



*Research article*

## **Social Economy as a key factor for enhancing Blue Growth in Greece. A conceptual perspective**

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Blue Economy has been an expanding concept in the EU, both as a tool for development as well as an economy transforming concept while its strategic orientation is reflected in EU's Blue Growth strategy. On parallel Europe's 2020 Strategy goals and their translation into targets for the member states, serves as a common ground for -among others- the implementation of Blue Growth goals and the enforcement of the activities of Social Economy Enterprises. Starting from this fact, a survey has been conducted to address: (a) the contribution of the Blue Growth goals to the activities of the Greek private and public economic sectors, as well as of the Social Economic one; (b) the current state of the art interaction between Blue Economy and Social Economy in Greece, and; (c) the current and future trends regarding the contribution of Social Cooperative Enterprises (SCE) as a tool for enhancing Blue Growth impact. Key findings include the level of engagement of SCEs with Blue Growth sectors, their potential of future involvement and the reasons for the current skepticism towards the Blue Growth potential. The above mentioned are complemented with a discussion on the viability and compatibility of a Blue Growth Social Concept adapted in the special environment of a heavily maritime related economy such as Greece.

**Keywords:** Blue Growth; Blue Economy; Social Economy; social cooperative enterprises; human capital; Greek economy

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Highlights regarding European Union's Blue Economy and Blue Growth and implications for Greece*

To sustainably facilitate its growing resource needs and to stimulate economic growth, the European Union (EU) has recently developed a long term strategy towards Blue Growth (BG) [1], that establishes the contribution of the Integrated Maritime Policy [2] to achieving the goals of the EU 2020 strategy [3], for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, for the marine and maritime sectors which are alternatively called the Blue Economy (BE) sectors. In addition, in 2014 the EU further elaborated in the special requirements of Blue Economy, as to specific aspects of the Blue Growth strategy and the problems it could face in its implementation in varying Member States [1]. The concept of Blue Economy covers a wide range of economic sectors linked to the seas and oceans, spanning traditional or established and emerging sectors including fisheries, aquaculture, (seagoing) shipping and inland waterway transport, ports and logistics, tourism, pleasure sailing and cruising, shipbuilding and ship-repairing, maritime works and protection of the coastline, prospecting for, and exploitation of, offshore mineral resources, exploitation of offshore wind and marine energy, and biotechnology. According to the findings of the BG study [4], among the BE sectors, fisheries, aquaculture, shipping and tourism, account to more than 70% of the EU maritime GVA and over than 85% of the EU employees in maritime activities. As a follow up, the Directive on Maritime Spatial Planning (2014/89/EU) [5] promotes BG and the parallel implementation of the EU environmental laws, such as the MSFD (2008/56/EC) [6] and the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) [7] and thus ensures the sustainable use of marine and coastal resources and the efficient use of the space.

Based on above evidence, the EC is seeking to further boost the potential of all the BE sectors by promoting relevant fundamental research, R&D, training, job creation, business start-ups, SMEs, social enterprises, cooperatives, education and apprenticeships [8] through the legal and financial support of two fundamental tools: the Regional Strategies Basins and the local maritime clusters as local synergistic concentrations of higher education, research and industry [9], as well as through various funding initiatives such as the shared and direct EU financial tools and the European Funds for Strategic Investments.

However, each of Europe's sea-basins (and each country within them) has its own economic, social, environmental, geographic, climatic and institutional characteristics, and each will contribute in its own way to a differentiated BG path. For instance, in a regional scale in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region [10], BG as one of the pillars around which the strategy is structured, involves targets by 2020 such as: (a) 20% increase in research investment in blue technologies; (b) Multiannual fisheries management plans to be adopted and implemented at sea basin level and; (c) the 100% of the water under national jurisdiction by Maritime Spatial Planning and the 100% of coast lines covered by Integrated Coastal Management, and their implementing mechanisms should be fully in place. In a national scale, as part of the above region, Greece (which is the focus area of this study) has a high potential for the development of the blue economy with most promising activities: Deep sea shipping, Marine aquaculture, Coastal tourism, Cruise tourism, Short-sea shipping (Incl. Ro-Ro), Yachting and marinas. More precisely Greek coastal areas provide EUR 181.8 billion and 4.3 Million employees, which translate in 93.1% of the total GVA and the 91.3% of the total employment of the country [11].

