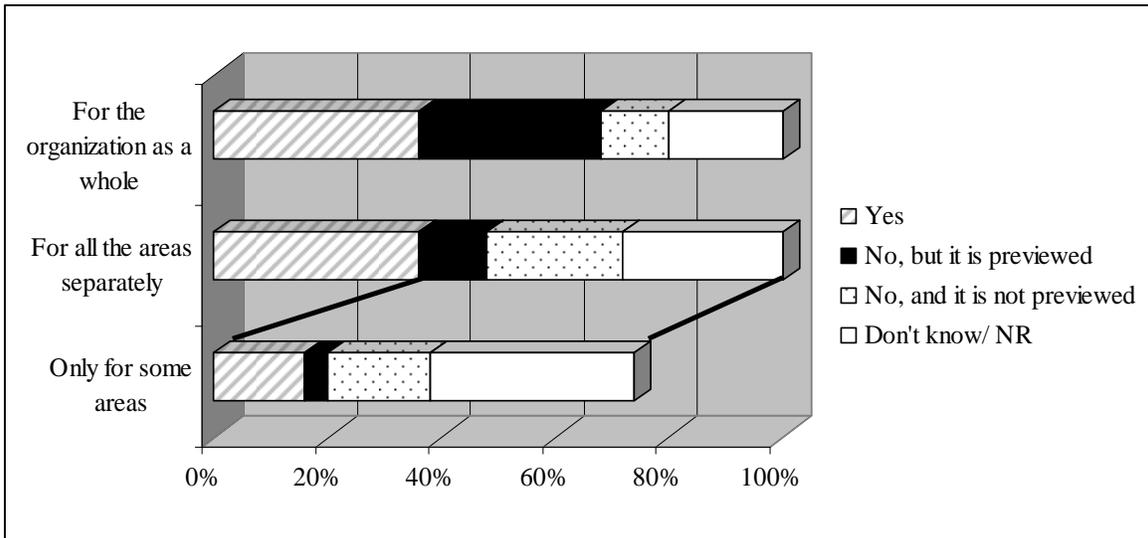


Source: Authors' preparation based on the data collected in the questionnaire

However, despite the existence of medium or long term objectives, the existence of formal long term strategic plans is much less common

(Graph II). Less than 40% declared to have written long term plans for the organization as a whole and all the areas separately. Some organizations have, for instance, a written plan for the next 3 or 5 years for the organization as a whole, but only annual plans of each of the areas of intervention. In several organizations there is no formal plan but it is previewed. However, there are organizations that do not even intend to define a written strategic plan for the organization as a whole (12%), or for all the areas (24%) or for some of them (18%). Where there was no formal strategic planning, some recognized that there was informal or unwritten strategic planning. Nevertheless, in general these organizations develop detailed budgets, including for new projects or programmes they entail. This probably is due to the fact that these organizations have to deal with a restricted budget as well as formalities required by funders.

Graph II – Existence of formal long term strategic plan



Source: Authors' preparation based on the data collected in the questionnaire

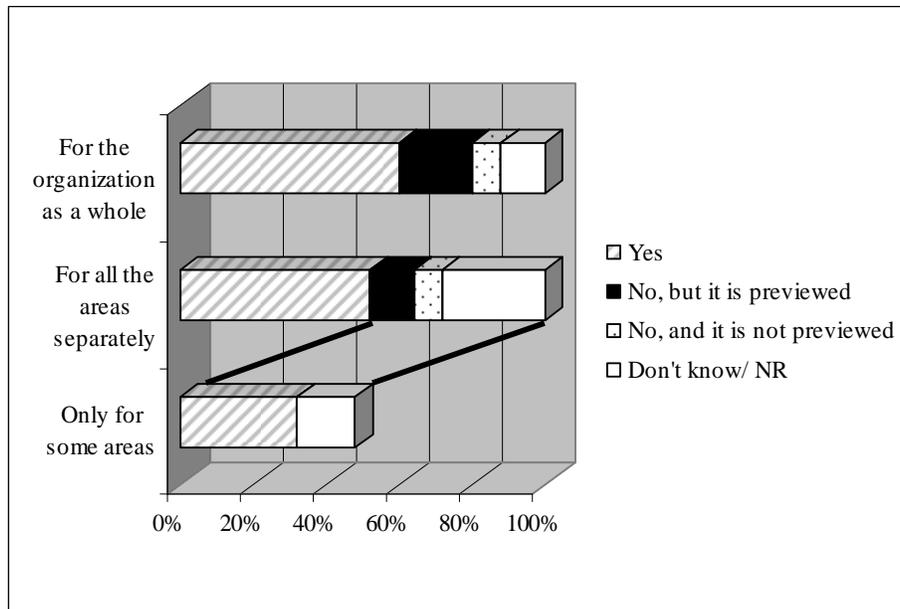
Decision-making and problem-solving is done in group, inclusively with employees that do not belong to the Board. However, besides internal staff, other stakeholders are rarely involved or involved in an irregular basis in decision-making.

