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**Introduction: The Rising Interest for Social Enterprise in Asia**

Eric Bidet and Jacques Defourny

Numerous works have been carried out since the 1990s to apprehend and describe the reality and the scope of so-called “non-conventional” economic initiatives and organisations in Asian countries. Different terms have been used to qualify such initiatives: non-profit organisations (NPOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cooperatives, social-economy organisations (SEOs), informal economy, self-help initiatives, third-sector organisations (TSOs), etc. The European concept of social economy has been an important early source of inspiration for some of these works, for example through studies carried out by researchers affiliated to the Japanese section of CIRIEC International, which was established as early as 1985 (Tomizawa and Kawaguchi 1997; Nohara 1999). In a similar vein, Bidet (2000) proposed an early analysis of the social economy in South Korea. This influence of the European concept of social economy more recently reached the political and professional spheres as well, with the creation, in 2011, of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (*Réseau Intercontinental de Promotion de l’Economie Sociale et Solidaire*, or RIPESS), which has regularly organised the Asian Solidarity Economy Forum since its first edition, in 2007 in the Philippines. The launching of the Global Social Economy Forum by Seoul Metropolitan City in 2013 is another signal of such evolution.

Another significant and early influence can be found in the American concept of non-profit sector, which reached Asia *inter alia* through the Johns Hopkins comparative project. The latter indeed included Japan, India and Thailand in its first stage, in 1993, and was subsequently, in successive stages, enlarged to other Asian countries like South Korea, Pakistan or the Philippines. The influence of the non-profit sector concept was also felt in the academic conferences organised by the ISTR Asia Pacific Regional Branch since 1999. This dynamic generated the first special issue of *Voluntas* dedicated to Asia; it was co-edited by Lyons and Hasan (2002) and included articles on China (Ma 2002), South Korea (Bidet 2002), Bangladesh and Nepal (Ulvila and Hossain 2002; Rafi and Mallick 2002) and the Philippines (Aldaba 2002). In their presentation of this pioneering *Voluntas* issue, Lyons and Hasan underlined the fact that these five articles increased by one-third the number of articles about Asia that had been published at the time by this journal. The situation has since deeply changed; *Voluntas* now often publishes papers dealing with Asian countries, and the journal even devoted, in 2016, an entire issue to Chinese civil society, non-profit organisations and citizenship and their institutional environment.

Although most of these early contributions were limited to a national survey or a single-country perspective, there were also a few attempts to offer a comparative view of several Asian countries. These attempts provided very interesting and largely innovative insights, which helped to grasp basic differences between third-sector organisations in different Asian countries, but they usually remained a collection of separate and disconnected research works, using very different methodological approaches. They contributed, however, to highlighting the diversity of both the academic situation and the interest for third-sector organisations among countries that were themselves very different in economic, social, political and cultural terms. As stressed by Hasan (2015: 1011), “apart from Japan and the Republic of Korea, the research infrastructure [on the third sector] has been weak in other countries in Asia”. Indeed, research about TSOs in Asian countries often depended on the personal involvement of individual scholars, who often lacked strong support by their academic institutions. Combined with the language barrier, which limited many surveys within national boundaries, this weak recognition limited the scope and impact of this field of research in most Asian countries until the late 2000s.

A new research stream appeared around the emerging concept of “social enterprise” (SE) and the setting up of an informal research group on social enterprise in Eastern Asia in 2008, within the influential academic sphere of the EMES International Research Network.[[1]](#endnote-1) This initiative certainly represented the first attempt by researchers from several East-Asian countries to adopt a common approach to their respective social enterprise landscapes. It led to the organisation, in 2010, of the first International Conference on Social Enterprise in Asia (ICSEA), which was held at Taiwan National University, in Taipei. The ICSEA initiative served as the basis for a special issue of the *Social Enterprise Journal*, co-edited by Defourny and Kuan (2011), which offered one of the earliest analyses on the emergence and main features of social enterprise in China (Yu 2011), Hong-Kong and Taiwan (Chan *et al.* 2011), Japan (Laratta *et al.* 2011) and South Korea (Bidet and Eum 2011). It also contributed to setting the grounds for a comparative analysis of social enterprise in Eastern Asia and for a debate about the key features and forms of different models of social enterprise in this region. As a result, Defourny and Kim (2011) put forward a first typology of SE models in Asia, which included five distinct models: the “trading NPO” model, which is strongly influenced by a US conception of social enterprise; the “work-integration social enterprise” model, which is closely related to public schemes and policies fostering labour-market access for disadvantaged categories of people; the “non-profit cooperative enterprise” model, which reflects the emergence of a new wave of cooperatives, pursuing social or societal goals, and not just their members’ interests; the “social enterprise stemming from non-profit/for-profit partnerships” model, that is closely connected to corporate CSR initiatives; and the “community development enterprise” model, which is geared towards local challenges in a specific geographical area.

