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This is a Post-print version of a publication  
published by Taylor & Francis  
in European Planning Studies

**DOI:** 10.1080/09654313.2015.1108394

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### **Please cite the publication as follows:**

Satu Rinkinen, Tuija Oikarinen & Helinä Melkas (2016) Social enterprises in regional innovation systems: a review of Finnish regional strategies, *European Planning Studies*, 24:4, 723-741, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2015.1108394

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**Document version:** This is the authors' accepted manuscript version of the article published by Taylor & Francis Group in European Planning Studies

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ceps20>). © 2015 Taylor & Francis

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**To cite this article:** Satu Rinkinen, Tuija Oikarinen & Helinä Melkas (2016) Social enterprises in regional innovation systems: a review of Finnish regional strategies, European Planning Studies, 24:4, 723-741, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2015.1108394

# **Social Enterprises in Regional Innovation Systems: A Review of Finnish Regional Strategies**

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## ***Abstract***

*The aim of modern innovation policies is to enhance the innovation capability of regions, their organisations and people. Regional innovation system (RIS) theory has been one of the most popular frameworks for realising innovation policies. Yet, adopting the perspective of sustainable innovation policy where innovation is also seen as a solution to various societal and environmental problems has been slow. Social enterprises (SEs) are discussed here as a means to address those problems, particularly through collaboration between sectors and focusing on social sustainability. The aim of this paper is to identify whether and in what way SEs are communicated as an innovative solution and as a source of innovations for economic and development activities through regional strategies. The data consists of regional innovation and business strategies from all Finnish regions, analysed using qualitative content analysis. We argue that there is a need to go deeper and include effective support mechanisms for SEs in these documents. Better inclusion of SEs as part of innovation systems and communicating this through regional strategies would help to develop SEs and to have them perceived as potential innovators and active entrepreneurial actors in innovation systems contributing to economically, environmentally and socially sustainable development.*

## **Keywords**

Regional Development, Regional Innovation System, Regional Innovation Strategy, Social Enterprise, Social Innovation

## Introduction

Regional innovation system (RIS) theory (Cooke et al., 1997; Braczyk et al., 1998; Asheim and Isaksen, 2002) has been one of the most utilized frameworks for innovation policies and activities. At the regional level, the current European Union's growth strategy, Europe2020 and related innovation policies are implemented, for example, in the form of regional innovation strategies for smart specialisation. Smart specialisation approach is about creating a unified innovation strategy for a region; a strategy that is based on regional assets in order to ensure the targeted use of funding and investments by focusing on the fields with the highest future innovation potential (see, e.g., Foray, 2009; Foray et al., 2011; McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2013a, 2013b). The smart specialisation approach promotes entrepreneurship, thus making use of regional assets. However, it appears that all types of entrepreneurs are not yet properly incorporated into regional innovation systems, policies and strategies.

In seeking smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, many expectations are set for social enterprises (SEs). The European Union (EU), for instance, expects SEs to be a source of new and innovative solutions to the persistent problems of society, to allow better inclusion of workers and consumers and to produce "laboratories" of social innovations, especially at the local or community levels (EU, 2012). Social enterprise has been conceptualized in different ways across nations (Kerlin, 2006). It is seen as a new and distinct entity compared to classical business and traditional non-profit activity, focused on addressing social issues (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001) and combining different elements of the social purpose, the market orientation and the financial performance standards of business (Young, 2008). A social enterprise has been equated with an innovative approach to tackling social needs and promoting social inclusion (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Kerlin, 2006). However, more research is needed to understand the conditions under which SEs can contribute effectively to solving social challenges in a sustainable way.

The aim of this paper is to identify whether and in what way SEs are communicated as an innovative solution and as a source of sustainable innovations for economic and development activities through regional strategies. Answers to the research problem are sought by setting the following research questions: First, in what way can SEs contribute to regional development through regional innovation systems and their objectives? Second, do Finnish regional strategies include themes related to social perspective, and is the potential of SEs to contribute to strategic objectives identified and communicated in these strategies? The data consists of regional innovation and business strategies from all Finnish regions, analysed using qualitative content analysis.

This paper contributes to regional development theory by bringing the concept of sustainability to development theory discussion particularly through the RIS theory which has dominated the field of regional innovation research during the past decades. Our paper points out that the RIS theory and innovation and development policy based on the RIS approach includes areas and objectives where principles of sustainability could be better incorporated and where SEs could contribute to the objectives. The main argument of this paper is that Finnish regional innovation systems – as reflected in their central policy instruments, regional strategies – still maintain a rather traditional growth-oriented focus instead of reflecting and promoting the objectives of sustainable innovation policy on a larger scale. We note that SEs hold unused potential in answering to expectations concerning RIS, particularly the social ones, and SE as a concept sustains both entrepreneurship and innovation and an alternative type of sustainable innovation policy.

