

Janka Tóth

**TENSIONS ARISING FROM THE DUAL
COMMITMENT OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES**

Theses of the doctoral thesis

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University of Szeged
Faculty of Economics
Doctoral School of Economics

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Theses for doctoral thesis
Supervisor:
Dr. habil. Éva Málovics
Associate Professor
University of Szeged
Faculty of Economics

1. Timeliness and identification of the topic

Social enterprises can contribute to solving today's social problems by helping to transform prevailing social and economic systems and make these more "people-centred", and by setting an example to other enterprises, entrepreneurs, and policy makers. The dissertation aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these companies, in the hope that the concept will become more widespread in the world and in our country.

Social enterprises are organisations that have social goals and strive to achieve economic self-sustainability (Siegner et al., 2018). Therefore, the goals of social enterprises are twofold: they are both economic (market) and social (societal). These organisations need to be both commercially sustainable and offer a solution to a current social problem (Barraket et al., 2016; Roh, 2016; Szemán, 2017). Social entrepreneurship is a hybrid model in which competing logics are often conflicting and contradictory (Mason and Doherty, 2016; Jenner, 2016; Primecz et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2013). The clash of often conflicting goals, business and social missions, which cannot be simultaneously achieved, creates tensions in operations. These tensions, arising from the structure of the goal system, are central determinants of social entrepreneurship (Doherty et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013).

The **amount of literature** on social entrepreneurship is **constantly growing** (Mason and Doherty, 2016; Sastre-Castillo et al., 2015) and the topic is also receiving increasing research attention in Hungary (Bereczk - Bartha, 2019; Kiss et al., 2020; Krátki - Kiss, 2021; Primecz et al., 2021). The understanding of the conception of social enterprises (Borzaga et al., 2012; Dess - Anderson, 2003, 2006; Defourny - Nyssens, 2010a, 2010b; Mihály, 2017), the study of successful social entrepreneurship character (Sastre-Castillo et al., 2015; Yitshaki - Kropp, 2016), the difficulties they face and the factors

that influence their success (Bereczk - Bartha, 2019; Jenner, 2016; Tóth et al., 2011), and the exploration of the factors that influence their success are getting more and more attention in researches.

However, it can be argued that **few attempts have been made to empirically explore the tensions that arise from dual (economic and social) engagement** (Doherty et al., 2014; Mason and Doherty, 2016; Smith et al., 2013). Given the prevalence of tensions in the functioning of social enterprises, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the problem (Jenner, 2016; Smith et al., 2013), which may also be essential for the survival of these organisations (Smith - Lewis, 2011). Furthermore, the presence of social motivations alongside business goals can increase the stress levels of social entrepreneurs, thereby also reducing their subjective well-being (Kibler et al., 2019), causing that knowledge about these tensions may be of utmost importance for social entrepreneurs themselves.

The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to a better understanding of this less researched phenomenon of social entrepreneurship and to the empirical findings on social entrepreneurship in Hungary.

2. Aim and structure of the thesis

The **purpose of the research** is to explore the tensions that arise from the dual commitment in domestic social enterprises. Accordingly, the **research question** is:

What are the tensions that arise from the dual commitment in the operation of Hungarian social enterprises?

Due to the nature of the topic, the research is inductive, exploratory, qualitative and aims to understand the deeper context. We seek to explore and understand the topic at hand and to explain those

phenomena that arise, primarily by inductive means (although of course also by relying on literature) and by means of idiographic explanations.

The method chosen for the research is the **individual in-depth interview method** (semi-structured individual in-depth interviews).

Within the Ph.D. dissertation, we first defined **what we mean by social enterprises**. We pointed out that there are many different definitions in the literature. We also tried to show the similarities and differences between these. An attempt was then made to classify and then type these organisations by sector in order to improve our understanding of social enterprises. We have also presented the narratives (interpretations) of the concept. We have then traced the history of social entrepreneurship in the world and in Hungary and presented the main characteristics of Hungarian social entrepreneurship.

After that, we presented the characteristics of social enterprises' goal system and their **dual identity**. We found that competing logics are often contradictory and conflicting and that the clash between business and social missions creates **tensions** in operations. We also showed the interrelationship between different (economic and social) goals. We then presented research on the tensions arising from multiple purpose systems that are specific to 'traditional' enterprises, and reviewed the literature on the dual commitment of social enterprises.