It is now well documented that the concept of social enterprise emerged simultaneously in the US and in Europe in the 1990s, in reference to a set of new entrepreneurial initiatives pursuing social goals (see Dees 1998; Defourny 2001; Dees and Anderson 2006; Nicholls 2006; Defourny and Nyssens 2010, among other authors). Since the late 1990s, the quest for a widely accepted definition of social entrepreneurship and/or social enterprise has been a central issue in a great number of works. Those conceptual attempts also contributed to identifying a few fundamental issues surrounding social enterprises, like the specific profile and role of individual social entrepreneurs; the central place of innovation and, more especially, social innovation; the capacity of non-profit organisations to earn market income in a context of shrinking public funding; the importance of governance and profit allocation as elements of trust; or the appropriate level of autonomy from public authorities and/or market influence.

In this fast-growing literature, some comparative works were developed at the international level: Borzaga and Defourny (2001) as well as Nyssens (2006) for Western European countries; Borzaga *et al.* (2008) for Central and Eastern Europe; Defourny and Kuan (2011) for Eastern Asia; and Kerlin (2009) for countries from various parts of the world. All these works contributed to a better understanding of the main features and dominant conceptions of social enterprise in several regions, but they were based on conceptualisations and/or policy frameworks shaped by specific national or regional contexts and, therefore, most of their analytical grids were country-specific to varying degrees. Moreover, they did not rely on systematic data collection at enterprise level.[[2]](#endnote-2)

# 1. The “ICSEM” Project

Against such background, the “International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project” was designed and undertaken with one main objective, namely to document the diversity of SE models as a way: (1) to overcome most problems related to the quest for a unifying and encompassing conceptualisation of social enterprise; (2) to show that it was feasible to theoretically and empirically build an international typology of SE models; and, consequently, (3) to pave the way for a better understanding of SE dynamics and eco-systems. Moreover, the ICSEM Project was based on the assumption that a solid and scientific comparative knowledge of social enterprise worldwide implied to analyse these organisations through a multi-level approach, combining the micro, macro and meso levels, and relying on empirical studies using a common methodological approach and common tools.

After a year devoted to preparing the basis for this worldwide comparative research project, under the auspices of the EMES International Research Network and within an “Interuniversity Attraction Pole on Social Enterprise” funded by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO), the ICSEM Project was officially presented and launched in early July 2013, just after the 4th EMES International Research Conference on Social Enterprise, held at the University of Liege, Belgium. From the outset, some 100 researchers from 25 countries decided to get involved and committed themselves to carrying out the proposed work over at least four years. Over the following twelve months, many other researchers joined the Project; in total, about 230 research partners from some 55 countries and all regions of the world became part of the ICSEM research community.

All the researchers involved in the project were first asked to provide a “country contribution” about the SE “phenomenon” or “landscape” in their respective countries. Each contribution had a threefold aim:

* First, it should help to *understand concepts and contexts* and to appreciate the use and the relevance of the notion of social enterprise in each country, the existence of alternative concepts, the interest of public authorities for social enterprise and the specific schemes that these authorities set up for their promotion and support.
* Secondly, it also aimed to *map SE models*, i.e. to identify and characterise the main categories of social enterprise as well as their fields of activity, social mission and target groups; the public or private supports from which they benefit; their operational and governance models; their stakeholders, etc.
* Finally, it should eventually propose an analysis of “*institutional trajectories”* through the identification and description of the main “institutions” (at large) shaping the profile of social enterprises: legal frameworks used by social enterprises, public policies and programmes, major financial supports or other tools such as norms or accreditations, federations of which social enterprises are members, private charters to which they subscribe, etc.

In order to make up for the lack of reliable datasets at enterprise level and to allow undertaking international comparative works, the second phase of the ICSEM Project aimed to collect in-depth information on social enterprises deemed emblematic of the different SE categories or models identified in the country contributions. In such a perspective, a common questionnaire was co-produced with all research partners and used by them to interview social enterprise managers in their country. Although the actual number of interviews differed across countries, detailed data were collected in a rather homogenous way for 721 social enterprises from 43 countries. Needless to say, the database which resulted from such survey represents a key achievement of the ICSEM Project.