## Regional Innovation Systems

In development of regional innovation activities and policies the innovation systems theory has been widely applied. The innovation systems approach originates from the discussion on national systems of innovation (Freeman, 1987; Lundvall, 1992; Nelson, 1993; Edquist, 1997) from which the regional dimension of innovation systems was developed by Philip Cooke (see, e.g. Cooke, 1992; Cooke, 1998; Cooke, 2001a; Cooke, 2008) and RIS became a popular concept when developing and realising innovation policies at the regional level. The important aspects in the systemic approach are the linkages between the elements of the system. These linkages can be defined as information and knowledge flows, investment funding, flows of authority, networks and clubs of partnerships (Cooke et al., 1997). The systemic approach was designed to take into account all important factors shaping innovation activity (Edquist, 1997). The policy conclusion of the RIS theory was that innovation policies should be embedded in a broader socio-economic context, the overall policy domain should be broadened, and management should change from top-down steering to network steering (Cooke, 2001b; Smits and Kuhlmann, 2004).

A RIS is considered a social system, and innovations are the result of social interaction between the innovation system's actors (Cooke, 1998; Doloreux and Parto, 2005). Policy tools and actions based on the innovation system approach do not focus solely on traditional input-output relationships but also on those social and institutional factors that affect the economic development of the region (Kautonen, 2006). However, Fløysand and Jakobsen (2011) argue that the innovation systems approach has fostered an instrumentalism that views innovation as a predictable and standardised process. They argue that a spatial- and context-sensitive relational turn is needed also in innovation studies. A relational turn in economic geography has meant viewing the economic and the social as fundamentally intertwined, and economic actions as context-specific processes (Bethelt and Glückler, 2003). Within the relational turn economic practice is seen as an action with many goals, not solely meeting material needs and making profits (Fløysand and Jakobsen, 2011). This view is in line with the idea of sustainable innovation policy that views innovation not merely as a means for profit making and growth but as a solution to a variety of societal and environmental challenges, not only to economic ones (Pelkonen, 2009). The EU is struggling to rise from its economic crisis with the help of the new Europe 2020 growth strategy that focuses on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010). Smart growth refers to an economy based on knowledge and innovation. The aim is to invest more in research, innovation and entrepreneurship. Sustainability deals not only with environmentally sustainable, efficient and competitive solutions, but it also underpins economic, social and territorial cohesion. The new growth strategy and objectives have an impact on national and regional policies and strategies in the EU member states, also in Finland. Receiving funding from EU Structural Funds for research and innovation investments requires a regional innovation strategy for smart specialisation (RIS3) (European Commission, 2011). RIS3 is thus one of the latest policy tools shaping regional strategies and systems.

Finland can be considered a forerunner when it comes to developing innovation policies and creating new innovation strategies (e.g., Cooke, 2012a). The Finnish national innovation system has been a good example of a successful science- and technology-based innovation system. It has succeeded in producing examples of internationally competitive and successful enterprises, such as Nokia (in earlier times) and Rovio (an entertainment media company and creator of the globally successful Angry Birds franchise). Despite these success stories, the Finnish innovation system and policy have encountered challenges to their future development. Getting involved in global networks is becoming crucial for Finnish enterprises, as the

competition is moving from head-to-head competition to competition between global business ecosystems (Moore, 1993; Hearn and Pace, 2006; Wallin and Laxell, 2013) and because of the very limited Finnish domestic market. Innovation policy should better take into account the systemic nature of innovation and the competences embedded in networks and ecosystems (Wallin, 2012).

In addition, the examination of regional innovation systems has been argued to be somewhat outdated (Harmaakorpi and Uotila, 2012). Regional systems are often perceived to comprise regional innovation platforms (Harmaakorpi, 2006; Cooke, 2007; Uotila et al., 2012). Regional innovation/development platforms have been defined as “regional resource configurations based on past development trajectories, but presenting future potential to produce competitive advantage existing in the defined resource configurations. The central power of development platforms may be found in exploiting distance as innovation potential, but synergy in the platforms is emphasised in terms of related variety” (see Harmaakorpi, 2006). The actors of a platform are firms, technology centres, expertise centres, research centres, educational organisations and alike. A platform must be separately defined each time. It is often based on an industry, area of expertise or future megatrend, or a combination of those. (Harmaakorpi and Uotila, 2006; Uotila, Harmaakorpi and Melkas, 2006) Platform-based innovation policy is based on the idea of building up a regional competitive advantage through related variety (Asheim et al., 2011) and focusing on the identification of the regional resource base instead of existing clusters. Innovation systems and platforms should be developed to highlight new emerging technologies and the increasing importance of both service and other non-technological innovations.

During the past decades the Finnish innovation policy has been rather science- and technology-focused. However, there has been a shift towards more broad-based innovation policy that also acknowledges the importance of more practice-based innovation activities (Edquist et al., 2009). Regarding innovation policy goal-setting, Pelkonen (2009) argues that the Finnish broad-based policy still largely adopts the perspective of a growth-oriented policy, which places economic competitiveness and productivity growth as central objectives instead of adopting the perspective of a sustainable innovation policy in which innovation is seen as a solution to various societal and environmental problems.

