

Reuse and recycling social enterprises in Europe: challenging exclusion by caring for the environment

On 28th of June, our Network RREUSE (Reuse and Recycling Social Enterprises in the European Union) led the cluster “Reuse and recycling social enterprises in Europe: challenging exclusion by caring for the environment”. It was chaired by Mr. Paolo Ferraresi (Founder and Administrator of RREUSE) and held in the framework of the main topic “Building European Cooperation Networks within the Social Economy”.

RREUSE is the European federation of social firms active in reuse and recycling. Today 42.000 full-time equivalent jobs are provided by the network of RREUSE’s members across Europe. Considering that in addition to that RREUSE occupies 110.000 volunteers and trainees we can estimate that more than 150.000 people are involved in RREUSE’s initiatives. This mean a collection of:

- Electronic appliances (WEEE) 150.000 tons collected every year;
- Textile-clothing: 146.000 tons/year;
- Bulky items: 265.000 tons/year;
- Organic waste: 113.000 tons/year

For a total of more than 700.000 tons/year of material diverted from landfill which can be either reused or, when this is not feasible, recycled.

The relevant importance of reuse in the social economy is well highlighted by the point reuse is one of the main activities carried out by social enterprises. Non profit organisations have pioneered this sector even before environmental issues became in such a way trendy as they currently are. The sector’s initiatives, which started long time ago and aimed at attaining collecting schemes, guarantee nowadays fairly professionalized structures offering hundreds of jobs and opportunities to marginalized groups. This because reuse’s activities are labour intensive and require a relatively small amount of capital.

Beside, reuse social firms offer further benefit to the society: people with low income can access goods from which they would otherwise be excluded. This because buying second hand is convenient since one can find good products at accessible price, often with guarantees.

The cluster held by RREUSE tried to focus the attention on some challenging questions concerning the set up and the role reuse and recycling initiatives play in the social economy sector targeting the strategic question of a true sustainable development society. In concrete, the discussion addressed subjects and relative questions concerning:

- Legislations: are the national and European legislations an obstacle or an opportunity?
- Cultural challenge: how to build a culture of second hand;
- Raising awareness: how to increase awareness amongst citizens;
- Competition: how to tackle the competition from new items from emerging countries?
- Professionalisation and training: how to professionalise the social business and make it more profitable;
- Planning carefully: what should be avoided and what should be implemented;

- Networking: how to get several initiatives structured into a network;
- Exporting goods: how to trade goods with other countries;
- Quality and environmental management: what it can bring.

At the outset, Mr. Ferraresi gave a presentation of RREUSE and its mission and described the context of reuse activities in Europe and the obstacles social firms have to face as well as opportunities they might exploit.

Afterwards, Mr. de Brone from Center t'raad - KVK took the floor.

KVK (Koepel van Kringloopcentra) is the umbrella organisation of the reuse centres in the Flemish region of Belgium. Objective of KVK is to federate and represent its 40 social enterprises at all relevant levels and to support them in their increase of professionalism.

Mr. de Brone dealt with "Second hand furniture and household goods. The case of Flanders: how quality management and branding can boost the business". He addressed the subject of collection, preparation and sale of furniture and household items. How does it work, how to motivate donors, how to work with regional and local authorities, how to boost the business. It also addressed the subject of branding and quality management in social firms.

Then Mr. Thibaut Jacquet from RESSOURCES took the floor and gave his presentation.

RESSOURCES, constituted formally in February 1999, federates the whole of the actors of social economy of the Walloon Area and of the Area of Brussels-Capital which collect, sort, repair, recycle and resell products at the end of their lifetime.

It federates 52 companies of social economy which employ 1500 workers (equivalent to full time jobs). The network receives the support of ten environmental organizations and social economy. Its missions consist in federating firms by branches of industry and geographical areas. The companies member of RESSOURCES operate in recovery and recycling and in prevention.

In particular, Mr. Jacquet focused the attention of the audience on the subject "Textile: how to survive the competition from far East emerging countries". He specifically dealt with how collection, sorting, preparation and sale of second hand clothing. Furthermore, he pointed out the subject of export and the problems that the clothing business has to face and how to tackle them.

Scheduled in the agenda as the last but obviously not least, Mr. Sepp Eisenriegler from Arge Repanet (Austria) and President of the Network RREUSE took the floor to address his presentation and speech on "Repairing and selling Electric and electronic appliances".