Strategic Implementation

Despite some lack of long term perspective stated before, more concern seems to be dedicated to the implementation and short term framework (Graph III). Short term quantified objectives exist for both the

organizations as a whole or for all the areas in separate in around 60% of the organizations. Nevertheless, almost 10% of the organizations declared not to have or being planning to have short term objectives, neither for the organization as a whole nor for all the areas in separate. Most of those that do not have defined these objectives for all the areas at least have for some of them.

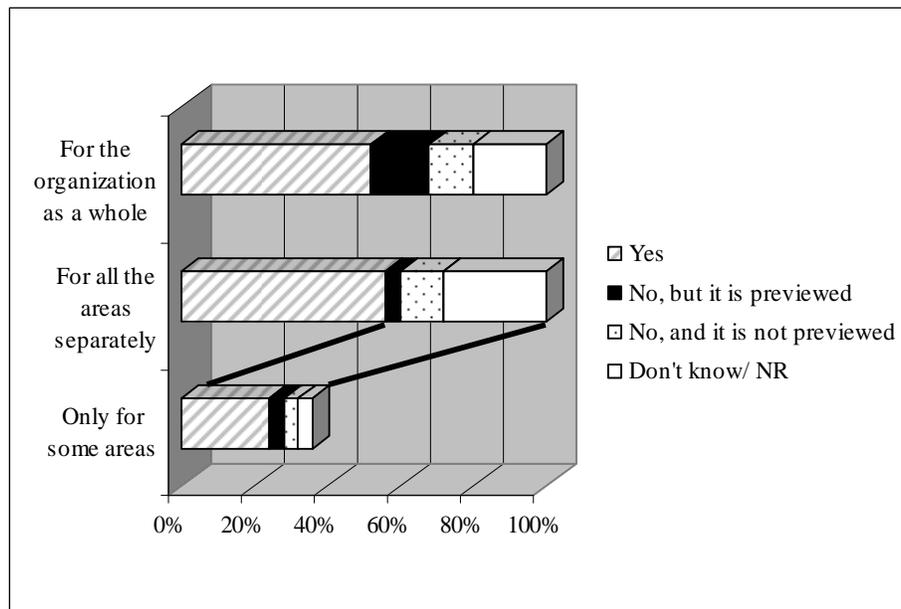
Graph III – Existence of Short term objectives



Source: Authors' preparation based on the data collected in the questionnaire

The majority of the organizations have action plans associated to the short term objectives (Graph IV), but there are cases where action plans linked to the short term objectives do not exist in the different levels analysed. Finally, employees are often aware of their role in the organization.

Graph IV – Existence of action plans linked to the short term objectives



Source: Authors' preparation based on the data collected in the questionnaire

Strategic Evaluation and Monitoring

Most of the organizations declare to periodically review the vision and mission of the organization. The regular evaluation of the existing programs and projects is important and almost 90% of the respondents assumed to regularly evaluate them. Evaluation often results in a revision of the proceedings to improve the performance. Finally, there is some importance given to the evaluation of the levels of satisfaction of the stakeholders, however, it is more focused on clients and employees than on other external stakeholders.