The current economic situation poses challenges in both policy planning and practice. These challenges include finding and defining regional strengths in global competition, creating new courses of action, activating people, and better exploiting the innovation potential embedded in regional characteristics and people in order to create both wealth and wellbeing. By definition, SEs have potential in terms of responding to these challenges.

## **Social Enterprises**

Businesses can play a key role in the pursuit of achieving the worthy goal of sustainable development (DeSimone and Popoff, 2000). Sustainable businesses could address social challenges that are barriers to advancing sustainable development (Fisk, 2010). Sustainable and socially responsible businesses incorporate sustainability principles into everyday practices of a business, from the fringes to the heart of the business (Fisk, 2010; Weybrecht, 2010).

In seeking smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, many expectations are set for SEs. SEs are perceived to be a source of new and innovative solutions to the persistent problems of society, as well as a means to facilitate better inclusion of workers and consumers (see Campi, Defourny and Grégoire, 2006). SE is considered a business model that can simultaneously address issues of economic growth, employment and quality of life and a source of solutions to certain illnesses, wicked problems (such as environmental problems, social exclusion, injustice and poverty), of our modern societies. They are acknowledged as a major producer or “laboratory” of social innovations, especially at the local or community levels (EU, 2012). In fact, social enterprises have solved those problems that other bodies such as traditional private, public, voluntary or community mechanisms have not been able to solve despite their efforts (Shaw and Carter 2007).

The utility of SE as an instrument for governments has been greatly emphasised, but how it is used is unclear. There is poor understanding of its functioning, lack of visibility in terms of its local, domestic and international roles, inadequate access to resources and inappropriate legal environments, all of which prevent SE from realising its full potential (EU, 2012; see also Sjögrén et al., 2015). The concept of SE is vague and there are numerous definitions in literature (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; see also the review of definitions of social entrepreneurship/ entrepreneurs/ enterprises in Dacin et al., 2010). SEs cannot be defined by their legal form, their sector of activity or any other fixed criteria. Moreover, the social aspect may relate to the input used (workers or working conditions) or the output produced (goods or services aimed at a target group in need). Therefore, it is almost impossible to obtain concise statistical information about the SE sector (Heckl et al., 2007). Therefore, the evaluation and assessment of the impacts, as well as comparisons of SEs, are very challenging, and general guidelines for how to promote their functioning are hard to outline. Comparisons across countries – and even within countries – may be misleading. Different legal and political standings in different countries also affect how SEs are set up and funded, by and for whom. All this makes SEs challenging targets for research.

Social enterprise can be seen as an outcome of social entrepreneurship (Mair and Martí, 2006). SEs combine business logic and social goals, which distinguishes social enterprises from traditional for-profit or non-profit activity (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Huybrechts and Nicholls, 2013). The impact of an SE on the society is potentially large, as its purpose is to achieve the desired social change by solving the societal problems and generating revenue at the same time (Brouard and Larivet, 2011). Social sustainability lies embedded within the core of SEs, but understanding the crucial social sustainability perspective in its true sense has to be the goal of every SE, and they typically need support in this (Khan et al., 2015).

Social sustainability covers the broadest aspects of business operations and the effects that they have on employees, suppliers, investors, local and global communities and customers. It is also focused on protecting the vulnerable, respecting social diversity and ensuring that we all put priority on social capital (Vavik and Keitsch, 2010). The community benefit brought about by SEs may be various degrees of financial self-sufficiency, innovation and social transformation (Brouard and Larivet, 2011; see also Magis and Shin, 2009; Thomsen and King, 2009). SEs should understand how to address economic, social and environmental challenges holistically in order to create a better world (Fisk, 2010). The progress in sustainable development can only mean improvement in all the three dimensions: economic, environmental and social (Tueth, 2010; Littig and Grießler, 2005). In their study on Finnish SEs, Khan et al. (2015) linked the concepts of social sustainability and SEs. They show that social sustainability is in many ways realized through the development of SEs, but that there are also numerous challenges that SEs face. The government

should help regions improve the support for SEs, raise awareness about SEs and promote their uptake (Khan et al., 2015).

The definition of the Social Enterprise Research Network EMES is used in this study to frame SE (Defourny, 2004). The EMES' definition distinguishes between SE criteria that are more economic and entrepreneurial and indicators that are predominantly social. These indicators have later been divided into three subsets for comparative purposes (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012). The distinction of criteria resonates with the notion that SE is constituted both *discursively* to solve wicked social problems innovatively and *materially* to perform efficiently in its sphere of operations. The four dimensions related to the economic and entrepreneurial criteria are as follows:

- *A continuous activity producing goods and/or selling services.* In contrast to some non-profit organisations with advocacy activities or that are in charge of the redistribution of money, the provision of goods and services is the main reason for the existence of SEs.
- *A high degree of autonomy.* SEs are often (co-)financed but never managed by public authorities. This autonomy is also apparent in the right of “voice” and “exit”.
- *A significant level of economic risk.* The founders of an SE assume the major part of the economic risk; financial viability depends on the efforts of the members and workers.
- *A minimum amount of paid work.* SEs can combine monetary and non-monetary resources and voluntary and paid workers, but they do not operate only with volunteers.