Quite logically, the last phase of the ICSEM Project, currently underway, aims to exploit this unique dataset, especially through statistical analysis of the main SE dimensions that were covered by the common questionnaire.

# 2. Understanding the Asian context surrounding social enterprise

As social enterprises are often regarded as new strategies to tackle social and societal problems, in order to analyse social enterprises in Asian countries, we first have to better understand the main challenges these countries are facing as well as the contexts in which social enterprises operate.

## 2.1. Socio-economic aspects

As Krugman (1994) stressed in his famous article on what the World Bank popularised as “Asia’s miracle”, Asian countries may look, at first glance, very similar to European or American ones, but a closer examination reveals that they actually present important differences. India is a world in itself, as is China—whose influence extends to a large part of South-East Asia. Since the early 1990s, numerous works have tried to catch the specific features of Asian economic development: they identified as strong common characteristics the central role of public authorities and the social influence of religions, including Confucianism (even though this is not, strictly speaking, a religion). To understand the economic environment of Asia, other features also deserve attention, such as the strong influence exerted by the Japanese model of development and, more recently, by the South Korean one; both foreign investments by big corporates and international aid by governmental agencies; or the central economic role of the Chinese diaspora, especially in Southeast Asia.

It should be noted first that, more than any other continent, Asia offers a highly diversified picture—which can however be partially apprehended through large comparative surveys and general indexes, despite their limits and weaknesses (see table 0.1). The countries surveyed in this book include major economic powers (Japan, China, South Korea and India), emerging economic players (Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan and Malaysia), but also countries that still remain very poor (the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia). Beyond this diversity, it should be stressed, however, that, with the exception of Japan, all these countries register today a robust economic growth, and many of them even used to have a double-digit growth in the past decades. Also worth underlining is the fact that the countries covered by this book represent almost half of the world’s population and include three among the top ten world economies.

Broadening the perspective, the Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of these countries ranges from the 17th position (Japan) to the 143rd one (Cambodia), with half of them above the 100th rank. The ten surveyed countries can be distributed into four groups: (1) well-developed countries in economic but also in social end education terms (Japan and South Korea—and likely Taiwan, although comparable data are not available for this country); (2) strong economies, with an intermediate level of development in social and education terms (Malaysia); (3) quite well-developed economies, with a lower level of development in social and education terms (China, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines); and (4) countries with lower levels of development for all three dimensions of the HDI (Cambodia, Vietnam and India).

Regardless of their level of development, all ten countries surprisingly display an unemployment rate that does not exceed 5%, and for most of them even remains between 2 and 4% (and is even lower than 2% in a few cases). When combined with poverty indicators, the relatively low unemployment rates confirm that poverty is not necessarily connected to the absence of job—although these figures could also indicate that the “official” unemployment rate does not reflect the real situation of the labour market. According to the World Bank (2018), more than 40% of the extremely poor in the world (people living with less than 1.9$ per day) are living in East Asia and the Pacific, but they are concentrated in a few low-income countries and, in more affluent ones, in remote areas. In the wealthiest countries of our sample, i.e. Japan and South Korea, the level of relative poverty (see table 0.1) is indeed among the highest among OECD countries, which suggests that these societies actually leave out a significant part of their population and are indeed “dual societies”.

## 2.2. Welfare systems and cultural environments

The scope and forms of the SE phenomenon in a given national context are sometimes considered to be closely connected to the type of welfare regime and the amount of social expenditure, and more particularly public social expenditure, in this context. Such an institutional perspective was developed in numerous works analysing the non-profit sector and eventually led Salamon and Anheier (1998) to elaborate the so-called “social origins theory”. Kerlin (2013, 2015, 2017) adopted such an approach to show how socioeconomic and regulatory institutions at the national level tend to shape different types of social enterprise and contribute to different national conceptions of social enterprise. Regarding welfare regimes in Asia, one of the most influential analyses was put forward by Holliday (2000), who proposes to enlarge Esping-Andersen’s well-known typology of welfare regimes and argues that there is an additional model of welfare, specific to Asian countries, which he calls the “productivist welfare capitalism”. This welfare regime is based on a growth-centred state and the subordination of all aspects of state policy to economic goals. The result is a type of welfare regime mixing elements of both the liberal and the conservative regimes of Esping-Andersen’s typology. However, beyond such broad elements of potential convergence regarding welfare regimes in Asia, national situations are actually very diverse, as expressed, for example, by the total public social expenditure as a percentage of GDP: although systematic data about this ratio are not available for each surveyed country, ILO and OECD data allow to highlight the wide diversity in this regard, with a spectrum ranging from 23.1% in Japan, 10.4% in South Korea or around 10% in Taiwan to less than 3% in other countries.