After the literature review, **the research methodology** was presented. The research question, the methodology used, the working definitions, the data collection procedure, the main characteristics of the sample, and the analysis procedure were described. We then presented the **results**, elaborating and reflecting on the findings of related international and Hungarian research. We concluded the dissertation with a **summary**, where, in addition to the main **conclusions (theses)**, we also discussed the novelty, limitations, and possible future research directions of the research.

3. Research methodology

As for our **working definition**, the term social enterprise is a framework rather than a precisely definable organisational form. Therefore, it is difficult to define exactly what constitutes a social enterprise.

For the purpose of this thesis, **social enterprises are defined as** those enterprises that "*like non-profit or voluntary organizations their primary purpose is to achieve a social mission, but like businesses they have to operate successfully within the market place*" (Cornforth, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, we consider **social entrepreneurs** as individuals who start or run a social enterprise as defined above (Bosma et al., 2016).

In our view, this broadly applicable definition of social enterprise is sufficiently open to not to limit the exploratory nature of the research and to provide an appropriate research framework. To address the difficulties with the definition of social enterprises, the chosen working definition was examined against the criteria on how social enterprise definitions may differ (Bosma et al., 2016). On the basis of this, our working definition does not take a position on four out of five aspects. These are the issues of (1) profit sharing, (2) innovativeness, (3) degree of economic risk, and (4) democratic decision-making. However, it does take a position on (5) the priority of economic or social interests, and commits to the idea that the social aspect (goals) should always take precedence over the economic one (interests) in the operation of social enterprises (Bals and Tate, 2017; Hubai, 2017; Smith et al., 2013). Without this aspect being taken into account, those enterprises that, while pursuing social goals, are typically more market-oriented and socially active in the context of social responsibility (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012) should have also been included in the research sample. The fact that our working

definition does not take a position on the other four questions does not compromise the research in this respect, but ensures that it does not limit its exploratory nature.

In this research, **tension** refers to the dilemmas that arise in the operation of social enterprises as a result of dual (economic and social) commitments, conflicting aspirations, and potentially incompatible goals, norms, and values that cannot be simultaneously achieved (Smith et al., 2013; Zahra et al., 2009).

The **method** chosen for the research was **semi-structured individual in-depth interviews**. **Data collection** was carried out in two phases. In 2018, 9 social entrepreneurs and 1 expert were interviewed, and in 2023/24, 11 social entrepreneurs were interviewed. The reason for the two-stage sampling was that I had two children born between the two dates, which made me take a break from my studies and research. The number of interviews was determined by the proximity of the saturation point. As the number of interviews increased, we found that the amount of novel information that emerged was decreasing, so at the end of the 21st interview, although we can never be sure about it, we concluded that we had reached or were close to saturation point, and that further interviews would not contribute significantly to improving the quality of the research.

In the **analysis**, we approached **our research question in an indirect way**. Thus, we did not "impose" our own preliminary interpretation of "tension" on the data, but worked in an open way with the stakeholders' own interpretations. Our aim was to explore and understand what the stakeholders perceive as tension. In the first round of data analysis, we conducted a detailed coding of the interviews. Here, we used an open analysis methodology, striving to ignore the theories we had learned. The main purpose of this first round was to provide a list of tensions that emerged in the interviews. Then we started to formulate the tension groups, until we finally arrived at the model

presented in our results, where there are main groups, with subgroups within each group, each containing concrete tensions.

In the analysis, we have therefore **defined tensions as broadly as possible**: we included all factors which, according to the stakeholders' own interpretation and perception, as well as our observations, can be linked to dilemmas and conflicts of objectives arising in the operation of social enterprises. By its very nature, the open analysis methodology is suitable to explore and understand the stakeholder perspective. All emerging tensions are included in the analysis if they arose in at least one organisation. The interview conducted with the **expert was not included in the analysis**. We made this decision because, although many interesting viewpoints and ideas emerged during the conversation, since no other expert interviews were conducted, the perspective of a single expert cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the opinions of stakeholders in the domestic ecosystem, as there are many different types of experts with very diverse insights into the sector.

4. Empirical results, theses

The main empirical findings and theses are presented below.

Thesis 1: (conflicting economic and social goals): Several international (Doherty et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013) and some Hungarian (Primecz et al., 2021) studies show that the economic and social goals of social entrepreneurship are often in conflict and contradictory. Confirming this, the contrasting orientation of economic and social goals emerged during the interviews.