The social criteria are:

- *An explicit aim to benefit the community.* One of the principal aims of SEs is to serve the community or a specific group of people. In the same vein, a feature of SEs is their desire to promote a sense of social responsibility at the local level.
- *An initiative launched by a group of citizens.* SEs are the result of collective dynamics involving people belonging to a community or to a group that shares a well-defined need or aim.
- *Decision-making power not based on capital ownership.* This generally refers to the principle of “one member, one vote” or at least to a decision-making process in which the voting power in the governing body with the ultimate decision-making rights is not distributed according to capital shares. Moreover, although the owners of the capital are important, decision-making rights are generally shared with the other stakeholders.
- *A participatory nature, which involves the various parties affected by the activity.* Representation and participation of users or customers, stakeholder influence on decision making and participative management are often important characteristics of SEs. In many cases, one of the aims of SEs is to further democracy at the local level through economic activity.
- *Limited profit distribution.*

The EU has been a strong actor in promoting research and program support for SE. In Western European countries, the support of SE is tied to governments and the EU. Government support includes legislation, coordination, policy work and programs. In terms of public policy and financing, however, much of the government support is narrowly focused on work integration SEs (WISEs) and is often targeted and limited to start-up initiatives and to make up for the temporary unemployability of disadvantaged persons in labour markets (Kerlin, 2006). In Finland, there are two main types of SEs: 1) WISEs that offer employment to



disabled and long-term unemployed people and that are provided for by law (Act on Social Enterprises, 1351/2003), and 2) organisations that have adopted an SE business model and are therefore eligible for the SE mark (Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2011). Currently, there are 43 enterprises that have been granted the SE mark, and approximately 160 companies are registered as WISE. A report published by the Finnish Ministry of Employment and Economy recently estimated that 4% of SMEs in Finland (which roughly means 8000 companies) could fulfil the social enterprise criteria used in the UK (Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2011).

The expectations for SEs as innovators are also high. The EU defines social entrepreneurship as “an activity whose primary purpose is to pursue social goals, produce goods and services in a highly entrepreneurial, innovative and efficient manner to generate benefits for society and citizens, use surpluses mainly to achieve social goals, and accomplish its mission through the way in which it involves workers, customers and stakeholders affected by its business activity” (EU, 2012). It needs to be noted that in the research literature, social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurship have been emphasised, whereas SEs as entities or “communities of practice” have received far less attention, although this would better reflect the current broader understanding of innovation.

This paper follows the notion that solutions to social problems often demand fundamental transformations in political, institutional, economic, and cultural systems. SEs may be seen as a way to catalyse social transformations well beyond solutions to the initial problems. SEs may create innovative solutions to immediate social problems and mobilise the ideas, capacities, resources and social arrangements required for sustainable social transformations (Alvord, Brown and Letts, 2004). However, in general, SEs are rather small, act at a local level and depend on public funds. It is obvious that SEs need the support of the external environment and a wide range of resources in order to fulfil the expectations as sources of sustainable innovations. Alvord, Brown and Letts (2004) identified how strategies intended to generate social transformation have focused on cultural, economic or political arenas. To foster cultural change implies, for example, reshaping cultural assumptions about the roles and appropriate behaviours involved in taking initiative, solving problems and influencing key decisions. Economic interventions focus on, for example, lending money and enhancing productivity. Political transformation may be leveraged, for example, by education and influencing decision-making.

For SEs to foster socially sustainable innovations in RIS the somewhat obscure and even contrasting expectations for SEs should be recognized and the relations between other stakeholders and actors revised. Various kinds of arenas are needed to reinforce entrepreneurial and economic performance or social innovations and regional renewal. The economic development is influenced by external barriers and driving forces, such as legal and taxation frameworks, public policies and budgets, demographic developments and unemployment rates. The promotion and development of SEs have been noted to involve several policy sectors, such as social, employment and industrial policy (Heckl et al., 2007), and concerning RIS and sustainable social innovations even more actors such as regional development agencies, business advisors, R&D institutions and political functions. Dynamism of interaction between the different parties also needs to be considered.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for the study of the role of SE in RIS. It summarises the general objectives of regional innovation systems that are steered by regional innovation strategies, and the characteristics and aims of SEs presented in the SE definitions. The circle in the middle of Figure 1 presents

as a space the potential that SEs possess to contribute to the RIS objectives and includes the expectations of SEs presented in the research literature and policy discussions.



**Figure 1.** Summary of the conceptual framework

### Research Design

The aim of this study is to explore whether and in what way SE is communicated as an innovative solution and as a source of innovations for economic and development activities in regional strategy documents. Regional business and innovation-related documents were therefore found to be the most useful data for this research purpose. The data covers all the regions in Finland. It consists of the latest regional innovation and business strategies (22), applications to the Innovative Cities programme (the new national innovation programme) (18) and the final proposals of the leading city regions (5) to the Innovative Cities programme. These regional strategies and Innovative Cities programme applications express the region's future goals concerning economic development and the means to achieve these goals. The regional innovation and business strategies used were the latest operative strategies available at the time the data was collected

(December, 2013). The strategies have varying time spans within the time frame of 2005–2025. The Innovative Cities applications are from 2012, and the final proposals are from 2013.

