

# Gaining Insight Into EU's Social and Solidarity Economy Role via Strategic Policy Documents Analysis

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**Submitted:** 5 February 2025 **Accepted:** 7 April 2025 **Published:** 29 May 2025

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “The Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Era of Polycrisis” edited by Francisco Simões (ISCTE-IUL), Renato do Carmo (ISCTE-IUL), and Bráulio Alturas (ISCTE-IUL), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i472>

## Abstract

This study examined European Union institutions' strategic policy documents and social and solidarity economy (SSE) concepts to gain a bird's-eye view of the topics being dealt with in EU strategies. The research also included assessing the SSE's role (i.e., its presence, absence, and relative importance) in policy and program instruments developed to meet challenges such as (un)employment, poverty, social inclusion, local development, community sustainability, and ecological transitions. Automated text mining techniques were applied to 74 EU policy documents to cluster employment, social affairs, and inclusion policies, and explore the SSE's most critical—or potential—role. The results have important policy implications and suggest future research directions.

## Keywords

EU policy; European Union; social economy; strategic policy document; text mining; VOSviewer

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has been called upon to support European and national social and employment policies as this economy's organizations have demonstrated to respond to major challenges in innovative ways (Vanderhoven et al., 2020). In *Equality and Non-Discrimination in an Enlarged European Union*, the European Commission (2004a) recognizes the SSE's instrumental role—alongside the European Parliament and national authorities—in advancing the EU's priorities regarding

discrimination. The recently approved Action Plan for the Social Economy also reinforces the SSE's valuable contributions to inclusion and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The European Economic and Social Committee further reported that the SSE has had a critical role in member states' response to the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting their important provision of personal social services and care (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021; see also Wollmann, 2018).

At the beginning of a new decade of European strategic and funding frameworks, the present study sought to identify the main themes present in EU strategic policy documents and explore the SSE's place in them. The goal was to provide a bird's-eye view of SSE-related topics included in EU strategies, contributing to the policy-making theory. In addition, this research conducted a preliminary assessment of the SSE's role (i.e., its presence, absence, and relative importance) in policy and program instruments responding to challenges such as (un)employment, poverty, social inclusion, local development, community sustainability, and ecological transition.

The analyses focused on key instruments used to design strategies (i.e., resolutions, communications, regulations, directives, recommendations). This study considered both cross-sectoral areas (e.g., the European Green Deal and the Recovery and Resilience Plan) and those more specifically linked to EU social policy, under the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion. By including all the relevant documents, the research could apply an integrated approach to analyze strategic policy rather than a segmented analysis focused on single documents (Garben, 2018).

The large body of printed and digitized documents defining these strategies contained a vast amount of text-based data, which justified the use of automated text analysis to extract important terms and their possible interrelationships. Indeed, one of the key contributions of this study is its innovative use of text mining to analyze a large corpus of EU social policy documents. Unlike traditional qualitative approaches that focus on a handful of texts, our comprehensive method systematically identifies not only the dominant themes but also the notable absence of certain topics—specifically, the SSE. By mapping both the presence and absence of SSE-related terms across a broad dataset, our approach provides robust evidence of its marginalization within EU policy discourse. This dual insight (what is there and what is missing) underscores the value of our methodology in revealing policy gaps that would otherwise remain undetected in smaller-scale studies. Text mining and clustering techniques were applied based on a comprehensive lexicon of SSE-related terms. The results were then subjected to critical analysis and an in-depth review was conducted of each cluster's main documents.

Two research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How are EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion policies clustered, and which streams have been given the most attention?

RQ2: To what extent is the SSE present—and how critical is its role—in EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion policies?

By clustering strategic documents' content on employment, social affairs, and inclusion, this study identified the key themes in social policy agendas and emerging concepts, actors, and policy instruments for

implementing change in the EU. The deeper understanding gained through critical analysis of the results contributes to the debate on the SSE's innovative role and the ways that EU policies guide transformative social change (Taylor et al., 2020). These topics are currently receiving special attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Zhang et al., 2022), and they proved key to government leaders' commitment to supporting the European Pillar of Social Rights in May 2021.