Thesis 2 (diversity in the relationship between goals): In the international literature, there are findings showing that the relationship between the economic and social goals of social enterprises can be very diverse in different situations and decisions (Battliana and Dorado,

2010; Cornforth, 2014). In the Hungarian context, there is little research on this topic and even this research is of rather different focus (Primecz et al., 2019).

Research has also shown that in a Hungarian context the relationship between objectives of social enterprises in different situations and decisions is not clear. In the context of balancing between goals, we also see the phenomenon of mission-drift, where conflicts between different goals and interests create a situation where market logic dominates and overrides social logic. We also discovered the phenomenon of revenue-drift, where the business becomes so focused on achieving its social goals that it becomes financially unsustainable.

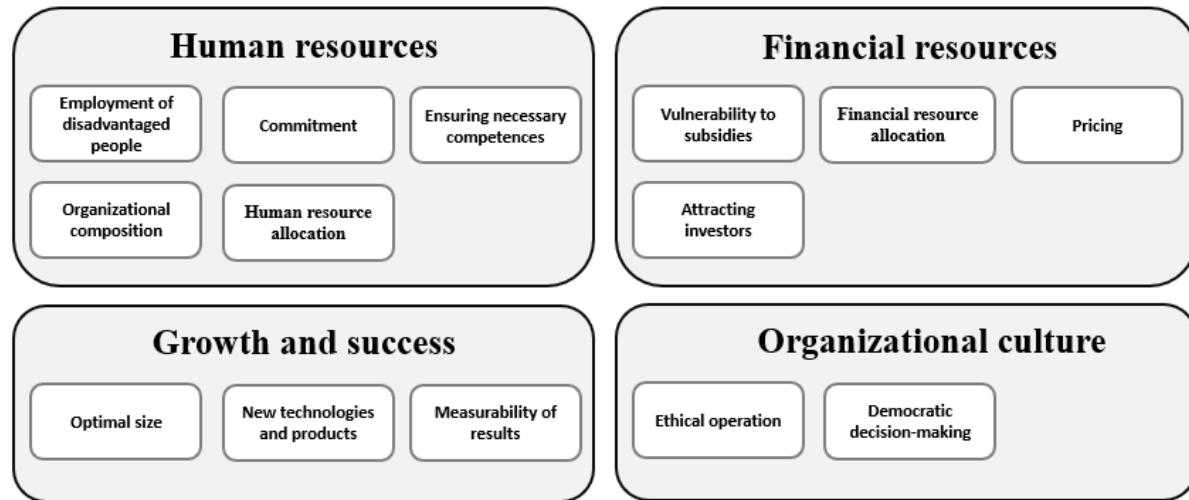
Thesis 3 (the presence of tensions as the result of dual engagement): Related international research has found that tensions can arise as a result of the dual engagement that characterises social entrepreneurship (Doherty et al., 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013). In the Hungarian context, it has also been shown that social entrepreneurs often have to balance business and social objectives when running their organisations and that the difficulties arising from this conflict are an inevitable feature of social enterprises (Primecz et al., 2021). Along these lines, it can be argued that social enterprises are in a difficult position compared to 'conventional' enterprises due to their dual objectives in a given market and social context.

Confirming these findings, our research revealed the presence of tensions, as definitive characteristics of the social enterprises under study, as a result of the conflicting orientation of economic and social goals.

Thesis 4 (model of tensions arising from dual commitment and related classification): Finally, the last thesis, the **main result of the investigation, is a model of tensions** that arise from the dual commitment of social enterprises **and their classification** (Figure 1).

During the research, the tensions arising were classified into 4 main groups and 14 subgroups within these.

Figure 1: Tensions that arise in the operation of social enterprises due to their dual commitment



Source: Own editing

Looking at the main groups, the most dominant type of tension was tensions related to Financial resources, followed by tensions related to Human resources. The third most dominant group was tensions related to Growth and success, and the **least** dominant group was tensions related to Organizational culture.

In terms of subgroups, the subgroup **most frequently** reported was vulnerability to subsidies. This was closely followed by the subgroup of tensions related to the employment of disadvantaged people, which was found mainly in the case of work-integration social enterprises (WISEs). Tensions related to the engagement and allocation of Financial resources were also common. Tensions in the subgroups of Attracting investors and Measurability of results were **least** prevalent in the organisations surveyed, occurring only in 2-2 organisations. The tension groups identified are presented below.

