

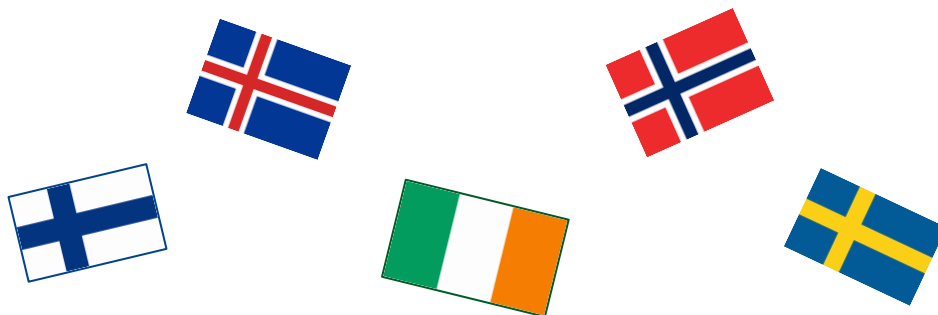
Study paper

What do we know about social entrepreneurship in rural areas?

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A literature review of previous research in Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden

by Yvonne von Friedrichs and Cecilia Dalborg



1. Background

The view of firms' responsibility has changed over time, from primarily being an economic pillar in society, to being an environmentally and socially responsible actor to achieve common societal goals (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Through a broader corporate responsibility, firms can contribute and act as a lever to meet society's demands for a more sustainable development (Mair & Martí, 2006). Interest has therefore come to be directed towards entrepreneurship that better captures economic as well as environmental and social values (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose & Tomaney, 2006; Porter, 2017). Social entrepreneurship involves people who have a social purpose as a starting point, combined with an entrepreneurially driven commitment (Dees, 1998; Mair & Martí, 2006). There is yet no precise definition of a social enterprises but a commonly used feature is in accordance with the work of Social Business Initiative (SBI), conducted in 2011 (European commission, 2020). SBI describe the concept referring to three key dimensions, namely the economic, the social and the governance-ownership dimension. The fundamental dimensions of social enterprises are explained, but without the intention of a fixed designation: *“the Commission does not seek to provide a standard definition which would apply to everyone and lead to a regulatory straitjacket”* (ibid. p. 28). The following, more general explanation is used in various previous reports: a social enterprise run commercial activities (*the economic dimension*) to achieve a social or societal common good (*the social dimension*) and have an organisation or ownership system that reflects their mission (inclusive governance-ownership dimension) (EU commission, 2020, p. 28).

The business model of a social enterprise differs from those of commercial enterprises, in at least, three different ways (De Beule & Dobson, 2023) which also results in difficulties with the long-term financial sustainability. The first difference is about the value creation. A social enterprise pursues the *social impact* as a main goal of the operation. This goal might incorporate *dual value chains* since the benefits of the activities can affect various receivers, such as the main target group (customers) as well as external beneficiaries such as society at large. The third difference concerns *the financing* of the activity and is due to the main target group's often deficient ability to pay which means a need for complementary funding, such as grants or public funding, combined with the income that operations provide (ibid.; Sparviero, 2019).

It is well known that social companies struggle with balancing the economic and the social values. This often results in a lack of financial viability and long-term sustainability in the social enterprises, which often makes them short-lived (Santos, Pache & Birkholz, 2015). It is therefore often necessary to involve several actors in a social enterprise in order for the business idea to be implemented, i.e. a different type of business model compared to the purely commercial enterprises (Rangan, Samii & Wassenhove, 2006).

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In order for SE to be the recipient of specific funding the general definition of SE (se above) has had to be clarified and more precisely defined in subsequent EU legislation (Fici, 2020). An example of clarification is as follows (European union, (2013), p. 347/243).

A “social enterprise means an undertaking, regardless of its legal form, which:

(a) in accordance with its Articles of Association, Statutes or with any other legal document by which it is established, has as its primary objective the achievement of measurable, positive social impacts rather than generating profit for its owners, members and shareholders, and which:

(i) provides services or goods which generate a social return and/or

(ii) employs a method of production of goods or services that embodies its social objective;

b) uses its profits first and foremost to achieve its primary objective and has predefined procedures and rules covering any distribution of profits to shareholders and owners that ensure that such distribution does not undermine the primary objective; and

(c) is managed in an entrepreneurial, accountable and transparent way, in particular by involving workers, customers and stakeholders affected by its business activities.”

However, there are more difficult questions than the definition. When actors from different sectors, with different goals and driving forces, are involved, also the collaboration needs to be organized and coordinated to create functioning businesses that can deliver intended social value (Jungsberg et al., 2020). If cooperations does not work, it threaten the continued survival of the companies and it will be the already vulnerable individuals, those who are in need of the operations' efforts, who will be hit particularly hard (ibid.).

Another threat to social, as well as to more traditional, entrepreneurship is related to the rapid urbanization that in various aspects has affected the rural development in many countries (Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022.). It is well known that companies, by being innovative, create jobs and employment and thus develop both rural and metropolitan regions (GEM, 2023). Previous research shows however that there is an uneven distribution of resources, which has resulted in worse living conditions for people who live and work in rural areas (Olmedo et al., 2024; Eurostat, 2024). If the conditions for living and working regionally differ, it will affect the hole welfare development and economic prosperity in rural areas (Pestoff, 2012). It is not uncommon that social, or community-based entrepreneurship is highlighted as a solution to this problem (Jungsberg et al., 2020; Kumpulainen & Soini, 2019; Olmedo et al., 2024; Olmedo et al., 2023). There is thus a great interest in the broadened view of entrepreneurship, as a solution to both social and societal problems.