## 1.2. Highlights regarding the Social Economy and Entrepreneurship in Europe and Greece

As mentioned already Social Economy Enterprises (SEEs) must be involved as considerable actors in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy [8]. In the European arena Social Economy has a rich historical background [12] and its present—day status remains important, since it is estimated that social economy employs over 11 million people, accounting for 6% of total employment [13]. It is worth mentioning though that the Social Enterprises, which comprise the backbone of Social Economy's, differ among member—states due to their inhomogeneous legal form characteristics. These forms include solidarity enterprises, co-operatives or limited liability social co-operatives, collective interest co-operatives, as have been adopted in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece, social purpose or collective interest companies in Belgium and community interest companies in the United Kingdom [14]. The share of the population involved in social entrepreneurship is estimated at 4.1% in Belgium, 7.5% in Finland, 3.1% in France, 3.3% in Italy, 5.4% in Slovenia and 5.7% in the United Kingdom. Approximately one in four businesses founded in Europe would therefore be a social enterprise. This figure rises to one in three in Belgium, Finland and France [15].

In this context, EU has acknowledged the importance of social economy and the necessity of implementing concrete supporting actions and therefore launched the Social Business Initiative in 2011, which identified three strands of action aiming to unlock the potential of social enterprises [13]: (1) Improve the access to finance; (2) Give more visibility to social enterprises and; (3) Optimize the legal environment.

More precisely, actions towards the facilitation of the access to finance include: (a) the availability to social enterprises of the Employment and Social Innovation programme; (b) the establishment of the European Social Entrepreneurship Funds (EuSEF); (c) the improvement of the regulatory environment for micro-credit; (d) the reform of the European Structural Funds (ESF) in order to enable Member States to earmark structural funds to finance social enterprises [16]. The new generation of the ESF, which strengthens the link between policy and funding, in line with the objectives of Europe 2020 Strategy, is considered to be an important financial potential source for social economy and social enterprises. Furthermore, due to the orientation of EU's competitive programs such as the Horizon 2020 additional funding opportunities have arisen. For instance, the European Fund for Strategic Investments will leverage up to 315 billion of public—private investments in a series of promising sectors [17].

In Greece, social economy is implemented through the establishment of SEEs. The Greek SEEs fall within the regulatory framework of Law 4019/2011 on “Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship”. This is the first legislative action introducing the concept of Social Economy in Greece and a special form of SEEs: the “Social Cooperative Enterprises” (SCEs) [18]. According to Art.2 of Law 4019/2011 the SCEs are “*civil cooperative(s) with a social cause possessing entrepreneurial capacity by law*” Hence, given the fact that Greece's main developmental advantage is considered to be its access to the sea and thereby its maritime growth orientation, and assuming that Social Economy—as a third alternative sector between the public and the private one—may contribute to the development and implementation of viable responses to the challenges that EU is facing and finally, based on the fact that Europe's 2020 Strategy goals and their translation into targets for the Greek case will be the common ground of BG and SCEs, this paper argues that the linkage between BG and SCEs is crucial and may enhance the exploitation of the BG stock in terms

of employment and social cohesion across Greece. It therefore attempts to reply questions such as: (a) what is the position of the Greek SCEs in relation to BE; (b) What are the enabling and/or inhibiting factors that affect the involvement of SCEs in BE and their contribution to BG; (c) What are possible actions that could be undertaken in order to encourage SCEs towards BE and BG.

To our knowledge such a hypothesis along with the main research questions and the methodology followed to address them, has not taken place before neither at Greece nor at any other EU county. This fact adds to the novelty of the present paper which can serve as a guide for similar research for the rest of Europe.

The paper is divided in the following four sections. In section two the methodology that was used to tackle the questions is briefly described. The results are presented in section three while discussed in section four. In the fifth and last section conclusions on the findings, policy implications and recommendations for future research are presented.

## 2. Method

Aiming to substantiate the hypothesis and to further reply abovementioned questions, a survey took place within the period of March 21th 2016 to April 4th 2016 during which questionnaires were sent by e-mail to representatives of the 666 Greek SCEs of Collective Productive Purpose that were holding a registration or were under registration status at the Social Economy General Register as of February 2016. In order to minimize non response bias, the questionnaires were resent thrice with a reminder during the period of the survey, followed by phone communication with non-respondents. The method of direct survey was chosen as the most appropriate and reliable source of information on SCEs, since a preliminary research by the authors showed a substantiate lack of data of official or academic/research nature, that could be used to extract any valid conclusions.