3.4 Discussion

The results from the questionnaire reveal that most of these organizations indeed think about their future, having defined long term objectives. Nevertheless, there is no clear link between what they want to achieve and the way they plan to do it. The weak degree of formalization of strategic planning difficult the achievement of those objectives and increases the gap between the long and the short term, in spite of the great effort being developed by some organizations and areas inside them. Actually, despite broad objectives, most of the times there are only short term activity plans and reports. Even when strategic planning takes place, there seems to miss

a clearer link between strategic objectives, operational objectives and activities developed, inhibiting a coherent management. These findings may be related to conclusions from previous studies mentioned earlier. The fact that these organizations are mainly small sized and their board elements lack managerial sophistication may affect their strategic management practices. In addition, the requirements from their main funder do not force them to develop sophisticated managerial tools. This is especially evident because the results from the questionnaire reveal that different areas inside an organization develop their managerial abilities at different paces. Areas funded by European funds, for instance, due to the complexity of applications, planning and reporting requirements, have more sophisticated procedures than others. In addition, the fact that these cooperatives are traditionally mostly funded by the Portuguese Government raises financial limitation that has been inhibiting their long term planning since they mostly rely on an uncertain annual based budget.

Another important issue raised by the findings is the participation of external stakeholders. The degree of involvement of the different interest groups in the strategy formulation is important to appraise the openness of the Board. There is some democratic approach to the governance of the cooperatives when they state that decision-making and problem-solving are often done in group and with the involvement of employees that do not belong to the Board. Nevertheless, external stakeholders clearly have a secondary role in the decision making process. Funders such as Portuguese Government and European Union as well as clients or users, members that do not work in the organization and private donators, both particulars and enterprises, are much less frequently involved in decision-making and problem solving. This may reveal that despite their importance in the provision of financial support, there is little effort in compromising them in the future plans for the organizations. However, it is advisable the involvement of external stakeholders, according to their importance, influence and dependency on the organization.

4. The BSC as a Strategic Management tool

One of the problems frequently faced by these organizations is a scarce use of management tools. Due to their specific characteristics the traditional tools need sometimes to be adapted. One of the tools that would help them to think strategically and increase the degree of formalization and its quality is the Balanced Scorecard, mostly because it is itself a process. In fact, the decision of developing it requires time and commitment. It is not an overnight decision and after it is planned and implemented, it has to be

seen in a learning perspective, that is to say, a BSC is never completed. It is being built and rebuilt through the time according the changes in the environment and in the organization. Building a BSC comprise several phases: planning, developing, implementing and monitoring.

To plan the BSC commitment at the various organizational levels is essential with the explicit support of leaders. Also, it is important to have a team that according to Niven (2003) should be composed of an Executive Sponsor, a Team Leader, an Organizational Change Expert and members from the specific areas. Appropriate training is required to understand the process.

In the development phase, mission, values, vision and strategy must be defined or confirmed, the appropriate scorecard perspectives chosen and finally, one of the most creative and demanding steps, to build the strategy map. The idea is to build a one-page document finding a rationale behind the existing objectives and mission statement itself, organized by the previously defined perspectives. Implementation needs the development of performance measures that translate the objectives into quantified indicators, in order to be clear about what is to be achieved and when. Initiatives must be then set to support the strategy. Finally monitoring allows to evaluate what is going right or wrong, to define corrective actions and learn with the fails.

Reviewing the assumptions taken to the strategy map and maintain people mobilized can be determinant to the success of the implementation of the BSC.

The BSC can be developed for the organization as a whole or for a specific department or area, but a pilot location can be chosen. The criteria to choose the right area of intervention to start can be the existence of mission and strategy, the commitment to measurement, the availability of data, or the need for a BSC that improves the management approach.