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However, countries in Europe have made different progress with policy work for social enterprises (Fici, 2020) and only in a few countries (Ireland, Italy and the United Kingdom) *social enterprises* are widely and adequately recognised by public debates, policymakers, researchers and practitioners, see figure 1 below (European commission, 2020). Thus, the knowledge about social enterprises, special in the rural areas, are scarce and needs to increase (Olmedo et al., 2024; Jungsberg et al., 2020).

| Degree of acceptance | Country |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Politically and legally accepted—large self-recognition | Ireland, Italy, United Kingdom |
| Challenged by social economy/social and solidarity economy | Belgium, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain |
| Not commonly used—limited space due to traditional welfare institutions | Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden |
| Politically and legally accepted but narrow understanding (work integration)—weak self-recognition | Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, Sweden |
| Challenged by other concepts, such as corporate social responsibility, social entrepreneurship and social innovation | Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden |
| Emerging acceptance | Albania, Malta, North Macedonia, Turkey |

Figure 1. Degree of acceptance of the social enterprise concept

Source: European commission, 2020, p. 35

The aim of this literature review is to explore previous research of social entrepreneurship in the five NPA-countries Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden in order to compare and explore knowledge gap about prerequisites for social enterprises in rural areas. Learning from well-functioning ecosystems for social enterprises can result in systems that make it easier to start and develop social enterprises in rural NPA areas.

2. Method / Methodology

During the spring of 2024, a literature review of what has been written previously around social entrepreneurship in rural NPA-areas was carried out. We found previous research by using Scopus indexed research publication (Scopus, 2024). A classically structured review, presented in tabular forms, was conducted in order to compare previous knowledge in the five NPA-countries and moreover identify research gaps (Snyder, 2019).

The first step in this literature review was to enter keywords to find articles relevant to the research topic on social entrepreneurship in the countries in question. Social entrepreneurship is often considered as a fluid concept that is used and interpreted differently according to various context (de Bruin & Teasdale, 2019) and there has been an

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evolution of themes over time (Teasdale et al., 2023). We therefore used different terms to find previous research about entrepreneurship that create social value. The following keywords were used; "social entrepreneurship" or "social entrepreneur" or "social enterprise" or "social business" or "rural entrepreneurship" or "rural entrepreneur" or "societal entrepreneurship" or "community entrepreneurship" or "community-based entrepreneurship". Since the aim is to explore research in five different NPA-countries we added AND Country to the search (i.e. Finland; Iceland; Ireland; Norway; or Sweden). Only peer-reviewed articles, books or book chapters were selected. The keyword "social innovation" was deliberately excluded as this study focuses on the company level. This first step resulted in 211 publications (table 1).

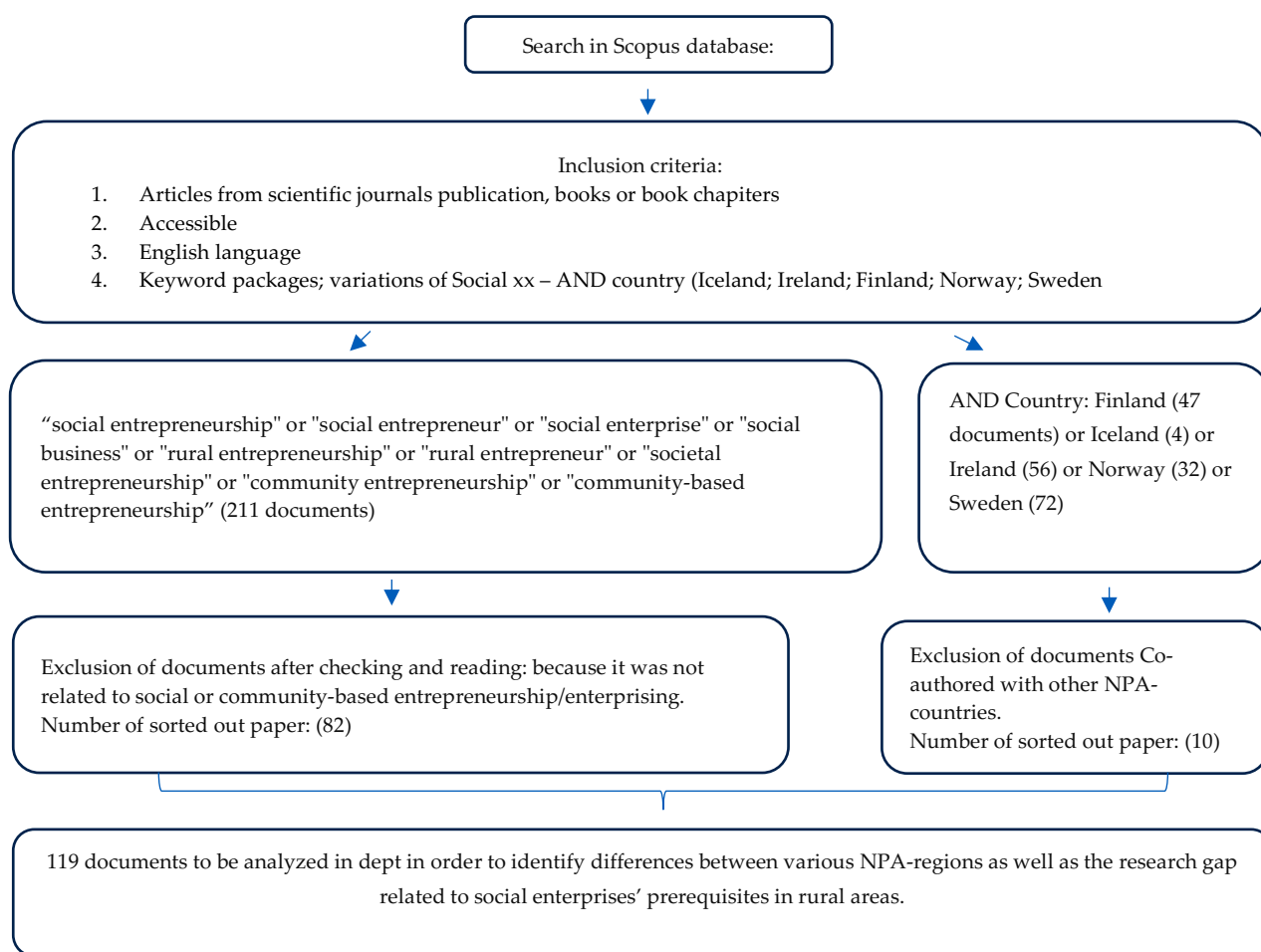


Figure 2. Selection process

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Table 1 shows some differences when it comes to labelling the research field. In Finland, Iceland and Ireland it is most common to write about social enterprises, while Norway and Sweden in a higher degree use social entrepreneurship.