The questionnaire consisted of mostly closed type questions, especially regarding the demographic data, where the participants were called upon to depict their personal and SCE's profile based on predefined age and educational groupings, a positive-negative reply on whether their SCE was coastal and their knowledge of basic BE and BG information as well as closed type questions with predefined possible answers regarding their source of relative information. As to the subject of BE and BG activities the closed type questions with predefined possible answers pattern was again followed in order to create the direct links with the EU defined BG concept. Finally, the participants were given the optional choice to further freely elaborate on the possibility of expansion to BE and BG activities and the way they thought that this would be possible, with the most relevant resulting answers being mentioned later in the Results and Discussion parts of the paper.

More specifically, the representatives were asked to provide information regarding:

(a) demographic data such as the average age and educational level of the members of their SCE; the presentation of the demographic structure of the population is one of the basic investigational principles, due to the fact that demographics are major independent variables associated with attitudes and respondents' reactions. In this context the demographic mapping of the individuals operating through SCEs, is crucial in terms of standard classified groups, such as the Economically Active Population. Furthermore, the aforementioned demographic structure creates direct links with the possible education level of the individuals, which was also surveyed.

(b) the geographical area where their SCE is active and its subject of activity; Blue economy is not limited in maritime areas, but is linked to coastal and inland activities as well. This conceptual

connection has not been widely communicated in the case of Greek entrepreneurship, thus resulting into SCEs active in inland and landlocked areas, not including maritime activities in their potential portfolio. With this question we attempt to group the SCEs based on geographic features and verify the validity of the hypothesis above.

(c) whether they were informed about the concepts of BE and BG and the source of such information, in order to determine the level of visibility of the BE and BG objectives and who is promoting it more successfully; The aim is to research the impact of institutional promoted activities in the understanding of the SCE opportunities that emerge within the BG and BE framework.

(d) the extent of involvement of their SCE in BE oriented activities along with the enabling and/or inhibiting factors towards or against it; This question attempts to record the state of the art in order to form a basis for the following analysis and discussion.

(e) their opinion about the level of involvement of the public and private sectors in the current Greek BE reality and their interest for a potential cooperation with one or both of these sectors (in case it does not already happen); This will serve the purpose of identifying trends and biases towards the key actors of BE and BG and the maturity of a cooperation driven approach. Finally;

(f) their interest to get further informed and engaged in BE social entrepreneurship along with the level of influence of the current survey towards such an involvement.

As a final note, it has to be clarified that the classification and extraction of the qualitative data collected, has been done using MS Excel Tables. Data have been classified on two way tables, using the lines section of the table recording the positive or negative stance of questioned SCEs representatives and the columns section to produce an elaborated quantity based picture based on the classification of the SCEs representative's answers. The columns were formed under broad titles, such as geography, activity relevance, public and private related factors, to accurately record the given reasons for both positive and negative replies as to their interest to get further informed and engaged in BE social entrepreneurship. It is worth mentioning that the classification titles produced can be interpreted as either positive or negative to better represent the questioned audience's conviction and reasoning. For example, geographical reasons were used both as an incentive for future activities in BE and BG by SCEs in coastal areas and as a deterrent by non-coastal ones. Similarly, public and private relating factors can, classification wise, include both positive incentives as for example public financial support and deterrents such as inadequate legislation or public sector mistrust.

### 3. Results

The questionnaires were replied by representatives of 92 out of 666 SCEs and hence the results are presented as count of the answers instead of percentages in order to present how many of the 92 respondents, have chosen an option (see for example Tables 1, 2, 5) or how many times an option has been selected (see Tables 3, 4). The use of percentage in the first case would mislead the audience to understand that it refers to a percentage based on the initial sample (666) and in the second case is not appropriate.

Regarding age and education, for 33 of the SCEs, the average age of their members is ranging between 35 to 44 years old (Table 1) while for 36 of them the majority of their members holds a bachelor degree (Table 2).

**Table 1. Average age of each SCE's members.**

Average Age Range	Number of SCEs
18-24	2
25-34	12
35-44	41
45-54	33
55-64	3
65+	1
Total responses	92

**Table 2. Educational level of the majority of each SCE's members.**

Educational level of majority of members	Number of SCEs
Uneducated	1
Elementary school	1
Gymnasium	2
Lyceum	14
Vocational training	16
Technological Educational Institution Degree	7
University Degree	36
Master and/or PhD Degree	15
Total responses	92

**Table 3. Most popular source of information about BE and BG.**

Source of Information	Times selected
International institutions	6
EU institutions,	12
Hellenic Ministries	2
Administrative regions (second-level local administration)	3
Municipalities (first-level local administration)	2
NGOs	4
Private Sector	19
Other	18

Furthermore, although 70 of the 92 SCEs are located in a region that has access to the sea, while the rest are located in other areas, those who knew about BE and BG were less (40 and 38 respectively) than those who didn't (52 and 54 respectively). For those who were already aware about either BE, BG or both, according to table 3, the most popular source of information was the private sector, followed by other unidentified sources. Since the respondents were allowed to choose more than one option for this question, the total of the choices does not correspond to the total of the respondents.