The text mining techniques applied in this study offered new insights due to the corpus of EU policy documents analyzed and provided intuitive visualization tools for clustering results. The overall findings facilitate the conceptualization of EU strategies on employment, social affairs, and inclusion and clarify the ways the SSE has been conceptualized. These results represent valuable contributions to the current debate regarding how to design effective transformative public policy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Roadmap of EU Social Policy

The evolution of EU social policy provides essential context for understanding the current position of the SSE within the broader policy landscape. Since the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (see Supplementary File, Figure 1), early EU social policies primarily focused on fostering cooperation between member states regarding employment, working conditions, vocational training, and social security. Initial instruments, such as the European Social Fund, were designed to support worker mobility and address basic social needs through collective action focusing more on European employment policy and limiting social policy to cooperation between member states.

Despite a period of economic prosperity and consolidation of the European model, economic progress did not lead to the expected social development, and poverty and social exclusion persisted. The crisis in the 1970s was a turning point in EU social policies and the European Social Fund's reform began. In 1974, the European Council adopted its first social action program, which gave the European Commission a social function and implemented pilot projects and initiatives combating poverty and exclusion. This period marked the beginning of a critical reassessment of the relationship between economic growth and social welfare, laying the groundwork for later policy shifts. The Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers was adopted in 1989, establishing the main principles for the European labor law model and shaping the EU social model's development over the next decade. These initiatives underscore early efforts to integrate social rights into policy, although they did not fully address emerging issues of social exclusion.

In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty, which founded the EU, was extended to include a protocol and an agreement on social policy, again focusing on workers' rights but adding "the integration of persons excluded from the labor market" ("33 years since the EU treaty," 2024). Finally, in 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam specifically mentioned social exclusion, adding measures to encourage cooperation between member states through exchanges of best practices and promoting innovative ways to combat social exclusion. Such measures, while progressive, highlight the limitations of a framework that struggles to integrate more holistic and solidarity-based approaches.

Since the late 1990s, activation policies have been at the core of different European welfare states. Now, member states tend to develop quite different responses to the same macroeconomic and social problems, but shared tendencies appear in the recent reorientation towards activation. This new EU approach to social policies was further strengthened with the Lisbon Strategy of March 2000. The connection was acknowledged between a trifecta of economic growth, the creation of more and better jobs, and the fight against poverty and social exclusion (Estivill, 2008). The Lisbon Strategy endorsed the human capital approach and focused on individuals as entrepreneurs, thereby establishing European neoliberalism as a strategy (Bernhard, 2010). This strategic pivot, however, inadvertently sidelined alternative paradigms such as the SSE, which emphasize collective welfare over individual entrepreneurship.

Throughout the twenty-first century's first decade, the Lisbon Strategy continued to be a reference point, but it put in jeopardy the more fragile aspects of fighting poverty and social exclusion by putting social inclusion policies in second place (Duplan, 2023). This de-prioritization of social inclusion elements has contributed to the persistent invisibility of solidarity-driven approaches within EU policy discourse.

In 2013, the European Commission launched the Social Investment Package, which highlights the need to update social policies to optimize their effectiveness and efficiency considering demographic change and economic challenges. This initiative invests in policies designed to strengthen people's skills and capacities and support their participation in society, beyond education and work (Nyström et al., 2023). Despite these initiatives, the overarching policy framework continues to favor market-oriented solutions over solidarity-based models.

Despite a growing awareness of the importance of the EU's social dimension, these policies are still handicapped by a lack of commitment, tools, and legal competences needed to ensure their effective implementation and further advances. In 2021, the European Commission's annual State of the Union address highlighted the EU's most pressing challenges, but social service representatives across Europe have observed that social policy issues are once again largely given low priority (de Vries, 2021). This ongoing trend reinforces the need for methodological approaches, such as our text-mining analysis, to systematically uncover and quantify the marginalization of the SSE within EU policy discourse.