Table 1. First step search results, Country/Keywords

| Country | Social entrepreneurship | Social enterprise | Social entrepreneur | Social business | Rural entrepreneurship | Rural entrepreneur | Community entrepreneurship | Community-based e-ship | Societal entrepreneurship | Duplicates | In total |
|---------|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|------------|----------|
| Finland | 16 | 22 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 0 | -16 | 47 |
| Iceland | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -2 | 4 |
| Ireland | 19 | 35 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -6 | 56 |
| Norway | 16 | 14 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | -14 | 32 |
| Sweden | 32 | 23 | 7 | 2 | 16 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | -13 | 72 |
| | 84 | 97 | 23 | 7 | 25 | 14 | 8 | 3 | 1 | -51 | 211 |

In the second step a first selection of relevant paper was conducted. In this step abstracts of the 211 papers were carefully read to further weed out papers not relevant to the study.

Table 2. Second step publications results, relevance and unique publications

| Country | In total | Excluded / Not relevant abstract | Excluded / Not relevant article | Used | Co-authored | | Unique |
|---------|----------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| Finland | 47 | -14 | -3 | 30 | 3 | (S, Ir, Ic) | 27 |
| Iceland | 4 | -1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | (Sx2, F, N) | 3 |
| Ireland | 56 | -19 | -4 | 33 | 1 | (F) | 32 |
| Norway | 32 | -8 | -5 | 19 | 2 | (Ic, S) | 17 |
| Sweden | 72 | -27 | -1 | 44 | 4 | (F, N, Ix2) | 40 |
| | 211 | -69 | -13 | 129 | 10 | | 119 |

As shown in table 2, 69 papers were considered as not relevant based on the abstract. Additional 13 papers were sorted out when reading the full paper, which means that the literature review was initial based on 129 papers. 10 of these were co-authored and turned up in more than one country. When this was taken into account, 119 unique contributions remained to be analysed in depth. The most of them, 96 papers, was published as articles in peer-reviewed journals (49 as Open Access). The analysis also includes 2 books and 21 book chapters.

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As shown in figure 3, the majority of the publications (74 %) were published 2016 or later.

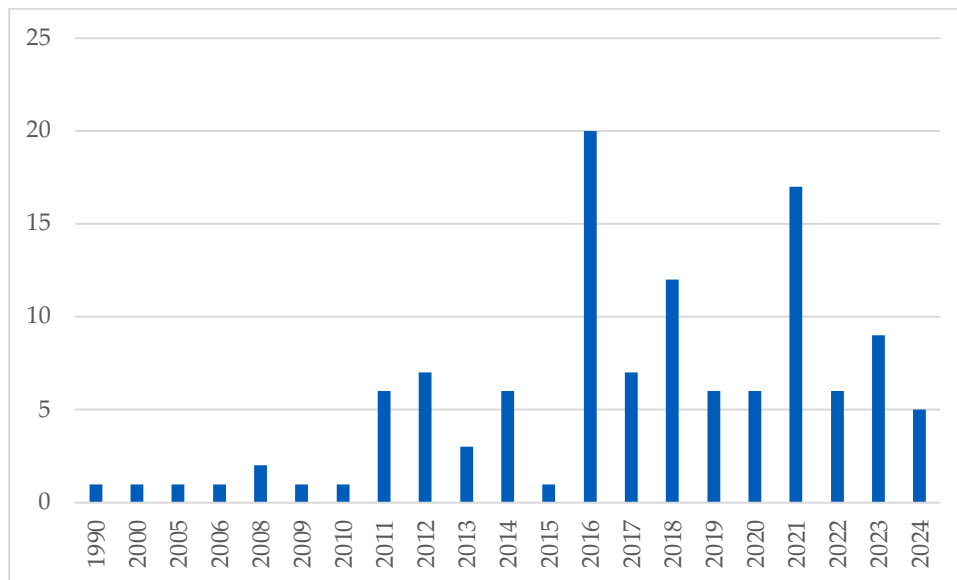


Figure 3: Number of publications per publication year

When comparing the five NPA countries, Sweden has been a leader in terms of research until the 2020s, when Ireland has instead published more. In Iceland, the field, and thus also the research around it, is relatively new.