Continental Finland consists of 18 NUTS3 level regions. Administratively these regions are federations of municipalities and are located between the state and municipal levels. The regions are obliged to form regional strategies as well as their implementation programmes. These strategies and implementation programmes are very general by nature. Strategies concerning innovation and business activities are produced at municipal or city region levels. As these documents were found more fruitful for the purposes of this study than the general regional strategies, innovation and business strategies from all major city regions were chosen as the most suitable data for this study, representing the strategies of regional innovation systems within the Finnish context.

The study utilised the qualitative content analysis method in which data is categorised inductively, and the goal is to reduce the data into manageable segments in order to understand the phenomenon (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Morgan, 1993). Qualitative content analysis is regarded as a flexible method for analysing text data and includes several different analytical approaches ranging from more interpretive analyses to strict textual analyses (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The approach was chosen based on the theoretical and substantive interests of the researchers and the research problem. Data structuring was not based on predetermined categories, but the categories were developed and defined inductively during the research process. The inductive approach is typical for qualitative content analysis. However, as Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) note, categories do not emerge on their own but are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data is telling him/her according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, etc.

The data was first read through using specific search words (in their different forms) that have been translated into English and are listed in Table 1. This was done in order to effectively find the text that relates to the research theme. These parts were then analysed in relation to the aims of the strategy. The identified text parts were divided into two categories, the ones that had explicit references to SEs and the ones that contained the “spirit” of the social perspective on business and regional development. The “spirit” was detected from the data based on the summary of the conceptual framework and the expectations of SE in RIS context presented in Figure 1. In order to explore the themes of SE in RISs within Finnish regional strategies, the findings will be illustrated on a map and as descriptions of how the “spirit” of the social perspective and SEs is connected to the strategic aims of different regions. These will be discussed in the context of RISs and innovation policy.

**Table 1.** Search words

Change	Innovation	Societal
Employment	Renewal	Society
Entrepreneurship	Responsibility	Sustainable
Inclusion	Social	Working life

## Results

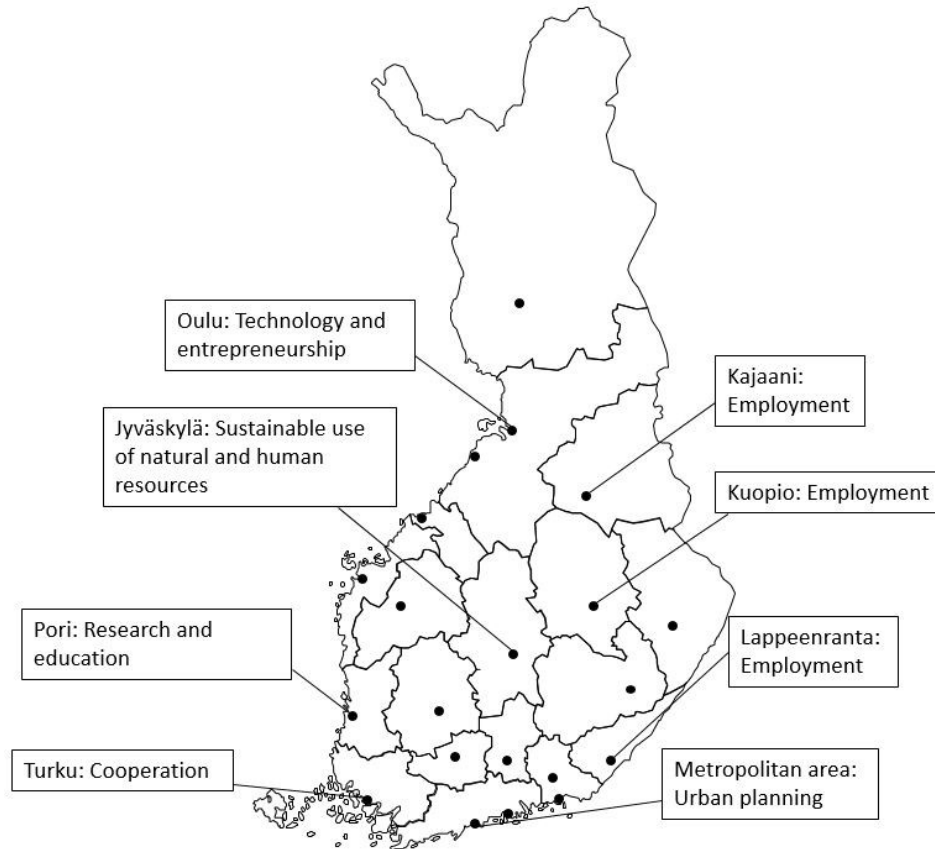
### *Explicit References to Social Enterprises*

Explicit references to SEs in the strategies are few. Only two explicit references were found in the regional strategies of Kuopio and Lappeenranta. The city of Kuopio has created an employment action plan that focuses on developing social employment. Lappeenranta's strategy involves establishing an SE as one of its objectives under the larger theme of "urging active working life and education".