## **2.2. Social Economy as Policy**

The SSE is an umbrella concept designating a sector that includes organizations that “have the specific feature of producing goods, services, and knowledge while pursuing both economic and social aims and fostering solidarity” (International Trading Centre, 2017, p. 1). The SSE encompasses both more traditional organizations (i.e., cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, and foundations) and a variety of other formal and informal initiatives that have emerged in recent years framed by the notion of a solidarity economy (e.g., non-profits, social enterprises, fair trade, alternative finance schemes, community groups, and open-source technology). The SSE shares a set of common principles and practices, particularly supporting the primacy of people over profits, the pursuit of collective interests, democratic governance—often self-management, voluntary and open membership, and, potentially, territorial foundations (Third Sector Impact, 2015).

In 1997, the European Parliament launched the pilot project Third System and Employment, which recognizes the SSE's potential regarding employment (Chaves-Avila & Monzon, 2012, p. 96). This

undertaking involved 81 experimental subprojects accompanied by a set of studies that contributed to making the “third system” and the SSE more visible as key actors. European institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Economic and Social Committee could no longer ignore this economy, especially regarding employment and social inclusion.

Studies evaluating different public programs, including EU programs, and pilot projects have shown that the SSE contributes to the fight against unemployment, the inclusion of vulnerable groups, and economic and local social development (Castelao Caruana & Srnec, 2013). Considering these findings, European institutions and national governments have acknowledged the SSE's capacity “for correcting significant social and economic imbalances and helping [the EU] to achieve various objectives of general interest” (Chaves-Avila & Monzon, 2012, p. 104). During the Covid-19 pandemic, this economy has been given special attention because of public systems' inability to respond adequately (Santos & Laureano, 2021).

The current study addresses a significant research gap by examining the disconnect between the robust policy rhetoric surrounding the SSE and its minimal integration in EU strategic documents. By systematically analyzing a large corpus of these documents, we aim to quantify both the presence or absence of SSE-related discourse.

Previous studies have often been limited to analyzing a single or a few strategic documents (Carella & Graziano, 2021; Garben, 2018), primarily due to resource constraints and the inherent subjectivity of manual content analysis. In contrast, this text-mining approach allows for a comprehensive and objective examination of a much larger corpus, providing new insights into the policy dynamics that marginalize the SSE.

### 3. Methodology

In view of a new decade ahead for European strategic and funding frameworks, the current study sought to identify the concepts that define the EU's social policy agenda and the SSE's role within this policy. The text-as-data method was thus applied to EU policy documents. The automated approach avoids limitations imposed by human subjectivity on literature evaluation and categorization while remaining efficient and scalable enough to handle any number of documents (Santos & Laureano, 2021).

Given the large quantity of published and digitized documents defining the current framework of EU social policy, the data selection phase focused on identifying the documents that contain text focused on that topic. Experts in EU strategy were first invited to validate thematic categories for the document search, and a list of documents was developed based on these categories. The four categories defined drew on previous studies (Neamtan & Downing, 2005) and are:

1. Territorial development;
2. Sectoral policies (e.g., the environment, employment, education, health, culture, and housing);
3. Policies supporting target populations (e.g., youths, the elderly, people with disabilities, immigrants, the unemployed, and women);
4. Cross-sectoral policies.

The relevant documents available in each category were listed based on the information available on the EU's official website. This list included, among others, directives, resolutions, proposals, and communications concerning the EU's current social policy framework (i.e., employment, social affairs, inclusion, and cross-cutting issues). The documents were produced by various EU institutions: the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the DGEMPL, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Social Protection Committee.

The aforementioned experts were asked to check the list generated for any missing strategic documents and to confirm whether the documents identified as a 'proposal' had already been updated to the definitive version. These specialists' input ensured a comprehensive final list of documents to be included in this study (see Supplementary File, Table 1). Table 2 in the Supplementary File summarizes the absolute frequency of each type of document—in total 74. Communications, reports, and proposals were the most plentiful.