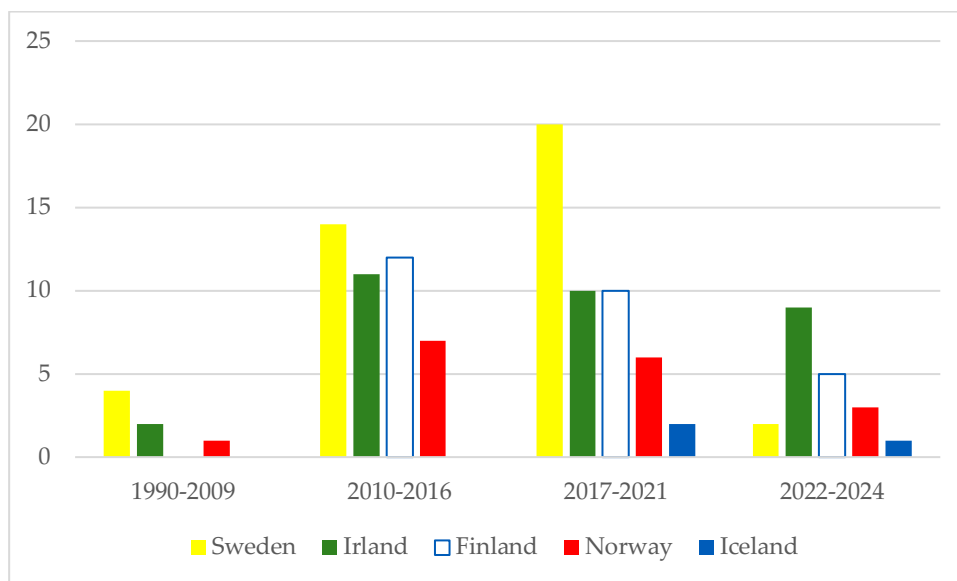


Figure 4. Number of publications per year and Country

In the third step of the literature review, a deeper content analysis was conducted, based on the 119 unique international publications. The following keywords formed the basis for the review of the content of the papers: *Research aim, Data collection, Social impact, Funding, Type of organization, Business models, Barriers and Enablers, and Business support.*

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3. Results

3.1 Content analysis

Microsoft Excel was used as a tool to get an overview of the content of all articles. Each country had its own "tab", (figure 5).

| Index | Cl | Publication year | Type | References | Aim | Date | Social impact | Funding | Hybrid organization | Business models |
|-------|----|------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 0 | 2024 | Article (DA) | Christmann, G., Sept, A. & Richter, R. (2024). Socially Innovative Initiatives in Deprived Rural Areas of Germany, Ireland and Portugal: Exploring Empowerment and Impact on Community Development. <i>Sciences</i> , 14(3), 38. | Focuses on how empowerment manifests empirically in the context of socially innovative initiatives, and address how to approach research on changes in the community's (and possible regional) development that may be associated with socially innovative activities. Empowerment is defined as the process through which actors gain capacity to mobilise resources to achieve a goal. Each of the three regions is classified as predominantly rural and is characterised by low population density and structural weakness in terms of neglected infrastructure and harmful effects on the quality of life. | Three case studies in Germany, Ireland and Portugal representing social innovations in different subject areas in rural-peripheral areas. The German case deals with the development of digital solutions for rural areas and a new form of tourism, the Irish case concerns the creation of novel governance structures to foster local development, the Portuguese case focuses on farmers who have been cultivating and distributing plants in a collaborative network, offering new prospects for the region. Qualitative multi-method design. Combination of participant observations within rural communities, expert interviews conducted with both local and external experts, problem-centered interviews with local actors and residents and document analyses. In total 39 interviews, 245 field notes/pages, and 50 analysed documents and media articles. | Regarding community development, "pathways to impact", such as infrastructure improvements and/or the creation of new employment opportunities and/or the influx of new residents, could be identified. However, this development often depended on both opportunity and the cooperation and goodwill of many stakeholders. | | | |
| 2 | 0 | 2024 | Book Chapter | Progar, K. & Warwick, P. (2024). The Case(s) of Environmental and Sustainability Education in the United Kingdom. <i>World Review: Environmental and Sustainability Education in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals</i> . | | | | | | |

Figure 5. Content analysis

3.2 Research aim

We started to explore the research aim in all articles. This was done through a thematization of the articles' expressed purpose. After a while, a pattern was identified, of the following categories.

Table 3. Thematization of research aim

| Research aim | |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|
| Characteristics/ Determinants | 32 |
| Eco-system/ Supportsystem/ Fostering SE | 18 |
| Community based entrepreneurship | 18 |
| Social impact | 15 |
| Sport activities as SE | 10 |
| Policies for sustainability | 9 |
| Social impact of WISE | 7 |
| Policies in general | 7 |
| Measurement of social impact | 2 |
| Procurement | 1 |
| Total number of papers | 119 |

The most common content was about characteristics or determinants for social entrepreneurship. For example: "This paper aims to interrelate social, civic, community, and other entrepreneurships in search of a more unifying concept of societal entrepreneurship for Sweden and

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beyond.” (Lundqvist & Middleton, 2010, p. 24), or “In this chapter, the evolution of the Finnish concept of social enterprise and the institutionalization of the phenomenon is analysed” (Kostilainen & Pättiniemi, 2016, p. 39). No significant differences could be identified regarding country and purpose, see below.

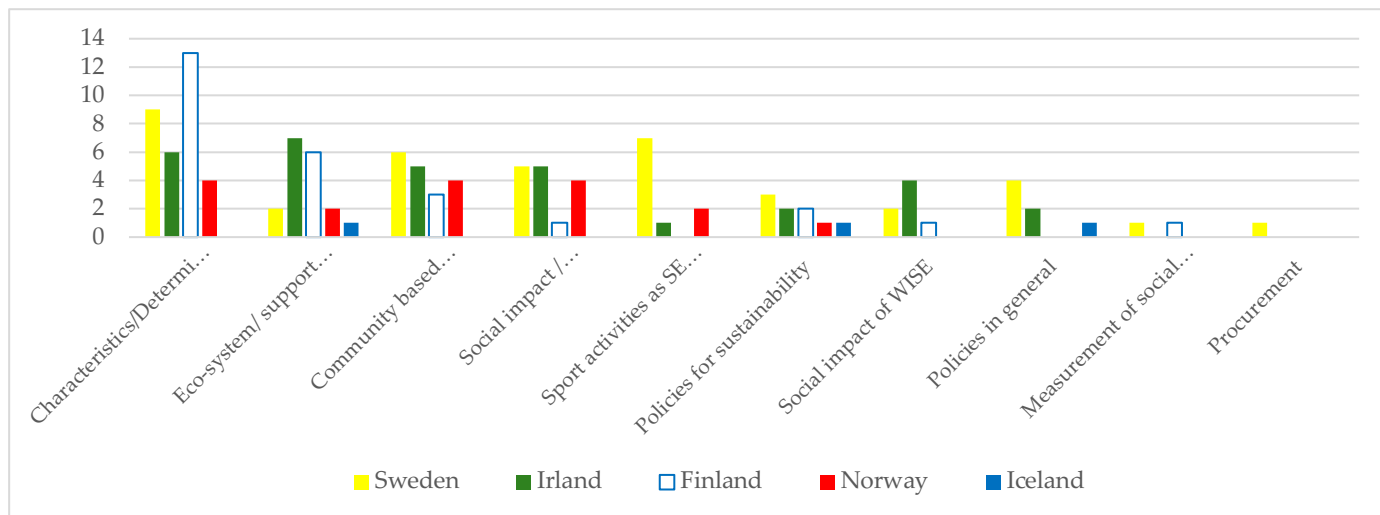


Figure 6. Research aims and country (number of papers)