On the other hand, although almost half of the SCEs were aware about the BE and BG and more than half of them were located close to the sea, only 10 of them were linked to just one BE sector, that being the Coastal Tourism. The reasons that inhibit the involvement of the rest 82 SCEs in BE sectors as selected by the respondents are presented in Table 4. Again, the respondents were allowed

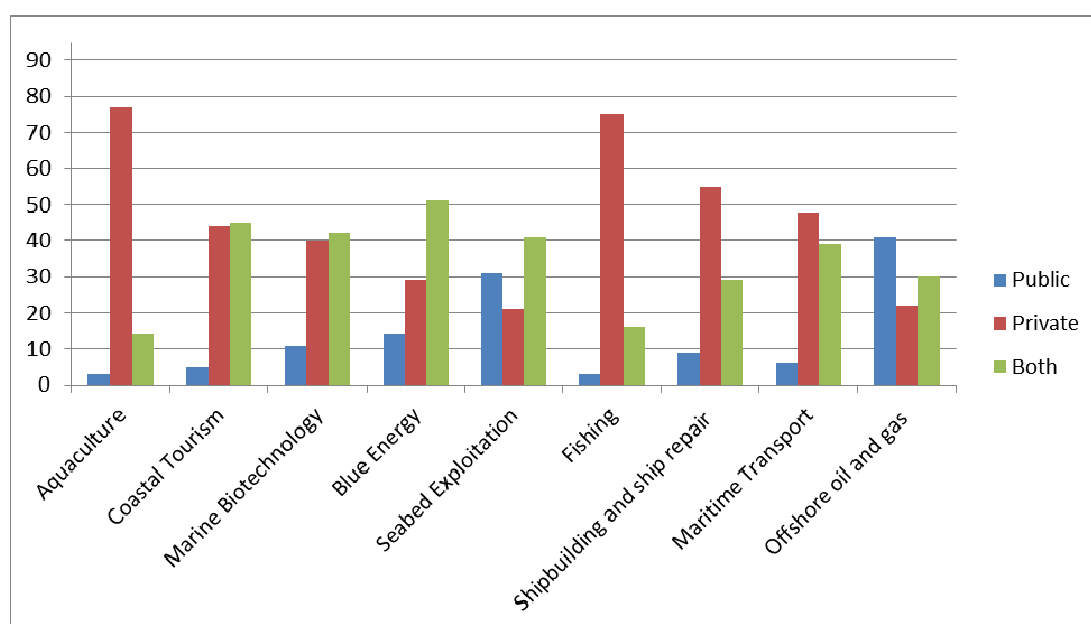
to choose more than one option for this question and hence the total of the choices does not correspond to the total of the respondents.

**Table 4. Inhibiting reasons against Greek SCEs' involvement in BE sectors.**

Inhibiting reasons	Times selected
Lack of regulatory framework	7
Lack of motivation	16
Lack of awareness	24
Lack of interest	17
Economic uncertainty	17
Other reasons	35

According to Table 4, the most popular choice was other (but undefined) reasons, followed by the lack of awareness regarding the concepts of BE and BG.

In another question the SCEs were asked to express their opinion about whether the public, the private or both sectors, play the most crucial role in various BE sectors most common in Greece. The responses are depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. The role of the public and private sectors in nine major Blue Economy sectors in Greece according to the opinions of Social Cooperative Enterprises representatives.**

As shown in Figure 1, according to the opinions of the respondents, the more traditional BE activities (with Coastal Tourism as an exception) such as Aquaculture, Fishing, Shipbuilding and ship repair and Maritime Transport are controlled by the private sector, while the rest activities such as Coastal Tourism, Marine Biotechnology, Blue Energy Seabed Exploitation seem to attract the interest of both the private and the public sector. The only activity that the public sector seems more

dominant is the offshore oil and gas exploitation. Nevertheless, the private sector seems the more dominant for the total of the activities comparing to the public sector or the combination of both.