After validating the documents comprising the dataset (i.e., corpus), their contents were analyzed using a text mining procedure in which terms were mapped according to their co-occurrence in the documents and the strength of links between terms. The latter output reflects the number of documents in which two terms occur together. The entire mapping process was completed with VOSviewer software (van Eck & Waltman, 2010, 2017), which selected the most relevant terms by removing non-meaningful words in this research context and organizing the terms into networks. The results facilitated the visualization and exploration of the map of terms appearing in the document dataset (Santos & Laureano, 2021).

The methodological procedure followed is shown in Figure 2 in the Supplementary File.

To understand more fully the SSE's visibility and invisibility in European strategies, a dictionary was defined of SSE-related terms, which were categorized by type of organization (see Supplementary File, Table 3). The text mining technique used the procedure's results to determine exactly how many times each SSE-related term occurred within each document. Finally, significant patterns were identified, and a critical analysis of the findings was conducted.

## 4. Results

The text-mining technique produced five thematic clusters. All the words in each cluster appear in the same color on the VOSviewer map of the word network (see Figure 1).

### 4.1. Cluster Profiles

The five clusters in EU policy documents are as follows:

- Cluster 1—Economy (red);
- Cluster 2—Equality (green);
- Cluster 3—Qualifications and Employment (blue);
- Cluster 4—Mistreated Groups (yellow);
- Cluster 5—Care (purple).



education, healthcare, energy transition, housing, and social services delivery, as well as generating jobs “for those furthest from the labor market” (European Commission, 2024b, p. 7).

This cluster also encompasses a reference document on the European SSE’s recent categorization as a key driver of economic and social development and as a supplement to existing welfare systems in many member states (EPSCO Council, 2015). While not binding, this document underlines the need to establish and further develop European, national, regional, and/or local strategies and programs that enhance the SSE, especially by favoring integrated, evidence-based policies.

Policy documents covered by Cluster 2 center around the broad idea of a “Union of equality,” including strategies regarding disability, racism, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning individuals, Roma people, work inclusion, urban poverty, and the European Pillar of Social Rights’ common framework.

To address the inequalities and vulnerabilities these different groups must deal with, EU documents consider a multitude of factors. The latter range from accessibility to build and virtual environments for people with disabilities, access to rights, training, and education, political participation, and access to quality and sustainable jobs. Other factors are ways to tackle discrimination and improve access to social protection, healthcare, housing, essential services, and leisure activities. Barriers’ intersectionality is also acknowledged, namely, the intersection of gender, age, racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious characteristics.

Community-based services’ importance is underlined, and the SSE’s role is highlighted in facilitating labor market inclusion for vulnerable people and promoting diversity in the workplace. The SSE’s potential is also acknowledged for being on the frontline in terms of fighting discrimination and integrating marginalized groups into society at large. Most of this cluster’s documents further emphasize developing data, monitoring systems, and adequate indicators to provide knowledge that strengthens and promotes evidence-based policy and practice.

Cluster 3’s related documents explaining European policies are linked to education and employment as key sources of social inclusion, personal fulfillment, and active citizenship. The main target groups are young people, low-skilled individuals, older workers, migrants, the Roma, women, and the long-term unemployed. Adult and lifelong learning are important topics, as are upskilling and reskilling. The documents focus on promoting access and advancement in labor markets for everyone, including those facing unemployment, restructuring, and career transitions.

The skills and competencies expected of EU citizens and workers are literacy, mathematics, and digital competencies, as well as personal, social, and learning-to-learn proficiencies (e.g., complex problem-solving skills). EU organizations plan to develop a highly skilled, qualified workforce able to respond to labor market needs, especially during green and digital transitions. In addition, this cluster’s documents focus on monitoring and ensuring quality education and training systems and increasing innovation in learning environments. To achieve these goals, different public and private sector stakeholders are called upon to take an active part in these systems, including vocational education and training (VET) providers and employers. Specific sectors of activity are mentioned including circular economy and new industrial SMEs.

Policy documents in Cluster 4 are connected to the idea of “preventing and combating” the risks and consequences for crime and harassment victims. Because various groups have limited access to their full rights in the EU, policy instruments have been created to respond to everyone’s needs. Target victims include those subjected to gender-based and domestic violence, child, elderly, and sexual abuse, hate crime, terrorism, organized crime, trafficking, and migrant smuggling, as well as crimes against people with disabilities.