3.3 Data collection

A lot of articles are presented as *qualitative case studies* (49) often conducted via interviews or qualitative mixed methods. A few articles, around 10 percent, have been conducted by quantitative data collection either with available databases, or by own data collection via questionnaires. Approximately 15 percent of the articles are based on previous studies (literature or document studies).

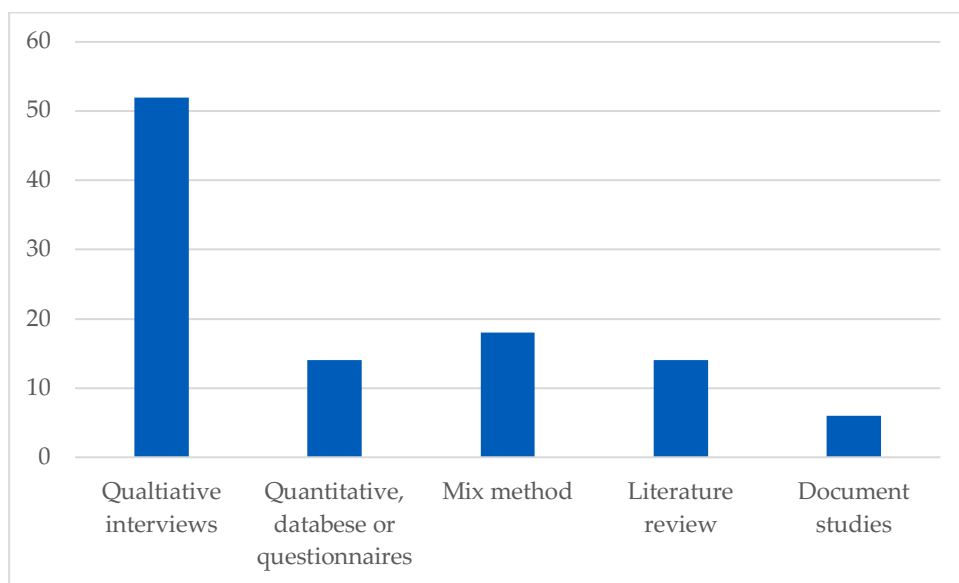


Figure 7. Data collection (number of papers)

3.4 Social impact

Just about a third of the articles highlights the social impact of the explored area, for example: *“Findings demonstrate how community-based social enterprises can act as enablers and supporters of local markets, channels of redistributive resources and coordinators of local reciprocity, thus, contributing to “institutional thickness” within their localities”* (Olmedo et al., 2024, p. 82), or: *“The participants perceived that working in the WISE gave them a feeling of freedom and increased their self-esteem because of the possibility to earn an income. Also, they were satisfied with their job (e.g., with regard to work quality and flexibility) and believed that their work contributed to society”* (Macassa et al., 2023, p. 1).

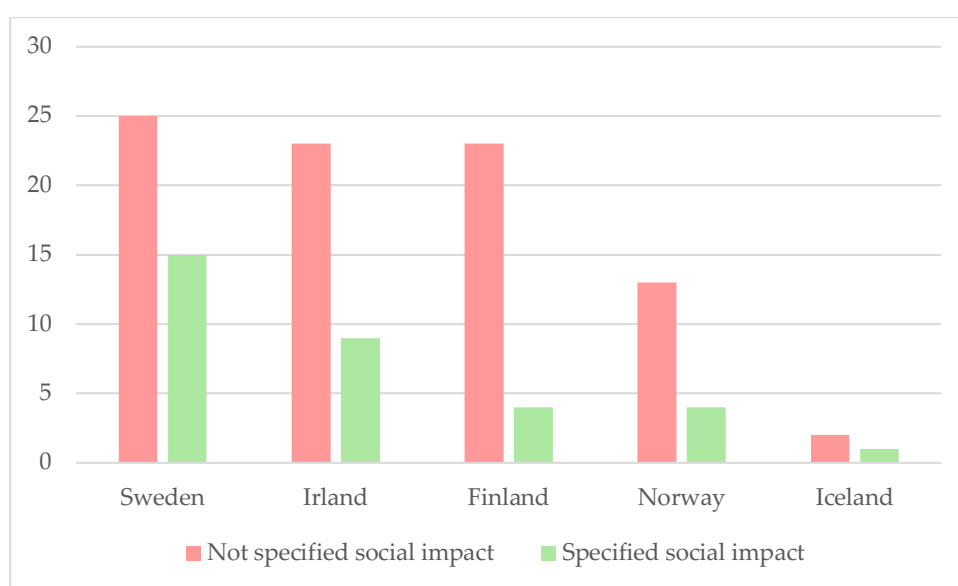


Figure 8. Highlight the social impact of SE (number of papers)

3.5 Funding

Very few (8%) previous articles in the literature review are about funding.

One exception is as follows: *“DBTK has successfully combined commercial activities with social objectives, relying on both EU regional development funds and revenues from their own commercial enterprises. This hybrid funding model has been crucial to their sustainability”* (von Friedrichs & Wahlberg, 2016, p. 201).