**Table 0.1. Socio-economic development of Asian countries at a glance**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Cambodia** | **China** | **India** | **Indonesia** | **Japan** | **Malaysia** | **Philippines** | **South Korea** | **Thailand** | **Vietnam** | **Unit** | **Source** |
| Population | 16 | 1,386 | 1,339 | 264 | 126.8 | 31.6 | 104.9 | 51.4 | 69 | 90 | Millions of persons | WORLD BANK |
| GDP ranking | 107 | 2 | 6 | 16 | 3 | 37 | 38 | 12 | 25 | 45 |  | WORLD BANK |
| GDP (PPP\*)/hab. | 4 | 16.8 | 7 | 12.2 | 43.8 | 29.4 | 8.3 | 38.2 | 17.8 | 5.7 | Thousands of USD | WORLD BANK |
| GDP (PPP\*)/hab. ranking | 143 | 82 | 124 | 100 | 30 | 50 | 119 | 32 | 75 | 127 |  | KNOEMA |
| Growth rate | 6.8 | 6.9 | 6.6 | 5.1 | 1.7 | 5.9 | 6.7 | 3.1 | 3.9 | 5.4 | % | WORLD BANK |
| Unemployment rate | 0.2 | 4.7 | 3.5 | 4.2 | 2.8 | 3.4 | 2.4 | 3.7 | 1.1 | 2.1 | % | ILO |
| HDI | 0.563 | 0.738 | 0.624 | 0.689 | 0.903 | 0.789 | 0.682 | 0.901 | 0.740 | 0.683 |  | PNUD |
| HDI ranking | 143 | 90 | 131 | 113 | 17 | 59 | 116 | 18 | 87 | 115 |  | PNUD |
| Gini Index | n/a | 42.2 (2012) | 35.1 (2011) | 39.5 (2013) | 33 (2016) | 40 (2016) | 40.1  (2016) | 31.6 (2012) | 37.8 (2013) | 34.8 (2014) |  | KNOEMA/OECD |
| Relative poverty \*\* | 14  (2014) | 4.5 (2016) | 22 (2011) | 11.2 (2015) | 16 (2016) | n/a | 25.2  (2012) | 18 (2016) | 10.9 (2013) | 8.4 (2014) | % | ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK |

\* PPP: purchasing power parity.

\*\* Relative poverty: percentage of the population living below the national poverty line.

*Unless otherwise indicated, all data are for 2017, except data about HDI and HDI Ranking (2016)*

It may be argued that some of the countries analysed in this book (such as South Korea and Taiwan) developed a welfare system inspired by Japan, with a strong orientation towards a potentially universal welfare system, including a long-term insurance scheme that has, in Japan and South Korea, a direct influence on social enterprises *qua* services providers. In others, by contrast, the state has a very residual role in the welfare system, and social policies are extremely limited and focus mostly on providing basic benefits to the most disadvantaged categories of the population; this is probably not disconnected from the fact that most of the surveyed countries are young democracies, which only recently escaped Western or Japanese domination and/or various forms of political dictatorship and, for some of them, experienced dramatic and devastating tragedies (Korean War; Vietnam War; Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia; Mao’s Cultural Revolution in China and Taiwan). Thus, many works stress that, as a consequence of such contemporary history, there was little room for an autonomous and independent civil society to develop until the late 1980s in Japan, South Korea or Taiwan, or even until more recently in the case of China, Vietnam or Cambodia.

The ten surveyed countries also present an interesting picture in terms of cultural environment, as is stressed, for example, in the World Value Survey (WVS), which has been regularly released since the 1980s with the aim of measuring changing values worldwide and their impact on social and political life. These surveys analyse economic development, democratisation, religion, gender equality, trust, social capital and subjective well-being. They led Inglehart and Wetzel (2005) to elaborate the “WVS Cultural Map”, which may be seen as a global typology of societies based on a double opposition—between so-called “traditional values” (observed in societies that emphasise religion, deference to authority, traditional family values) and “secular-rational values” (typical of societies that place less emphasis on traditional values and therefore show a higher tolerance towards issues like divorce, abortion, euthanasia or suicide); and between so-called “survival values” (which characterise societies that emphasise economic and physical security) and “self-expression values” (observed in societies that give a high priority to environmental protection, demonstrate growing tolerance of foreigners, gays and lesbians, support gender equality and are characterised by rising demands by citizens for participation in decision-making in economic and political life). On this basis, the analysis of WVS results shows that all Asian countries offer a weak orientation towards self-expression values. It also stresses, however, that Asian countries can be classified into two different groups: (1) a group governed by the so-called “Confucian culture”, where secular and survival values are privileged (Japan, China, South Korea and Taiwan); and (2) a group governed by the so-called “South-Asian culture”, where traditional and survival values are dominating (Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia). According to works by authors such as James (1989), who tried to identify a link between cultural values and the importance and features of the third sector, an orientation towards secular-rational values should be considered *a priori* as a more favourable environment for the development of social enterprises. As to the orientation toward survival values rather than self-expression values, which is common to all Asian countries, it might be reflected in a stronger involvement of social enterprises in economic issues and a weaker one around broader societal issues.

