

BOOK REVIEW

Eric Bidet and Jacques Defourny (Eds.): Social Enterprise in Asia: Theory, Models and Practice

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Eric Bidet and Jacques Defourny's edited book *Social Enterprise in Asia: Theory, Models, and Practice* is by far the most comprehensive and extensive scholarly collaboration on social enterprises and social economy in Asia. This book covers multiple sub-Asian regions (East, South, and Southeast Asia) and seven comprehensive Asian country chapters (Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand). The book's specialized country-level cases incorporate more countries (Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam) when investigating social enterprise specific fields of engagement, including rural community development, health and social services, and human services. Its cross-thematic comparison covers religious or faith-based influence and agricultural value chains.

Some of the readers may still request more countries, regions, fields, or themes, given that Asia is even more vast beyond the sub-regions covered in this book. The two co-editors defend their selection of countries and geographical coverage fairly reasonably by citing statistics on the range of the socio-economic development status and the proportion of demographics and populations covered in this book through its introduction chapter, respecting the insatiable readers' statistical or "large N" approach and providing answers from those questioners' stance. However, this statistical

defense does not entirely reveal the true contribution and value of this book and its project. The distinctive value and admirable achievement of this book may lie in its organic approach, which brought together 25 dedicated scholars and practitioners with shared goals of exploring but preserving the holistic models of social enterprises and social economy in Asia.

To understand what I meant by the holistic nature of this book, it is a pre-requisite to know about its mother-project, the International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project¹. Indeed, this book stems from the ICSEM Project, which brought together 230 researchers from 55 countries across the globe over a five-year period of preparation, data collection, analyses, writing, and discussion. The project built a dataset of 721 social enterprise cases across 43 countries, and produced a series of volumes focusing on four main regions: Asia, Latin America, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Despite the project's large scale and massive contributions from all around the world, it is considered that the ICSEM Project has not received sufficient contributions from some regions including North America, Africa, and some sub-regions of Asia. The reasons for this incomplete geographical coverage may vary; nevertheless, the regions that have so far been less investigated may be a focus of future research. A most interesting characteristic of the ICSEM project is stimulating scholarly exchanges—and even some constructive tension at times—between the U.S. scholarly-led established discourse in the non-profit or civil society research and the European-community-led third-sector framework in social and solidarity economy (Young, 1983; Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Evers and Laville, 2004; Salamon and Sokolowski, 2004; Nyssens, 2006; Kerlin, 2013; Laville, 2017). From this standpoint, the exploration of the Asian model becomes more interesting, raising the following questions: Does it exist? How is it different from European or Anglo-Saxon models? Does it serve as a balancing pendulum between European and Anglo-Saxon models? What are the variations within Asia itself? This book will play a key role in providing some clue about these fundamental scholarly questions.

The ICSEM Project allows its local partners full ownership, autonomy, and liberty regarding the way authors select the cases, typify social enterprises in their respective countries, and describe them. As noted in the preface of this book, this large-scale scholarly collaboration enabled to scan the “diversity of social enterprise models and their ecosystems” (p. viii). It is noteworthy that the ICSEM Project aimed to preserve the distinct models of social enterprise and economy from respective partnering scholars' countries, regions, and continents. This priority might have offered the ICSEM Project the advantage of its devoted narrative closest to the particular contexts in various countries and regions across the globe. However, it was also inevitable that trade-off exists in terms of the epistemological or methodological selection. The ICSEM's approach may not be fully supported by positivism and its mechanical randomization formula in assuring the representativeness of the population. However, it is a matter of trade-off. The ICSEM's approach has its own merits and should get full credit for valuing the expertise and assessment of participating scholars/practitioners

¹ For more information, see: <https://www.iap-socent.be/icsem-project>

in terms of identifying unique cases or models in the respective countries. It can be evaluated that this approach prioritized the value of uncovering unique models in the respective countries and societies. This approach also contains a long-term benefit of allowing organic growth in unique cases from unexplored countries and fields. It makes sense to leave room for continued future growth in this scholarly discovery, given the nature of the social economy field itself, heavily relying on societal context and historical trajectory.