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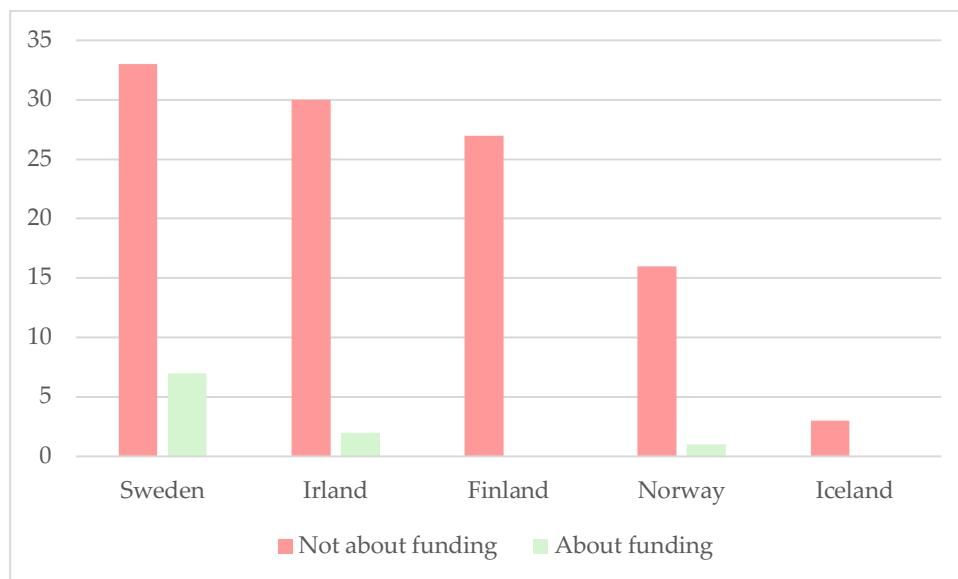


Figure 9. Countries that highlight SE funding (number of papers)

3.6 Type of organization and business models

Previous research shows that social enterprises often have more than one legal form (Dalborg & von Friedrichs, 2021). One focus in the literature review is therefore on type of organization. However just a few (8%) articles have written about this.

Articles that highlight the hybridity in social enterprises, often also describe a “broad” business model that are used. For example Tykkyläinen and Ritala (2021, p. 693) say: “Our results confirm that social enterprises rarely have just one business model that integrates social and business logics but deploy several activity sets involving different configurations of logics. The authors also highlight that “business model innovation in social enterprises can involve various forms of hybrid logic that combine social and financial outcomes, either sequentially or in parallel over time, and in a path-dependent and gradual manner or in a more radical and discontinuous leaps.

In the literature review, 13 articles (11%) wrote about business models used in the social enterprises.

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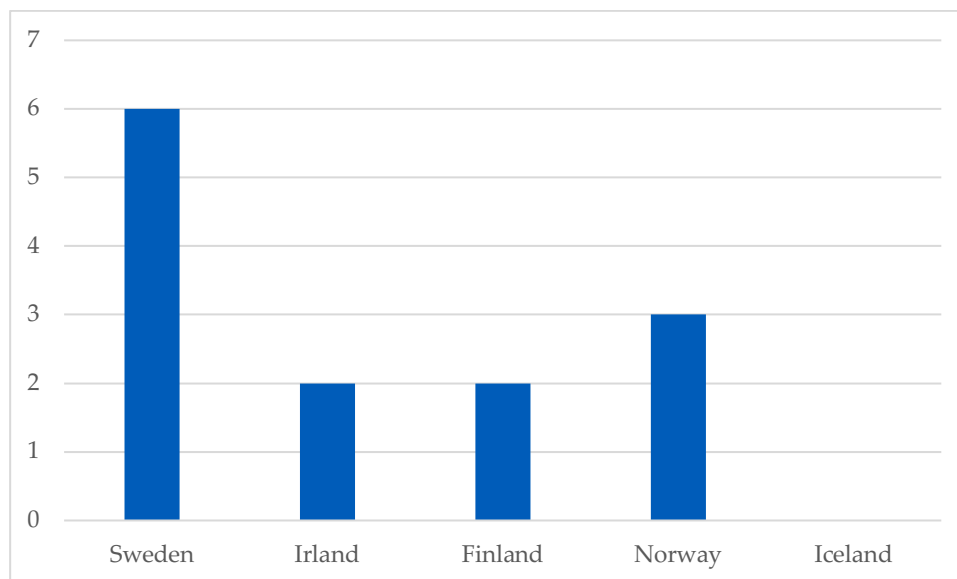


Figure 10. Countries that have written about business models (number of papers)

3.7 Barriers and enablers

Many articles highlight barriers, as well as enablers that social enterprises face. In the literature review we could see that 42 articles write about this.

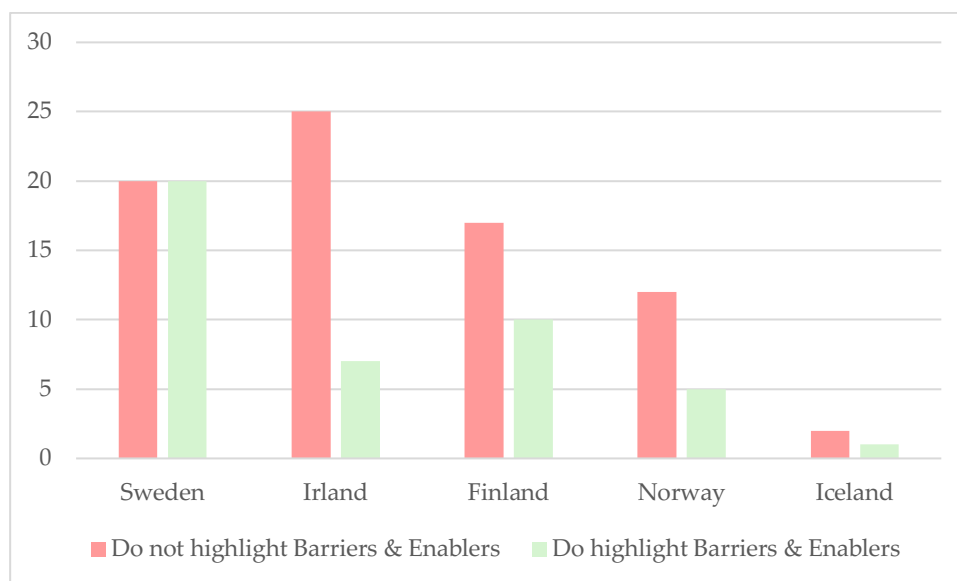


Figure 11. Barriers and Enablers in previous articles (number of papers)