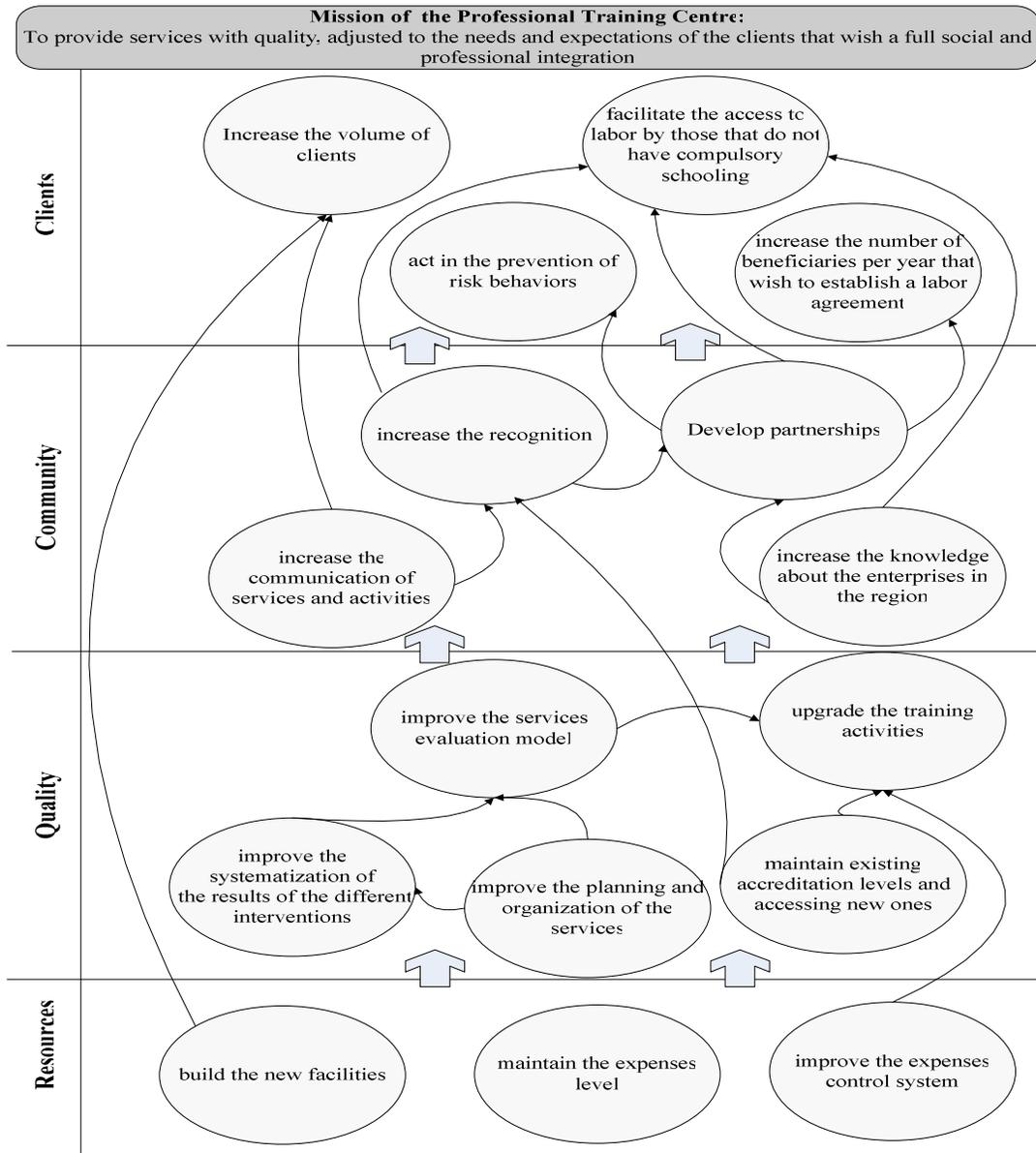
Example of a BSC in a Professional Training Centre of a social solidarity cooperative

In these social solidarity cooperatives, Professional Training area is often one of the most developed areas in the management field due to the requirements of the European Union. It constitutes a good pilot area and it is the basis for the example proposed. The rationale is based on existing plans, reports and other documents of a specific Professional Training Centre inside a social solidarity cooperative.