Official approaches mostly concentrate on supporting and protecting victims with information, assistance mechanisms, and compensation and on sanctioning offenders. Policy documents commonly argue for integrated, holistic, and human rights-based methods, so “mistreated groups” are discussed in this cluster’s documents from a mainstreaming and intersectional perspective. This theme also incorporates the question of awareness-raising regarding different topics mostly to make victims more visible and gather information on—and monitor—varied crimes and harassment in the EU.

Finally, Cluster 5 relates to care, which is the least frequently mentioned area covering terms such as “mental health,” “prevention,” “intervention,” and “drug.” VOSviewer’s clustering function tends, when dealing with a residual set of documents forming a separate cluster, to identify terms with emerging themes. Mental health and addictions are an outlier within EU policy on employment, social affairs, and inclusion.

The European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing addresses the need to make mental health one of the highest priorities in public health agendas. This document argues that, despite significant advancements, much room for improvement remains regarding the quality of mental health patients’ support, prevention, treatment, and care. Frameworks for both mental health and drug policies emphasize their cross-cutting nature and thus advocate for the integration of public health, justice, and other policies in areas such as labor, education, and social affairs. One strategy considered essential is to shift away from traditional models of healthcare based on institutional infrastructure—already proved to be outdated and stigmatized—towards more community-based services, though the SSE is not referred to specifically.

#### 4.2. SSE’s Visibility in EU Strategy Clusters

Regarding the SSE’s visibility and invisibility in European strategies, Table 5 in the Supplementary File shows the relationship between the five clusters and all the SSE-related terms of the dictionary developed for this research. The themes in Clusters 4 and 5 are not closely connected to the SSE which is cited less than 10 times. Cluster 1 has the most mentions of this economy ( $n = 1,835$ ).

Regarding SSE-related terms, the most frequently used in policy documents (see Supplementary File, Table 6) are “social and solidarity economy” ( $n = 1,438$ ) and the closely linked terms “SSE,” “social economy,” and “solidarity economy.” “Co-op” ( $n = 529$ ), “social enterprises” ( $n = 242$ ), and “unions” ( $n = 147$ ) also appear more than 100 times. “Foundations” is absent from the documents, and “mutuals” ( $n = 6$ ) and “non-profit organizations” ( $n = 9$ ) are infrequently mentioned ( $>10$  terms).

The SSE has a significant presence ( $>10$  terms) in 14 of the 74 documents under analysis. In 27 of them, this term does not appear even once. These terms appear frequently in only two documents ( $>1,000$  and  $>100$  times, respectively): *New Technologies and Digitization: Opportunities and Challenges for Social Economy*

and *Social Enterprises and Statute for a European Cooperative Society*. In both cases, the title itself is about the SSE, so, not unexpectedly, SSE-related terms are used multiple times.

The document with the top number of SSE terms ( $n = 1,614$ ) is a 2020 study focused on whether, why, how, and to what extent integrating digital platforms and advanced technologies can affect the design and delivery of new better social, and societal SSE impacts. Referring to case studies, the document specifically discusses SSE digital transitions. The cited study ends with recommendations regarding the need for a common legal form for EU member states seeking to create digital platforms.

The *Statute for a European Cooperative Society* makes a further 412 references to SSE-related terms as it specifically focuses on cooperatives, including what is, how to create, and how to transform a cooperative into a European Cooperative Society. In addition, one EU communication discusses initiatives that create a favorable climate for social businesses, so this document has 72 mentions of SSE terms. The goal is to place the SSE and social innovation at the heart of the EU's concerns to promote a "highly competitive social market economy."

In the fourth position ( $n = 60$ ), another quite generic document concentrates on promoting the SSE as a key driver of Europe's economic and social development. The contents reaffirm how important the SSE is to the European Commission and encourage SSE businesses and social entrepreneurs to become actively involved in the development of EU-wide policies and strategies promoting their sector of activity.