Example of content within this area:

Finland: "The following bottlenecks were identified: preconceptions and prejudice - mainly from the outer world - as a factor that people in SEs have to struggle with in everyday work; concretisation of projects and ideas constructed around one active person or a few people, making the organisations rather "vulnerable"; and problems in networking with "normal" companies." (Melkas, Koskela, Oikarinen & Konsti-Laakso, 2017, p. 68).

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Iceland: *“The terms “social enterprise”, “social innovation” and “social entrepreneurs” have rarely been cited in Icelandic public policy. There is no special policy or support structure aimed at social enterprises. Iceland lags behind many European countries in implementing specific large-scale policy initiatives to support and strengthen social enterprises, social entrepreneurs and social innovation”* (Hrafnadóttir & Kristmundsson, 2021, p. 108).

Ireland: - *“One of the most significant challenges facing these rural-based social enterprises is the uncertainty surrounding future state support”* (O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016, p. 232).

Sweden: *“Shifts in policies throughout the Swedish development of the welfare state have had major impact on social enterprises - their sustainability and which kinds of social enterprises that emerge. There is a wide political agreement to promote and support social enterprises but different views occur about what role in the welfare triangle they should have (which affect social enterprises position in it due to current government/political settings). This leads to that problematic paradoxes occur”* (Gawell, 2021).

Sweden: *“[...] the absence of sustainable business models, the lack of financial resources and the existence of municipal monopoly are identified by the advisers as challenges”* (Dalborg & von Friedrichs, 2021, p. 280).

Sweden: *“The policy area has so far been weakly institutionalized. The involved actors in the implementation structures are given high discretion to design their principles and working methods. As a result, policy intentions and decisions weakly guide those who implement the policy. Current policies supporting innovation in the region are identified as having a weak support structure for entrepreneurs who have a solid social commitment but lack the abilities and knowledge to start and run businesses. Therefore, the developed strategy is to prioritize entrepreneurs who are not usually part of the support structure within business and growth policies”* (Johansson & Gabrielsson, 2021, p. 15).

Norway: *“[...] community entrepreneur has to be familiar with a broad set of resource factors and see how these add up to a complete venture. Within the ventures in this study a frequently practiced strategy was the use of existing organizations and networks as a platform in the start-up phase. The community entrepreneurs are characterized not only by a strong will and ideology towards common goods and welfare, but they also possessed a strong action capability. Further, they needed able skills in legitimizing the project and creating informal institutional platforms within the society. The mobilization capability depends much on the community entrepreneurs giving a lot of themselves in this process”* (Borch et al., 2008, p. 120).

3.8 Business support

Previous research in the five NPA countries shows that there often is a lack of a support system specifically adapted for social enterprises. In all countries there are business support organisations that offer a range of services, including funding, mentoring, networking, and capacity building, not only to social enterprises, but to all kind of enterprises.

In Iceland the support system primarily focuses to encourages social innovations. For example, there is a government fund that intended to support social innovations, but it is not only aimed to companies. Municipalities and organizations that provide social services can also apply for money.

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) provides funding, mentoring, and support to social entrepreneurs across Ireland, aiming to accelerate the impact of innovative social enterprises. In Ireland the organisation 'The Wheel' also is a support and representative body for the community and voluntary sector, offering resources, training, and advocacy for social enterprises.

Finland: Centre of Expertise for Social Enterprises (YYO): Provides advisory and guidance services to social enterprises, promoting the employment of people with partial work capacity and supporting social innovations. Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, is active in promoting social enterprises and related financing models, aiming to create new business and financing models for social enterprises.

Norway has the organisation 'SoCentral' that is a membership-based organization acting as a social innovation incubator, facilitating cross-sectoral cooperation between private and public sectors, the voluntary sector, and social entrepreneurs. And Ferd, in Norway is an investment company that has provided funding to social enterprises since 2009, offering seed funding, business development support, advice, and network building.

In Sweden the organisation Coompanion is a network of independent, locally based organizations promoting and supporting social entrepreneurship in the form of cooperatives. In Sweden there is also the organisation Centre for Social Entrepreneurship in Sweden (CSES) that focuses on supporting the transition of the agrifood system, circular economy, and sustainable production and consumption.

Results from the literature review, about business support, is presented below:

Finland: *"The Swedish-speaking regions might provide certain key benefits to SEs, and enable, for instance, access to many formal and informal networks that provide mutual support. The recognised*

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existence of social capital among the Swedish speakers may provide a valuable basis, but to be able to reach more social entrepreneurial activity in these regions, better visibility, management support, funding sources and various communication and training efforts for various parties still appear to be needed.” (Melkas, 2020, p. 113).

Iceland: “In 2015, the Ministry of Welfare implemented a special policy on innovation in welfare services and technology. As part of that policy, the Ministry established a social-innovation fund to promote social entrepreneurship and social innovation; both municipalities and other entities providing social services are eligible for application. In April 2017, the first Icelandic business accelerator for social innovation was launched, in cooperation with various universities and official bodies. The endeavour is meant to strengthen diversity in Icelandic innovation and create a forum for social entrepreneurial activities” (Hrafnisdóttir & Kristmundsson, 2021, p. 109).

Ireland: “The adoption by successive Irish governments of a labour market integration approach, to supporting the development of the Irish social economy, since the early 1990s, has shaped the sector and contributed to the emergence of one dominant social enterprise type, the WISE” (O’Shaughnessy & O’Hara, 2016, p. 462).