Repanet is a social enterprise network providing long-term employment for people with difficulties in the first labour market, like disabled, low qualified, elderly, former long-term unemployed people. Activities of business are primarily collection and reuse of used mobile phones in two partnership-projects with Caritas Austria and the Austrian national broadcast company and with T-Mobile Austria. So far, about 700.000 mobile phones have been collected and either sold for reuse (80%) or for recycling (20%) since December 2005. Planned future perspectives are also activities in trash-design, collection and reuse of used IT – equipment and building up new social enterprises in the field of reuse and recycling in Austria as well as in Slovakia. Staff members are also in the board the Austrian Association of municipal waste counsellors and are / were involved in the EQUAL-development partnership EcoNet Austria.

The RREUSEs President presented the way how further develop the activities the Network carries out and successively presented the experience of repair centres and talked about Waste Electric and Electronic Equipments (WEEE) management.

During his presentation Mr. Eisenriegler showed a short but effective film concerning the possibility of reusing WEEE items thanks to the reparation chain granted by people working in this sector who, as written above, have a difficult past behind them and thus are at risk of further lagging behind in the society if not provided of these opportunities.

Even if the programme scheduled ten minutes of question time after each presentation, we would like to stress the point there were so many inputs from the audience in the question time that was so useful and appreciated to go in-depth discussions without taking too much care of the schedule. The results on each discussion were thus even more effective. Concrete questions and - as we believe - practical answers and information were provided during these discussions.

RREUSE was the leader of the cluster. However we strongly perceived that the leader's role in the cluster was held by the principle of info's exchanging and support between those who showed the willingness to cooperate altogether more and in-depth in this sector.

We assess the meeting very effective and concrete. Participation was high (17 organisations instead of the 10 scheduled). We kindly appreciated participants' inputs who gave their power point presentations and speeches. Even if these presentations from the audience were not scheduled, we considered this deeper participation from the organisations taking part to the cluster as a further good feedback in evaluating the meeting and – more important – for the social economy sector we are involved.

For the above mentioned reason, we strongly believe fair mentioning the unscheduled presentations given during the Gdansk cluster:

“An approach of sustainable development” presentation given by Vincent Blanchard from the French organisation Les Ateliers du Bocage;

“Social Economy and Environment protection” presentation given by Marek Klimkowsky from the Polish organisation Association Disabled for the Environment EKON;

“Recycling in the Emmaus Community” presentation given by Gregorz Hajduk from EMAUS Poland.

Final remarks and considerations were held by Mr. Eisenriegler. He further stressed the importance of collaboration between people and organisation committed to the social economy cause, specifically those involved in the thematic sector of reuse and recycling activities. He kindly invited all the participants to feel free in the next future to submit their further question and consideration and request to RREUSE through the contacts distributed during the cluster and that we provide in this document.

In giving thanks to everybody for the participation Mr. Eisenriegler closed the session.

We would like to draw the attention on the fact that further discussions continued informally later on. This was an amazing result considering that thanks to the active participation from all the participants to the cluster we went far beyond (3 pm) the time scheduled for the session's closing (1 pm).

RREUSE wishes again to kindly thank the Polish organisation for the opportunity of leading the cluster and to give thanks to the participants (list and contacts at the bottom of

this page) to the meeting for the concrete and effective discussion's topics put into the cluster.

RREUSE is at disposal for any further contact or question would arise.

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List of participants:

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3. Thibaut Jacquet, RESSOURCES – RREUSE;
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5. Sergio Michelini, RREUSE;
6. Noël Ramon, de Kringwinkel (Bruges, Belgium);
7. Dzemila Sulkiewicz-Nowicka, Bank Drugiej Ręki;
8. Anna Kwiatkiewicz, Bank Drugiej Ręki;
9. Marek Klimkowski, EKON Association;
10. Zbigniew Drażkowski, EMAUS Lublinie;
11. Gregorz Hajduk, EMAUS Krakow;
12. Nick Eyre, Techsoup;
13. Vincent Blanchard, Les Ateliers du Bocage;
14. Janusz Firla, Grupa Cosparcia ;
15. Chris Ford ;
16. Karine Pflüger, Social Economy Europe ;
17. Drath Tadzysz, Stow. Segm. Zad.

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