The Innovative Cities programme applications also contained two explicit references. Pori's application emphasises the role of Diaconia University of Applied Sciences as a central organisation in SE-related research and development work in Finland. Pori's application is the only document among all the research data where the concept of SE is defined. The definition is: "Social enterprises work for social good. With the help of their business they strive to solve social or ecological problems and to further social objectives. Social enterprises use more than half of their profit for producing social good that matches with their objectives and business idea. Their business model is also characterized by their customer orientation, investing in workers' wellbeing and transparency of their business." However, Pori's document fails to view SEs in a broader regional and social context and only views them as a field of expertise of a specific educational organisation. Oulu's Innovative Cities application and final Innovative Cities proposal only mentions a specific enterprise, labelled an SE, that helps start-ups find premises and organise events.

### *Thematic References to Social Perspective on Business and Regional Development and their Regional Scope*

The data contained many more parts connected to the spirit of the social perspective on business and regional development compared to explicit references to SEs. These parts were analysed in the context of the strategic objectives they were connected to. The map in Figure 2 illustrates how the spirit of the social perspective is connected to different strategic objectives in different regions. The map shows the NUTS 3 regions in Finland, and the dots represent the main urban areas within these regions. Regions that did not have a clear connection between the thematic references to SEs and strategic objectives were not examined further; however, those regions are included as dots on the map to highlight the fact that our data covered all the regions and main urban areas. The strategic objectives of the 8 regions having thematic references to SEs are explained below.



**Figure 2.** Strategic objectives of the regions and the social perspective (Map base: National Land Survey of Finland, 2014)

In Kajaani, Kuopio and Lappeenranta, the social perspective is connected to the objective of increasing employment in the regions. In Kajaani, the third sector (non-governmental organisations or NGOs) is encouraged to implement more business-like activities and is seen as a new path to entrepreneurship. The third sector is also seen as a provider of healthcare and wellbeing services in the future; therefore, its preconditions for growth and employment are to be developed. The city of Kuopio has created an employment action plan that focuses on developing social employment. One of the objectives is better coordination of social employment initiatives and funding. In Lappeenranta, one of the aims is to establish an SE and to include social criteria in public procurement standards.

In the metropolitan area around Helsinki, the social perspective is brought out, especially in the context of urban planning. The metropolitan area is said to emphasise communality, which becomes visible in participatory urban planning, a strong “we spirit” and new housing solutions. Advanced urban planning is connected to attracting a workforce to the region. In Oulu, a certain SE is named as one of the actors that provides premises and arranges events for other enterprises in their early stages. Oulu aims at retaining its image as a “smart” technology centre, and innovative technologies are utilised to create new services for individuals and communities. Communities are also regarded as sources of innovations in the form of technology development and testing. Social responsibility, quality criteria and purchase know-how are seen

as ways to further the operational preconditions of enterprises and their fair treatment in these procurement processes.

In Jyväskylä, the social perspective is connected to the overall objective of the strategy that focuses on sustainability and the wise use of both natural and human resources, called “resource wisdom”. In addition to an ecological and economic dimension, this resource wisdom is said to have a social dimension in the form of human resources. This social perspective is also considered in public procurement. Jyväskylä is known as the higher education centre of sport and health studies in Finland because of the University of Jyväskylä’s Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences. Thus, the strategy highlights exercise and overall physical and mental wellbeing as important factors in a balanced work life and in maintaining human resources.

Pori’s Innovative Cities application was indeed the only one to include a definition of SE. SEs are primarily presented in the context of the region’s strengths in education and research instead of highlighting specific strategic objectives or presenting them as potential solutions to specific societal problems or as sources of innovations. Pori’s Diaconia University of Applied Sciences has been one of the central actors in Finland in the research and development of SEs. The regional units of the University of Turku and the University of Tampere in Pori also plan to do research in the area of social innovation at the interface of the private and public sectors. Some of the references to the social aspects are related to management issues and employees’ wellbeing. The importance of cooperation in all fields of development is emphasised in Turku’s strategies. Doing and creating things in cooperation with different partners is regarded as essential in order to learn, renew and create new solutions. The importance of social innovations in conjunction with technological innovations is also brought up.