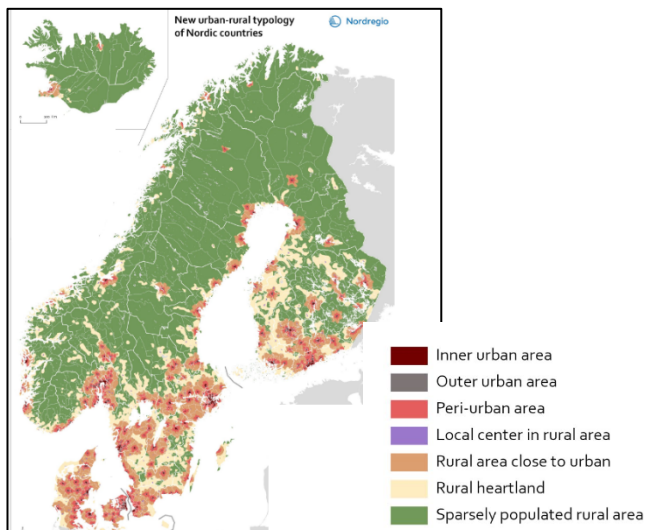
Norway: “It is a challenging task to adapt and develop support tools that work well in the specific context [community entrepreneurship]. The flexibility, development, and adaptation of government support tools “tailored” to the characteristics of the rural communities are of importance” (Borch et al., 2008, p. 121).

Sweden: “[...] many advisers lack experience in social entrepreneurship, yet they consider that social enterprises are not “genuine” entrepreneurs, and that they, therefore, refer them to advisers focussing on co-operative enterprises” (Dalborg & von Friedrichs, 2021, p. 280).

4 The rural area

A special research interest in this study is directed to the context. The literature review highlights particularly contributions that take into account a rural context and the consequences that it brings.

In order to define rurality, we use an urban-rural typology taken by the Finnish Environment Institute in 2013 (SYKE, 2020) Their method is created of seven typology classes: (Inner urban areas; Outer urban areas; Peri-urban areas; Local centres in urban areas; Rural areas close to urban; Rural heartland areas; and Sparsely populated rural areas). Figure 12, below, shows that large areas of land in the Nordic countries are consider as rural and sparsely populated. The same applies to Ireland (see Eurostat, 2024, p. 8).



Local centers in rural areas are population centers located outside urban areas, small towns and large parish villages where population is between 5000-14999 inhabitants.

Rural areas close to urban areas have a rural character that are functionally connected and close to urban areas. In average this means 20-30 of minutes’ drive time from the edge of outer urban area. This class overwrites the area classes ‘Rural heartland’ and ‘Sparsely populated rural areas’.

Rural heartland. Rural areas with intensive land use, with a relatively dense population and a diverse economic structure at the local level. Most of the agricultural land is in this class.

Sparsely populated rural areas. Sparsely populated areas with dispersed small settlements that are located at a distance from each other. Land cover is usually forest, mountains, or natural grassland.

Figure 12. Classification of countries (except from Ireland)

Source: Nordregio, 2024

There are considerable differences between countries as regards their territorial composition. For example, Ireland, Finland and Sweden are generally rural and sparsely populated (Eurostat, 2024, p. 8).

The literature review, with aspect to rurality and SE, shown in table 4, displays that there are significant differences in previous research about SE in combination with rurality. Previous research from Ireland and Norway has in a high degree taken the rural context into account while research from Finland and

Table 4. Social entrepreneurship and rurality

| Country | Unique | About Rurality | About Rurality * |
|---------|--------|----------------|------------------|
| Finland | 27 | 3 | 11% |
| Iceland | 3 | 0 | 0% |
| Ireland | 32 | 16 | 50% |
| Norway | 17 | 6 | 35% |
| Sweden | 40 | 9 | 23% |
| | 119 | 34 | 29% |

Sweden has only in a low degree a rural focus. The scarce research from Iceland excludes a rural focus. Some examples of social enterprises and rurality

Okuneviciate Neverauskiene and Pranskeviciute (2018, p. 14) argue that: “. Social enterprises emerge in areas which are not reached by the state and are not interesting to businesses due to their low profitability. Social enterprises bring entrepreneurship into deprived areas, which is crucial for regional development”.

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Ireland: *“There are specific local circumstances that contribute to success and create challenges, but it is the human resources of leadership, strategic and entrepreneurial focus and how they generate the activities that appear to be the common factors. These need to be borne in mind in any consideration of replication potential. [...] A key success factor in these five rural-based social enterprises is their effectiveness in mobilising and harnessing a variety of resources through the state, market, philanthropy and volunteers. [...] Local development companies have been very significant in stimulating, supporting and promoting these rural-based social enterprises. They have responded to the varied and distinctive support needs of these businesses by providing a range of hard and soft supports including: capital financial assistance; business mentoring; leadership and governance training; marketing support; and facilitating networking events. (O’Shaughnessy & O’Hara, 2016, pp. 231- 232).*

Sweden: *“The results of the cases presented show that there are no quick fixes; that community-based entrepreneurship implies long-term oriented activities, which have to be integrated in each local context. Decisions to make the work successful must to a large extent be taken in each local community, since the knowledge and understanding of possibilities and limitations can only be found in the community in question” (von Friedrichs & Lundström, 2016, p. 158).*

5 Summary of previous research in NPA-regions

The literature review shows that previous research in the five NPA countries has been conducted to varying degrees. In Sweden we find the oldest studies, dating back to the 1990s and early 2000s, and it is also in Sweden that the most articles have been identified. For Iceland, SE is a very new research area, and the 3 articles included in this review were all written between 2020 and 2022. In recent years, Ireland has published the most in the area. A large proportion of previous research deals with characteristics and determinants of social enterprises. A lot of previous research highlights barriers and enablers in the social entrepreneurship area. The support system is not yet developed specifically for social enterprises, only for work-integrated social enterprises.

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