The first main group is tensions related to **Human resources**, within which the subgroup **Employment of disadvantaged people subgroup** is prominent, as these workers have **reduced ability to work effectively**, which can in many cases hinder the achievement of economic goals. In terms of the **quality of the product/service** produced by disadvantaged workers: in the absence of the same skills, disadvantaged workers are not always able to produce a product/service of comparable quality to that of competitors employing nondisadvantaged workers. In addition, hiring disadvantaged workers often requires a **more sensitive and accepting attitude** than hiring non-disadvantaged people, and **not all types and degrees of worker disadvantage can be integrated** into the functioning of an organisation. The employment of disadvantaged people can create prejudice and also lead to **high turnover rates**.

The second subset of tensions related to Human resources is **Commitment** subgroup: employees and stakeholders are committed to economic and social goals to varying degrees. They may also have

different expectations and preferences regarding **work schedules** and **flexibility** in terms of payment. Differences in commitment may also arise from the fact that social enterprises are typically able to offer **lower wages than the market one** and that in the for-profit sector much higher wages would be achievable, raising the question of how to motivate workers beyond financial incentives. Furthermore, social enterprises tend to rely heavily on **voluntary work**, but the level of commitment expected from volunteers is not the same as that expected from paid employees.

The third sub-group of tensions under the Human resources group is **Ensuring necessary competences**. The **lack of economic competences** was more pronounced in the case of the companies studied, and although less frequent, the **lack of social competences** could also be characteristic. Tensions can arise over the skills required to hire employees to be successful, and tensions over **selection** occur because the practice of selection as a process driven by social interests does not always result in an economically beneficial decision.

The fourth subgroup of the Human resources main group is Tensions related to **Organisational composition**. The proportion and composition of stakeholders can be a source of tensions within the organisation: the social objective is to involve as many people as possible who are directly affected by a given social problem, while it is important for the realisation of economic interests that not only those *are* included in the enterprise who are affected by the problem at hand. It is in the organisation's interest to have a diverse workforce, rather than a high proportion of people with similar problems. At the same time, although the aim is to help as wide a range of people as possible, the integration of workers with multiple disadvantages is extremely difficult. The requirements for membership in **the legal format of social cooperatives** (compulsory municipal membership), which in

Hungary is specifically designed for social enterprises, can also be a source of tension.

The last subgroup of the Human resources group is tensions related to **Human resource allocation**, which arise when an organisation has to make the decision whether to allocate existing - typically scarce - Human resources to support economic or social goals.

The second main group of tensions is related to **Financial resources**. The first subgroup within is **Vulnerability to subsidies**, which has been identified as a dominant group of tensions. As the social role of the enterprise increases, **vulnerability to external resources** may also increase and dependence on subsidies may appear. The expectation of self-sustainability in the application requirements- of most tenders **seems unrealistic** in relation to the social objectives undertaken by social enterprises, which makes their situation particularly difficult at the end of the grant period. In addition, although organisations need the financial support provided by these applications, the related **requirements** may also contain elements that **hinder the achievement of the social objectives** or are contrary to the operational logic and values of the organisation.

The second subgroup includes the tensions related to **Attracting investors**, which stem from the fact that the more socially engaged a company is, the more difficult it is to attract investors. Therefore, to reach investors, it may be necessary to reduce social engagement, creating a dilemma for social entrepreneurs.

The tensions in **Pricing** arise from the fact that social enterprises are often able to produce/provide services at much higher costs than their competitors because of their social engagement. Tensions can also arise from **price differentiation**, i.e. determining to whom to sell products/services at what prices, as these enterprises may, in line with their social commitment, provide certain services/products free or at a discount to certain groups, while others pay market prices

for the same. Finally, the dilemma arises as to whether to set the prices or to ask for a **donation** amount set by the customer.

Tensions over **Financial resource allocation** arise from the dilemma of whether the business should allocate revenues to economic or social purposes. In the case of the enterprises studied, the risks of "mission-drift" and "revenue-drift" both emerged. Dilemmas about the allocation of financial resources can be **emotionally demanding** for social entrepreneurs.