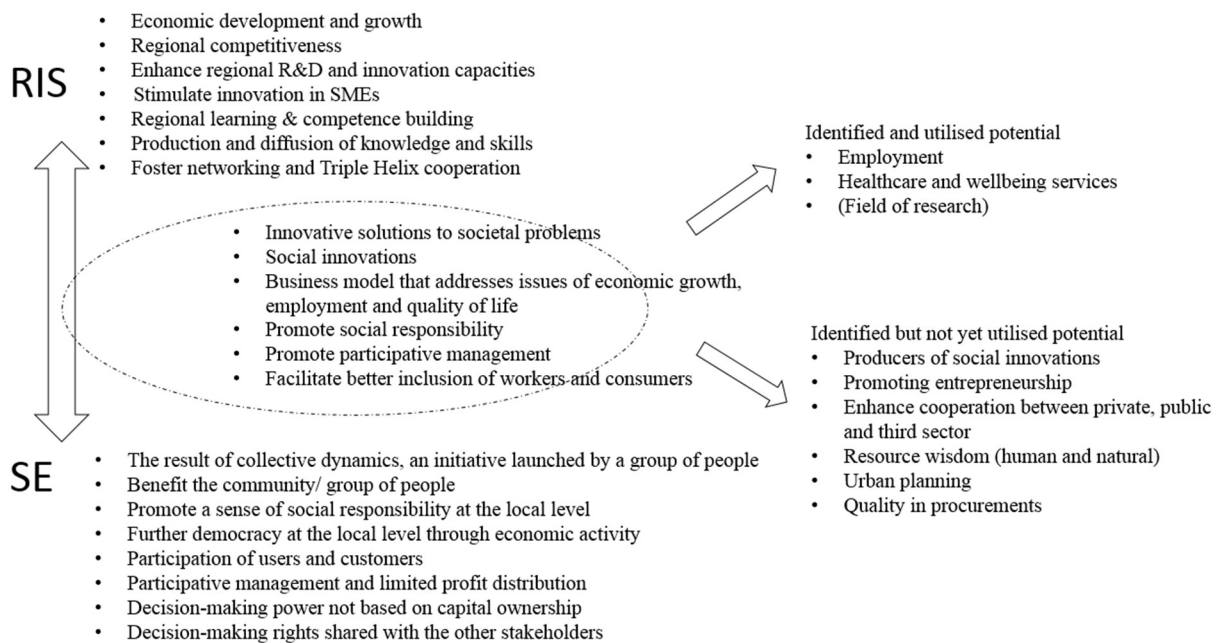
### *The Emphases of the Social Perspective on Business and Regional Development*

In almost half of the regions where the social perspective is connected to the strategic objectives, the thematic references were connected to the objective of increasing employment. SEs and new solutions emerging from the third sector are seen as possible future solutions in terms of the objectives of creating new jobs and developing employment activities. The current very challenging economic situation, including increasing youth unemployment, forces regional authorities to seek entirely new solutions, and social employment is regarded as a possibility not yet fully utilised. It is unfortunate that SEs are still strongly related only to employment objectives instead of being viewed as solutions to other societal problems and as sources of innovations. Moreover, they are regarded as WISEs only instead of being seen from a broader perspective vis-à-vis societal change.

In Pori and to some extent in Jyväskylä, the societal perspective is closely related to the presence of educational and research organisations. These organisations are an essential part of RISs. They operate in regions as part of the knowledge creation subsystem and in interaction with the knowledge exploiting subsystem (Autio, 1998). Although SEs are mentioned in the context of these educational and research organisations, they are not connected to the broader strategic objectives. It can be argued that the existing knowledge and research results concerning SEs are not yet exploited in regional development activities in practice.

Resources, sustainability and responsibility were the frequently used terms when discussing societal impacts. The themes of resource exploitation, sustainability and responsibility are rather vague and overarching and are also related to the current broader economic and political discourse and objectives. Putting them into practice is the true challenge of the future.

Figure 3 presents the conceptual framework complemented with a summary of the results. As the conceptual framework reflects the discourse related to the concepts of RIS and SE, the results attempt to bring this to the level of more concrete and materialized processes and practices. Identified and utilised potential refers to the potential of SEs to contribute to RIS objectives that has been recognised and also utilised regionally. However, according to our research, this potential is not identified in every region and is utilised in even fewer. Identified but not yet utilised potential refers to the strategies where the social perspective is present in the form of thematic references that were discussed above. However, SEs are not yet recognised as potential contributors to the policy objectives related to these themes. These themes appear to have strategic importance for RISs and their development since they are included in the regional strategies. They also have a strong social perspective, which again indicates that SEs could be potential contributors.



**Figure 3.** Identified and utilised/unutilised potential of SEs to contribute to RIS objectives

The thematic references to the social perspective in the regional strategies indicate that the social perspective is viewed as a strategically important aspect for regional development. SEs as concrete contributors to development goals are not yet recognised. For example, strategies discuss communities, but these are not connected to entrepreneurial activities. Communities in the sense of developing and testing

platforms are seen as a source of, for example, information, not as potential independent actors and producers. The social aspect of entrepreneurship and economic activity is still handled at a rather vague discursive level instead of more materialised processes in a specific (regional) context.

### **Discussion: Implications for Innovation Systems and Policy**

Chell et al. (2010, p. 491) highlighted the need to “tie in” entrepreneurship with social, cultural, civic and political considerations: “Social enterprise presents the society with choices. For example, the prioritization of individualism, much of which may be seen as self-centred and self-serving, contrasted with collectivist solutions where building and developing communities is key to social and economic welfare and wellbeing. In these ways, social enterprise poses ethical dilemmas for governments, industries and individuals.” The results presented above are discussed in the context of these systems and of how these transformations could be better incorporated into RISs as statements, declarations and actions.