The introduction chapter well demonstrates the long-grown expertise of the two editors, Bidet and Defourny, from their personal, professional, and scholarly experience and contribution. The introduction chapter well delineates the historical trajectory of where the EMES International Research Network and the ICSEM Project fit in, in terms of the formation and growth of the field. While following the footsteps of the academic events and growing literature provided by the two editors, readers can quickly grasp the historical meaning of the project and the value of this book. This book will serve as another noteworthy milestone in the lineage of the literature that covered the third sector, civil society, and social economy studies from a comparative perspective.

The national overviews of social enterprises cover Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. The editors explicitly mention that “no priori definition” (p. 11) was proposed to local researchers regarding the social enterprise. This national overview part offers a detailed background of the history and ecosystem surrounding the selected countries. These national overviews exhibit variations in the social enterprise typology and levels of institutionalization (formal and informal), while stunningly revealing the common nature of the societal function and expected roles from the community.

The second part of this book addresses specific fields associated with the social economy of Asian countries. Rural community development is covered through the cases of Japan, Indonesia, and Taiwan. Social service provision roles are featured through the cases of Japan and South Korea. The fields of poverty alleviation and social inclusion are highlighted through the cases of the Philippines and China. The pair of the Philippines and China in the theme of social inclusion provides a very intriguing but effective showcase of how social enterprises can play a shared role under the contrasted societal system—one is more participative and the other is more centralized.

The third part of this book conducts thematic comparisons across multiple countries. The selected themes are three folds: (i) the diverse religious tradition (Buddhism in Cambodia, Islam in Malaysia, and Christianity in South Korea) and its influence on social enterprise and economy; (ii) agricultural value chains and social economy in southeastern Asian countries (the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam); and (iii) locating and characterizing Asian models through statistical analysis in comparison with the worldwide social enterprise dataset built by the ICSEM Project.

The comparison of Asian models with the statistical analytical result of the ICSEM Project’s global dataset seems to be the culmination of this book. This statistical synthesis, utilizing a hierarchical cluster analysis to identify major social enterprise categories, makes it possible for the ICSEM team and its local partners to cross-check between what they individually identified

based on their local contexts and what the computer programs mathematically calculated through statistical distance. The data and analysis are based on five core dimensions of social enterprises: (i) general identity; (ii) social mission; (iii) workforce composition; (iv) financial structure; and (v) governance structure and rules. Although the sophisticated statistical level analysis for Asian models was somewhat constrained by the low number in the Asian dataset, this regional scale comparison vis-à-vis the global counterpart provides priceless insights to readers from a comparative perspective, which is an unrivaled contribution ever made to the scholarly community in the social enterprise and economy studies.

The conclusion chapter highlights the findings through this book's Asian country cases and their comparisons. The editors summarized: (i) legal framework development and institutionalization at varied levels; (ii) social inclusion and care provision as key priorities; (iii) meso-level factors (including partnerships and resource-mix) as critical factors; (iv) various practices and influence of religion on social enterprises (pp. 357-364). This conclusion chapter excellently captures the main characteristics of Asian social enterprises with their varieties and commonalities. While these summaries distinctively portray the key aspects of Asian social enterprises, the exploration tasks seem to remain in progress and open for future contributions. One thing the co-editors insinuate, through their quotes at the end of the book, is their confidence in the fundamental mission of social enterprises. The editors wrap up the book stating, "new ways of sharing the responsibility for the common good in today's economies and societies" (p. 364; recited from Defourny and Nyssens, 2017). This delivers the editors' optimistic view of the expected roles despite facing challenges surrounding social enterprises and the social economy.

To summarize, this book is a must-read book to understand the Asian social enterprise models on the multiple-levels—macro, meso, and micro—from a global and regional comparative point of view. This book not only provides a broader description of social enterprise typology, but also detailed cases and narrations from the respective countries in Asia. With the editors' experience, expertise, insights, and all contributors' integrated efforts, this book competently locates itself with a significant and substantial contribution at the intersection of multiple disciplines of the third sector, non-profit management, civil society, and social and solidarity economy studies.

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