After having a picture about the role of the private, public or both sectors in BE and BG the respondents were asked to describe if there is any potential for cooperation between their SCE and one or both of these abovementioned sectors? That section aimed to gather information from unstructured input and was replied from 59 respondents. These results are presented in the following Table 5. Furthermore Table 5 presents most prominent -detected from the open replies- reasons towards or against cooperation of SCEs and with the private sector or the public sector or both. As shown, the majority of the respondents (39 out of 59) holds relatively positive views on the prospect of cooperation and the involvement in the Blue Economy. It is characteristic that a group of respondents acknowledges the blue potential and the linkage with social economy by stating *“if Blue Economy will be implemented properly it will be able to serve the collective interests”* or *“We estimate that Coastal Tourism is a sector with high growth and employment potential”*. Additionally, relevant blue skills were identified, which could support a blue shift of the SCE’s existing activities: *“some of our members have developed skills due to their working experience in the sectors of Maritime Transport and Coastal Tourism”* and *“...there is potential in the sectors of Aquaculture and Marine Biotechnology because one of our members holds a PhD in marine life and currently works as a researcher at the University of Belfast”*. Furthermore, some of the respondents described the necessary conditions that must be met in order to *enhance the cooperation and maximize the impact of the intervention*. *“Building of respect and mutual trust”*, *“setting up an effective regulatory framework”*, *“raising awareness and disseminating information on Blue Economy”* are phrases that characterize this context. On the other hand, responders with a positive attitude towards Blue Economy and the potential of developing a partnership with the public or/and private sector by implementing activities within this framework, expressed their skepticism in relation to *“economic uncertainty”*, *“cash flow”*, *“blurred government policy regarding entrepreneurship”*, *“bureaucratic obstacles”* etc.

**Table 5. Potential for cooperation between SCEs and the private sector or the public sector or both.**

Replies	Times selected
Positive without Elaboration	10
Elaborated Positive	29
• Activity Relevance	13
• Public Related Factors	13
• Privately Related Factors	2
Negative without Elaboration	3
Elaborated Negative	19
• Geography	5
• Activity Relevance	8
• Public Related Factors	3
• Privately Related Factors	2

However, from the 59 respondents 20 had negative opinions about the prospect of cooperation with the private or the public sector or both of them. Specifically, 3 respondents spoke negatively without explaining their opinion and 19 provided the following reasoning: The geographical



dimension was demonstrated as a crucial factor that prevents SCEs, which are operating in region units without sea access, from developing blue oriented activities. Another argument that was used in order to support the negative position was the different object of activities that their SCEs are implementing and the lack of linkage with the activities that are present in the Blue Economy.

Lastly, confusion was observed regarding the definition of Blue Economy. A respondent claimed that she participated in a project that is structured within the “Blue Economy”. The definition is used to describe a place-based initiative which is focusing on an alternative form of economy. The term “Blue” is misleading since it’s not connected with maritime activities.

Closing the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to choose to what extent did the survey motivate them to consider the prospect of engaging with blue oriented activities? The reply of 52 was from extremely to moderately and for the rest 40 the survey motivated them from slightly to not at all.

#### 4. Discussion

Commentating on the quantitative results of the conducted survey, a number of important facts seem to arise regarding both the concept of SCEs and its relation to the BG and BE and its utility as a tool for their implementation.

Starting with the general concept of SCEs, it is worth mentioning that they seem to refer by a great majority to economically active population age groups. This fact appears to be important, since it can be interpreted as a sign that SCEs entities should be regarded as systematic economic enterprises and not only as occasional subsidized economic activity. On the subject of the educational level of personnel participating in SCEs enterprises, it is quite positive that the majority is classified as university or technical education graduates and in any case including a high percentage of trained employees. It has to be reminded that, according to the EC, one of the major challenges for BE and BG strategy and projects is the relative lack of specially trained personnel. Although the detected expertise of the aforementioned participants is not explicitly linked to BE activities, their high capacity seems to enforce the conclusion that similar structures can be used to promote and implement BG and BE in general.

Regarding one of the basic hypotheses that SCEs can be incorporated in potential broader BE and BG Greek strategies, the survey seems to imply a positive reply, although the scene is not quite clear. A major element is the geographical placement of SCEs entities, most of which are either littoral or in sea neighboring areas giving them a strong potential for BG activities. As mentioned earlier, in Greece, coastal tourism is one of the most important BE activities, this fact is also reflected by the activities of those SCEs that declare relevant to BE, i.e. their operational purpose is focusing on coastal tourism. However, the relatively low participation in BE and BG activities shows that the abovementioned finding demonstrates a potential rather than a strong economic reality, while raising questions why the rest of the BE activities still stay unexplored by social enterprises.