As discussed earlier, the Finnish innovation policy is a strongly growth-oriented policy investing in science and technology based innovations and internationalisation. SEs contribute to socially sustainable development in their entrepreneurial activities and could thus be regarded as a part of sustainable innovation policy (Pelkonen 2009). Sustainability has become a global megatrend as the limits of ecosystems and societies have become obvious. The need to focus on sustainability and sustainable solutions in all fields of activities, and the tridimensional (economic, ecological, social) character of sustainability were evident also in the studied strategies, but SEs were not seen as potential contributors to sustainability objectives. SEs are not related to a particular sector but can cross a variety of sectors and thus also contribute horizontally to sustainability objectives across sectors. Incorporating SEs as part of RISs particularly as enterprises contributing to sustainable development could also help bring SEs from the margin to acknowledged actors of regional entrepreneurial and innovation networks.

In recent years academic discussions on RISs have focused on themes such as learning (see e.g. Cooke, 2014), related variety (see, e.g., Asheim et al., 2011; Uotila et al., 2012) and platform development (see, e.g., Harmaakorpi, 2006; Harmaakorpi et al., 2011; Cooke, 2012b). Building social capital is an important objective for innovation platforms. SEs as collectivist solutions and communities can contribute to increasing social capital among regional actors. SEs can also increase the variety of regional innovation potential by creating new courses of action for the regional system. Thus far the literature on sustainable innovation policies has focused on new clean technologies limiting the discussion to environmental sustainability (see, e.g., Foxon and Pearson, 2008; Nill and Kemp, 2009). SEs can have a specific role when broadening the discussion to cover also social and economic sustainability (without neglecting the intertwined nature of these three aspects of sustainability). Incorporating SEs as part of RISs could promote innovating in different ways contributing to the target of social sustainability. The development of the social enterprise is viewed as a small step towards the realisation of social sustainability. So far, a lot has been written about the concepts of social enterprise and social sustainability. However, the link between the two concepts has been discussed far less often (Khan et al., forthcoming).

SEs as a form of entrepreneurial activity still remain unfamiliar to many. Regional (and national) research and development organisations can act as advocates and raise awareness of the opportunities of SEs as well



as provide information and support for early stage SEs. As Heckl et al. (2007) have noted, SEs are often small and depend on public funding. Legislation and taxation are examples of barriers that can significantly hinder their development. Thus, the promotion and development of SEs concern several policy sectors, such as social, employment and industrial policy, which makes removing bottlenecks of SE development also an issue for national level policies.

## Conclusions

This paper emphasises the potential of SEs in innovation, employment, social cohesion and mobilising human capital in new ways. Regional innovation and business strategies show that the increasingly common themes of new kinds of entrepreneurship, wellbeing and responsibility have been acknowledged widely at the regional policy level. SEs could have a special role in regional innovation activities and in realising new innovation policies, such as regional smart specialisation strategies. Having a regional innovation strategy for smart specialisation is an *ex ante* condition for receiving funding from the Structural Funds for research and innovation investments in 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2011). Creating these smart specialisation strategies for regions provides a good opportunity to explore the potential of SEs to contribute to development objectives and sustainability. The challenge lies first in defining SE and in making it clear and visible in society and in perceiving it not as a project or workshop activity focusing on employing marginalized people but as a sustainable entrepreneurial activity that has its own role in regional innovation and business ecosystems.

The results show that the spirit of the social perspective on development, innovation and business is present in regional policy documents, but SEs are not viewed explicitly as potential contributors to development objectives. Current business and business support environments are used to traditional enterprises. Growth strategies at all policy levels (local, regional, national, supranational) emphasise entrepreneurship and employment. As to the objectives of growth, SE is directly connected to employment, innovation, entrepreneurship and extending work careers with the help of flexible forms of work and entrepreneurship. However, when taking into account the limited natural and human resources of our planet and societies, policies should aim at steering the focus from growth by any means towards sustainable development. In the innovation policy context this means adopting the ideas of sustainable innovation policy. Our paper contributes to the regional development theory by arguing that the RIS theory and innovation and development policy based on the RIS approach include areas and objectives where principles of sustainability could be better incorporated and where SEs, in particular, could contribute to the objectives.

The main argument of this paper is that Finnish regional innovation systems – as reflected in their central policy instruments, regional strategies – still maintain a rather traditional growth-oriented focus instead of reflecting and promoting the objectives of sustainable innovation policy on a larger scale. We note that SEs hold unused potential in answering to expectations concerning RIS, particularly the social ones, and SE as a concept sustains both entrepreneurship and innovation and an alternative type of sustainable innovation policy. As to the regional innovation policy's practical side, the vision of how to encourage SEs in regional development should be enriched. The focus could be widened from employment purposes to other social, economic and environmental aspects. SEs alone cannot generate social transformation. At the core are cooperation structures to bring together public, private and third sector organisations to encourage

sustainable development and innovation. As noted by Chell et al. (2010), SE presents society with choices. Future research should focus on choices and transformations, inter alia. More research is needed on how these social transformations aiming at sustainable development arise; how they can be supported by different policy means, and what choices these transformations require from the society.

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