The 14 documents that mention more than ten SSE terms include two (documents no. 2 and 4) that make quite generic references to SSE's role and cooperatives' statutes. Most policy documents (documents no. 3, 5, 8, 12, 13, and 14) are either about social and economic development in the single market and agriculture or the European Pillar of Social Rights. Three documents (documents no. 7, 9, and 11) are about VET systems. Two others focus on specific target groups, namely, people with disabilities (document no. 6) and homeless individuals (document no. 10). Only one (document no. 1) is, specifically, mainly concerned about digital transitions.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The above results answer the predefined research questions by showing trends and patterns that can be investigated further. Regarding RQ1, the results reveal the primacy of investment programs and/or funds for climate transition and digitalization. Innovation, economic development, and competitiveness are also high priorities (Cluster 1).

A second significant stream is policies that promote inclusion, equality, and non-discrimination. The idea of a "union of equality" is strongly emphasized, although the complex intersectional barriers to achieving this are recognized. A third stream concentrates on qualifications and employment, especially education, training, and improving skills to ensure target groups' digital and green transition employability. These groups include young people, low-skilled individuals, older workers, migrants, the Roma, women, and the long-term unemployed.

A fourth stream is related to mistreated groups as crime victims. Women, children, and other victims of human rights crimes, such as trafficking, are important targets. A final stream emphasizes policies promoting

healthcare, in particular mental health, and addiction. A vast number of EU regulations and directives are included, and member states' cooperation stands out as a theme.

The results for how the SSE is framed show that, in only 14 of the 74 policy documents analyzed is the social economy a significant topic (>10 terms). Even in these 14, just two have over 100 mentions. While our analysis is cross-sectional and does not directly compare past and present, external institutional developments suggest a shift in SSE visibility. For instance, the legal constitution of the European Parliament Social Economy Intergroup in January 2020, along with the establishment of a dedicated European platform—Social Economy Europe—to represent SSE interests at the EU level, indicates that the SSE is receiving increased recognition. These developments point to greater visibility within specific subsectors (e.g., the social field and the integration of vulnerable groups) and as an emerging employer sector and driver of social innovation.

The most prominent SSE-related terms in policy documents are “social enterprise,” “social innovation,” and “cooperatives” (i.e., co-ops). “Social innovation” appears associated with entrepreneurship as a key tool for combatting unemployment. The SSE tends to be ignored when economic, technological, innovation, and environmental issues are discussed, and this economy lacks operational mechanisms and tools.

### **5.1. Policy Implications**

Based on our empirical findings that show a limited presence of SSE-related discourse in EU policy documents, our analysis suggests that EU strategic policies might benefit from a more integrated approach. The SSE, public institutions, and administrations need to work together to be better prepared and responsive to societal concerns about employment, social affairs, and inclusion. Future EU strategic policies need to consider the present study's findings regarding a more integrated, holistic approach—rather than fragmented, diffused tactics—to policy design. The SSE should be clearly mentioned in policy documents as a key partner in EU strategies so that this economy and EU institutions can together prepare better for crises. Greater preparedness entails recognizing the SSE's critical role during crises, as well as this economy's varied, ongoing needs. This recommendation was previously made by the European Economic and Social Committee (2021).

The Social Economy Action Plan adopted on 9 December 2021 may be an opportunity to achieve the EU's social goals by putting an inter-organizational system in place that combines all sectors' efforts. The SSE also could now be integrated into EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion strategies. However, this perspective is not yet present in the key actions announced that support the SSE, namely, the EU Social Economy Gateway or the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation.

To avoid creating isolated measures, this action plan should follow the EU's recommendations regarding cooperative strategies in which the three economic sectors (i.e., governments, businesses, and the SSE) co-create inter-organizational networks. This SSE framework would benefit from all the relevant actors' unique experience, thereby achieving social, environmental, and economic goals and improving the SSE's visibility, recognition, and access to finance and markets. EU debates and strategy design need to reflect the SSE's role and the added value it provides to construct a more resilient Europe.