Another important point is the level of involvement of the private and public sectors in BE activities and its implications for the position of SCEs as representatives of the social economy sector. It is remarkable that almost half of the BE sectors attract mainly private investments, only one is more public sector oriented and the rest seem attractive for both the private and public interests. This fact exhibits an encouraging message, that there is space for the involvement of the social economy sector as well, at least in those BE activities that exhibit higher possibilities for synergistic action such as coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, blue energy and seabed mining.

However, the survey also reveals a number of inhibiting factors against the SCEs's active involvement in BE. One major factor is the reported lack of knowledge on the terms of BE and BG, as specific EU frameworks. This goes hand in hand with the lack of official state promoted information on the respective subject. Furthermore, according to the respondents, their non BE & BG activity of the SCEs is further hindered by the lack of relative information, even though a more general lack of interest is not the case.

Here a fact should be pointed out that is not explicitly demonstrated by the responses, i.e., the current functioning of the Social Economy Register Department that might further hinder the SCEs's active involvement in BE. For instance, its understaffed status along with the absence of support related to funding opportunities and business development renders it unable to efficiently guide the SCEs into a high competitiveness era. Furthermore, the bureaucratic obstacles that occur, hinder the achievement of outcomes commensurate with the amount of time, energy, and expenditure. One such an obstacle for instance is that in order to renew their registration in the Social Economy General Register and secure their authorization, the SCEs need to deliver handwritten minutes of meetings.

Nevertheless, a final important point to be mentioned is the positive (in general) attitude towards the subject of BE and BD in the SCEs concept of operation after the participants rated themselves as informed by the end of the survey, further pointing towards a more positive picture even without the removal of hindrances.

## 5. Conclusion

As national and EU data show, maritime economy has a major financial impact for Greece both in terms of the population and the number of areas affected (European Atlas of the Seas) [19]. Combining this with the results of the survey, it is rather clear that the SCEs concept is a valuable, but rather underutilized, tool that exhibits a high potential for its incorporation into the national BG and BE framework and general planning. It can be used to promote the interest for the development or the empowerment of a local scale sustainable economy that will eventually actively contribute to a national scale.

The conducted survey showed that the major objects towards such a direction are found in the administrative sector and the general financial situation in the country. For the activation of the SCEs as BG and BE tools an improvement in these fields is required that in turn will assure the (a) Provision of updated information regarding BE and BG opportunities and requirements; (b) Promotion of SCEs as alternative form of business to prospective entrepreneurs, through for instance the demonstration of best practices from other EU member states; (c) Provision of financial incentives, such as the financing of the start - up and scaling - up phases of the SCEs and the relevant institutionalization, in order to secure the viability of the ventures; (d) Orientation of SCEs towards BE investments through the same financial pool for Social Enterprises and Blue Growth. The need to invest in synergies between and within the EU funds is crucial, in order to combine the areas of interest and maximize the result of the intervention; (e) Ensuring that the best use of the funds will be made. More specific the good intentions must be reflected into concrete projects. Without clear political will and ownership by the public sector, the full potential of SCEs in the blue economy context will not be fully untapped, and; (f) regulative facilitation of synergies between the SCEs and the private and public sectors that ensure sustainable developments and transparency.

Finally, the compatibility of the general BE and BG approach and tools with the Greek economy in local and national level should be considered. This element provides a solid basis for the broader conclusions to the hypotheses behind the SCEs survey. In an environment of asphyxiation in terms of credit and liquidity every funding opportunity is considered to be crucial. In this context the involvement with maritime activities provide considerable opportunities to SCEs and a viable perspective, while the timing for a more active approach seems to be right, as the institutional elements and the financial tools in the EU transnational levels are in place for such a development. As a result, the interaction and interrelation between the BG and SE objectives could even facilitate addressing the EU economic crisis. In that sense and considering that Greece's marine and maritime financial dependency is not unique among other countries of the European South, comparable surveys similar to the one presented here in other EU Mediterranean countries would be of added value. The accumulation of such survey results from more countries of the region would be useful for the formulation of regional scale approaches, focusing on the social aspect of economy related to maritime space.

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### **Conflict of interest**

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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