# 3. Contents and structure of the book

This book is based on contributions about ten Asian countries that were drawn up in the framework of the ICSEM Project.[[3]](#endnote-3) It includes three parts: The first one proposes country-level analyses of social enterprise in seven Asian countries (Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand). As explained above, these chapters, which are derived from contributions produced in the first phase of the ICSEM Project, focus on the various national contexts and on the concepts used therein to capture the SE phenomenon or landscape. It is important to note that no *a priori* definition of social enterprise was imposed on local researchers. This methodological strategy was adopted in a perspective favouring a bottom-up approach, with a view to capturing the dynamics and initiatives that can be understood as social enterprises or SE-like organisations. These enterprises are also analysed in the light of their historical background as well as in their current eco-system, which can be more or less conducive to the development of social enterprise.

The second part of the book proposes a set of contributions that document the reality of social enterprise in a few Asian countries with regard to specific issues. Two chapters deal with the forms of social enterprise engaged in rural community development. They show that this issue does not only concern the poorest and still mostly agricultural economies; SEs active in this field can indeed be observed in very different countries, like Indonesia, Taiwan or Japan. The next two contributions, which focus on social services provision, allow us to compare the cases of Japan and South Korea in this regard. These two countries are facing very similar social transformations (in particular, a very rapidly ageing population), which led them to develop new initiatives, including a long-term-care insurance scheme that brings stable revenues to social enterprises, and especially to social cooperatives, which are seen as efficient service providers. The last two chapters of this part are devoted to the specific role of social enterprises regarding poverty alleviation and social inclusion; they underline the critical role played by social enterprises in this regard through the examples of the Philippines and China. The specific characteristics of each of these two contexts help understanding the very different dynamics that can be observed among social enterprises—which are more participative in the Philippines, and more “centralised” in China.

The third and last part of the book contains three chapters; it presents a few complementary perspectives for a comparative analysis of social enterprise in Asian countries. The first chapter summarises the main outcomes of a study on social enterprise and agricultural values chains in four South-Eastern Asian countries (the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam). The second one is an original analysis of the way in which religions influence social enterprise in three countries with quite different religious traditions (Buddhism in Cambodia, Islam in Malaysia and Christianity in South Korea). The final chapter provides an analysis grounded in the exploitation of the unique dataset that was built up by the ICSEM Project through conducting a survey based on a common questionnaire, among more than 700 social enterprises. Empirical results for Asia are confronted to the typology of SE models (Defourny and Nyssens 2017) highlighted through the ICSEM dataset at the world level (Defourny *et al.* 2019) and to the typology put forward earlier by Defourny and Kim (2011) at the East Asian level. Together, these three chapters provide the basis for a better understanding of social enterprise in Asia and they pave the way for a discussion about the existence—or the absence—of one or several models of social enterprise that would be specific to Asia.

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1. The acronym “EMES” came from the title (in French) of a large research project (carried out between 1996 and 2000 in the 15 countries that then formed the European Union)—namely “The Emergence of Social Enterprise in Europe” (Borzaga and Defourny 2001). This acronym was then retained by the research network that emerged from—and pursued its activities beyond—this first joint research project. This name indeed remained for various subsequent research projects as well as when the EMES members decided to form a non-profit association under Belgian law, in 2002. In 2013, the EMES European Research Network became the EMES International Research Network, as a growing number of researchers from Asia and Latin America had expressed their willingness to join and the Network opened up to these new members. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. With the exception of Nyssens (2006), who coordinated a survey carried out among work-integration social enterprises in 11 EU countries. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Earlier versions of most “national” chapters have been published in the *ICSEM Working Papers Series*, which constituted the output of the Project’ first phase (see <https://www.iap-socent.be/icsem-working-papers>). A small number of contributions did not follow exactly all steps of the ICSEM Project and were prepared at a later stage of the Project. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)