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study provides an up-to-date view of the SSE and the EU policy process, revealing that SSE-related discourse in policy documents is both limited and fragmented (Kendall & Anheier, 1999). Although our cross-sectional analysis does not capture policy evolution over time, this pattern suggests that prevailing theoretical models may underestimate the benefits of an integrated, cross-sectoral approach. Consequently, our findings encourage scholars to reconsider their approach to strategic management in SSE- and EU-related policies. Policy-making theories should evaluate how different sectors interact, as this integrated approach can strengthen the resilience of SSE organizations. Adopting a holistic perspective—viewing policy documents as an interconnected web rather than as isolated artifacts—can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different policy domains interact (Carella & Graziano, 2021). Overall, theoretical studies that fail to treat the SSE as a critical part of constructing a resilient EU could end up proposing inappropriate management strategies for the public sector, businesses, and SSE actors.

## 5.3. Practical Implications

The current results reveal that the SSE is largely ignored in EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion strategies. It needs to develop a greater capacity for self-promotion to gain more recognition. Its organizations can work together to create mechanisms that facilitate inter-organizational and inter-sectorial collaboration with companies and the public sector during projects and put pressure on the EU to implement strategies that give the SSE a more central role. In addition, businesses' calls for funding supporting corporate social responsibility could favor SSE projects that involve cooperating with other sectors' organizations and promoting all sectors' sustainability and resilience. These projects would thus gain an advantage in terms of attracting funding.

## 6. Conclusion

The SSE is currently seen as providing social and employment policies and responding to significant social challenges innovatively, but this is not always reflected in EU institutions' policy strategies. The present study found evidence that the SSE has been overlooked in important EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion policy documents.

The analysis covered the contents of 74 directives, resolutions, proposals, and communications produced by various organizations regarding the EU's current social policy framework. Text mining techniques were applied to generate a map of EU policy terms using VOSviewer's co-occurrence algorithm, which revealed five thematic clusters in the documents: *Economy, Equality, Qualifications and Employment, Mistreated Groups and Care*. The results show that only 14 of the 74 policy documents in the dataset make significant references (>10 times) to the SSE, and 27 documents (about 36%) fail to mention this economy even once.

This research provided empirically robust evidence that EU strategies overlook SSE organizations' potential as key partners in resolving employment, social affairs, and inclusion issues. Given the SSE's widely recognized critical role in coping with the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, future policymaking processes must include these organizations when designing and implementing action plans in the relevant areas. However, recent policy documents show that the EU has still not adopted this integrated approach,

preferring instead to continue incorporating the SSE into isolated strategies involving other sectors' organizations (i.e., the public sector and businesses). These findings were subjected to critical analysis to highlight any policy, theoretical, and practical implications, thereby contributing to encouraging more EU resilience strategies that acknowledge the SSE's key role.

### **6.1. Limitations and Future Directions**

The present study underlined the challenges and opportunities of applying text mining techniques in qualitative research and social policy analysis, particularly when a massive volume of data is processed (i.e., Big Data). This approach not only enables the analysis of vast datasets but also uncovers hidden patterns that might be missed by conventional qualitative methods. Automated text analysis combined with non-automated critical analysis of results is an arguably fundamental tool for dealing with the growing number of politically meaningful texts that have spread along different channels over time. In this context, the choice not to include a systematic review of all policy documents could be considered a limitation. However, this exploratory research's main goal was to provide a bird's-eye view of the most relevant documents' content and discuss the EU strategic policies mentioned. Nonetheless, employing a mixed-methods strategy that combines text mining with qualitative content analysis may further enrich our understanding of the evolving policy landscape. The findings should thus be treated as a basis for future studies of specific policies, especially during those periods when strategies are revised, and new strategic documents and action plans developed.

### **Acknowledgments**

The publication of this work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT), Portugal, under the scope of the SocioDigital Lab for Public Policy LA/P/0125/2020.

### **Funding**

This research was funded by UID/04011: CETRAD—Centro de Estudos Transdisciplinares para o Desenvolvimento.

### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### **Data Availability**

The data used in this study consists of publicly available strategic documents from the European Union. All documents can be accessed through the official website of the European Union at <https://europa.eu>.

### **Supplementary Material**

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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