The third main group contains the **tensions related to Growth and success**. The tensions related to **Optimal Size** arise from the fact that although strengthening the economic leg is a condition for survival, excessive growth is undesirable because it can work against social goals. Indeed, increasing the size of the company does not necessarily contribute to the achievement of social goals and may even work against them. Another argument against growth is that it may jeopardise the functioning of the **established worker community**. At the same time, growth can contribute to the spread of **ideals and values** of the social enterprise in the wider society. Growth may even provide **access to** political and economic **interest groups** that may help the survival of the enterprise, but such access may be against the values that social enterprises promote.

The tensions associated with the **New technologies and products** stem from the fact that, although the introduction of new technologies increases efficiency, it can also hinder the achievement of social goals. Social goals require that, rather than mechanising processes, businesses employ as many people as possible to help them. However, in this case, production costs will be higher, reducing efficiency and competitiveness. The introduction of **new products** can also be a source of tensions: the need to meet market expectations in terms of products, but at the same time trying to stay true to the company's values is clearly a challenge. The challenge for success can

therefore be to find products and technologies that can serve both economic and social objectives.

Tensions over the **Measurability of results** arise from the fact that economic and social goals can be measured in different ways, which can also make it difficult to define success.

The final, fourth group of tensions is related to **Organisational culture**. The tensions related to **Ethical operations** arise from the fact that, although ethical functioning is a social goal, excessive ethicality can hinder economic results in the short term. For example, the development of a community based on trust among employees can hinder expansion, as the existence of trusted relationships is difficult to replicate. Tensions over **boundary setting** can also put entrepreneurs in a difficult position if they have to admit that not everyone can be meaningfully helped via and involved in the running of the organisation. There may also be tensions over the creation of a family atmosphere, because although creating a family atmosphere is considered a public interest, excessive familiarity may hinder economic results in the short term.

Although **Democratic decision-making** is in the public interest for most social entrepreneurs, it can slow down decision-making, which can work against economic interests. Tensions also relate to the fact that not all members are **actively involved** in the functioning of the organisation while in many cases, particularly in the case of social cooperatives, all members have equal **voting rights**. Finally, the question of the **distribution of responsibility** for decisions can also raise tensions.

5. Summary

The research has contributed to extending, deepening, and systematising the findings related to the research topic. The research

has yielded **novel results** and provided **a detailed analysis** of the tensions arising from the dual commitment of social entrepreneurship that has not been previously found in the international or Hungarian literature.

Although many of the tensions identified in present research were identified before by other research processes, (1) a similar depth and breadth of exploration (and modelling) of tensions cannot be found in the international literature, and (2) present research explored tensions that have not been previously explored by other research processes or not in such detail and depth.

In addition to the internationally novel model of tensions that characterize social enterprises, our research is the first one to empirically investigate the tensions that characterise Hungarian social enterprises in a structured way.

A **limitation of the research** is that data analysis was carried out by one researcher, a source of researcher subjectivity in qualitative research, even if we have tried to mitigate this through supervisor consultations. Another limitation of the research is related to the two-round sampling. Although we tried to analyse the second round of interviews without considering the results of the first round of interviews, i.e. to start the analysis with a "clean sheet", our own observation suggests that this was not always fully achieved. A preconception was necessarily and unintentionally present in our minds based on our previous work, which in turn could distort the obtained results. To reduce this, we made a conscious effort to avoid reading and consulting our own studies and models based on our former results for a long period of time before the second round of analysis.

A further limitation is that the research did not address the potential tensions that could arise from the clash between environmental and social concerns (goals), which in one interview emerged as an unexpected observation. Although this may point to an

interesting research direction for the future, the present research is focused only on tensions that are related to social and economic objectives.

We believe that our research has **practical utility** and can also set **directions for future research**. Our model, which contributes to a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship, could form the basis of quantitative operationalisation of the tensions that characterise social entrepreneurship. Mapping and better understanding these tensions can also help social entrepreneurs operate more consciously. Our results could also form the basis for research projects aimed at tension management, which could also shed light on important phenomena not only for researchers, but also for social entrepreneurs. Our model can also help decision makers to better understand the sustainability challenges of social entrepreneurs and thus support their operations more effectively. Finally, an attempt could be made to extend the model, for example, to investigate whether similar tensions are also present in enterprises with CSR activities and how these could be addressed in such organisations.

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Date: 18.10. 2024

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