The organizations have freedom to select the scorecard perspectives that better fit their reality, while responding to its strategic objectives and belief among the workers. Considering four main categories that were already being used and that fit the organization's mission, the proposal will be based on those perspectives. Those perspectives are: *Clients* (related to the accomplishment of the mission); *Community* (related to the fact that the different areas of intervention, as well as the organization as a whole, rely on the community to achieve their mission); *Quality* (related to the fact that the quality of the internal processes as well as the services provided is central to the mission of the whole organization); and finally, *Resources* (instead of putting the stress on financial resources that are essential in the provision of the services, the stress was put in the resources, whether they are financial or physical).

Having defined the perspectives, the strategy map can be built. Figure I represents an example of what could be a strategy map for the Professional Training Centre. The map is to be read from the bottom to the top. In general, the adequate resources will provide the basis for the achievement of all the objectives and the mission itself. These resources will support the quality of the services and internal processes that will support the interaction with the community and, together, these three perspectives will help achieving the objectives related to the clients and the mission. This cause-effect notion is the added value of the BSC approach to traditional performance measurement.

Figure I – Example of a Strategy Map for a Professional Training Centre



Source: Authors' preparation based on existing strategic objectives and mission statement of a Professional Training Centre of a social solidarity cooperative

For instance, maintaining existing accreditation levels and accessing new ones will improve the upgrade of the training activities, increase organization's recognition that will boost the development of partnerships and will help achieving strategic objectives related to the clients.

Figure II presents an example of some performance measures that could be used to monitor the achievement of the previous established objectives. For instance, the establishment of new partnerships in the Community perspective can be measured by the success rate of contacts that are established by the cooperative with the enterprises that employ the trainees and that can become partners and develop a longer term relationship.

Figure II – Examples of objectives linked to performance measures

| | Strategic objectives (and sub-objectives) | Measures (some examples) |
|-----------|---|--|
| Community | 6. develop partnerships | |
| | 6.1 keep the existing partnerships | Retention rate of existing partnerships |
| | | Share of organizations that have established new protocols (among the existing ones) |
| | 6.2 establish new partnerships | Share of organizations that have established new protocols (among the new ones) |
| | | Success rate of contacts |

Source: Authors' preparation based on existing measures of a Professional Training Centre of a social solidarity cooperative

It is then important to define performance targets. The BSC needs to be clear about what is to be achieved, and when. Afterwards, in order to translate targets into reality, it is necessary to set initiatives that support the strategy. Thus, the link between what is to be achieved and the initiatives to be developed to achieve them has to be done. It is extremely important for the members of the organization to understand the strategic importance of what they are doing. Figure III presents the possible linking between the objectives and the initiatives established.

Figure III – Example of objectives linked to initiatives

| | | Initiatives | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|---|-------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|--|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | |
| Community | 5. increase the knowledge about the enterprises in the region | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | X | |
| | 6. develop partnerships | | X | | | | | X | | | X | | | | X | | | |
| | 6.1 keep the existing partnerships | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | X | | | |
| | 6.2 establish new partnerships | | X | | | | | X | | | | | | | X | | | |
| | 7. increase the recognition | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | X | | | |
| | 7.1 by local and regional entities | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | | | | |
| | 7.2 increase the recognition by partners | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | X | | | |
| | 8. increase the diffusion of services and activities | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | |

| | |
|----|---|
| 2 | To establish a partnership for training courses for different clients, technicians, and parents with the Drugs and Drug Addiction Institute |
| 7 | To keep the contacts with the Ombudsman and working together with FENACERCI |
| 14 | To study and implement a coherent strategy for approaching enterprises |

Source: Authors' preparation based on existing initiatives of a Professional Training Centre of a social solidarity cooperative

To conclude, the proposition of a BSC exemplified for a Professional Training Centre should be later duplicated for the other areas of intervention and the organization as a whole. This pilot BSC experience helps developing a learning process that will support the better development of the other scorecards.

5. Conclusion

In the last decades, the interest on strategy in social economy organizations has increased in the academic and organizational world. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of space for improvements in the strategic management process in order to make it more unified and participated. This suggests that further research is to be done in this management field of social economy organizations. The use of the case study approach would be useful to study in a deeper extent their practices, the process of implementation of the Balanced Scorecard and its impacts in the performance and effectiveness of the organizations.

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