Exploring the Potential of Belgium’s Social Restaurants for Poverty Reduction

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ABSTRACT
This article will examine the potential of the Belgian social restaurants as a type of social enterprise for poverty reduction. A case study will be analyzed according to five factors relevant to poverty reduction using interview and survey data. It shows how the most direct contribution lies in social employment, while creating more indirect opportunities to counter social inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Restaurant, Poverty, Poverty reduction, Social economy, Social innovation

JEL CLASSIFICATION: I3, J2

1. INTRODUCTION
This article will examine the potential for poverty reduction of social restaurants as a type of social enterprise. These are places where people can eat at a reduced price, often operated by people in subsidized employment trajectories. We will discuss the results of a case study of social restaurants in the Belgian region of Flanders, focusing on how this social innovation interacts with different factors in poverty reduction. We understand social innovation [SI] in a generic sense as innovation that is social in both its goals and its means (Ilie & During, 2012). It is about addressing social needs and societal challenges through the transformation of social relations (Ghys, Oosterlynck, 2013).

In Belgium, social restaurants first originated in the mid nineteen seventies, and have slowly grown to what is estimated between 120 and 150 enterprises. Social restaurants are typically initiated by a local NGO, charity or municipal social service. Having roots in both the tradition of charitable food relief and the social economy sector many social restaurants can be considered ‘work integration social enterprises’ (Nyssens, 2014, 2006), in so far as they help disadvantaged unemployed people integrate into the labor market. Although this type of social enterprise is not new in Western Europe (Moulaert, Aileni, 2005), social restaurants are innovative because of the way they integrate this with other functions. Although there is much variety in the sector, the typical social restaurant offers people in poverty affordable meals with pricing that does not follow the market. At the same time, most social restaurants are accessible to the general public and try to create social cohesion in the neighborhood. This is combined with offering opportunities for training and employment to disadvantaged groups, sometimes in a mix of volunteer and subsidized work. Although the charity variant (very cheap food, volunteers) still exists, throughout the years many initiatives evolved towards a more professional and employment oriented approach.

Following Townsend (2010) we approach poverty as a relative concept and will define it as the situation in which persons have such a lack of resources in relation to the general distribution that they become socially excluded in multiple domains of life (Dierckx, Ghys, 2013). Since poverty is related

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both to the general distribution of resources in society (inequality) and to how social forces react to this lack of resources (exclusion), poverty is best conceived as a structural societal problem (Royce, 2015; Vranken, 2001; Holman, 1978). In international comparison, Belgium (11 million inhabitants) has a quite low poverty rate of 15.5% (Coene, 2015), according to the EU poverty line, which is 60% of the national median income. However, in most Western welfare states there has been little substantial progress in reducing aggregate poverty in the last four decennia (Cantillon et al, 2014), and Belgium is no exception. This helps explain why many are interested in SI as a potential new path to poverty reduction in Europe (Brandsen, 2014; Oosterlynck et al, 2013; Dierckx, Coene, 2012). Yet the link between social innovation and structural poverty reduction is not evident (Ghys, 2016). Some authors doubt the inherent potential of local community initiatives for tackling structural problems like poverty (Alcock, 2005), while others recognize the potential of SI but warn that only under certain conditions SI can lead to sustainable improvement (Sinclair, Baglioni, 2014; Martinelli, 2012). Since social restaurants are a ‘mature’ SI, it will allow us to better explore the conditions that allow for both the merits and limitations of this innovation.

2. METHODOLOGY

In what follows, we briefly explore the analytical framework and methodology used for this cases study. Our aim is to apply a concern for poverty reduction to concrete cases of SI by outlining five factors that are relevant in the data collection and analysis. The first factor is the relation to the socioeconomic mechanisms that produce poverty (Royce 2015; Ghys, 2014) like structural unemployment, inequality, commodification, social exclusion, shortcomings in the official welfare provisions, etc. Does the innovation include alternatives to these processes? The second factor is the relation to the position of people in poverty: who has access and how does the SI affect their position? Does the SI contribute to the empowerment (or contrary the stigmatization) or social mobility of the poor; and how? The third factor relates to the sometimes forgotten subjective conditions for poverty reduction: the need to generate the will, support and political climate to actually implement the measures that could reduce poverty (Gans, 1995; Horton, Gregory, 2010; Royce, 2015). Processes of politicization, awareness raising and collective mobilization (of the poor) are analyzed. The fourth factor is the scale and spread of the SI initiative: under what conditions can it amass enough mass to weigh on the structural constitution of society? Diffusing SI is also important for achieving equal territorial access and avoiding new types of territorial inequality (Andreotti, Mingione, Polizzi, 2012; Martinelli, 2012). This translates into looking at the coordination, opportunities for growth and long term sustainability of the project. In Western Europe, this is closely connected to the fifth factor which analyses the relations to the government and the broader institutional context allowing the innovation to take place. Data is collected on how projects are linked to existing services within the welfare state (task division, agreements, etc.), and if in some occasions the relation to the government is mutually enforcing (as in learning processes) or antagonistic (pressure, conflict). Furthermore, there is attention for dangers such as offloading state responsibilities for guaranteeing social rights (Moulaert et al, 2005; Sinclair, Baglioni, 2014), in which case SI might weaken existing antipoverty effort. In this article our most attention will be given to data on the first and second factors, in line with the general focus of this SI on unemployment and social cohesion.

The case study is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data (Yin, 2009). The first was mostly collected through 16 semi structured interviews (Rubin, Rubin, 2005) with organizers and (former) staff of the restaurants, as well as related government officials. All interview quotations in this article are translated from Dutch by the author. These were conducted by visiting six different social restaurants. Four of these belonged to the same larger social economy enterprise (Sense). Two were fully independent small enterprises. It must also be mentioned that the case study focused on Flanders, the Northern Dutch speaking state in Belgium’s federal structure. This was supplemented by a scan of 367 newspaper articles mentioning social restaurants aimed at analyzing possible debates or controversies surrounding the project, as well as analysis of the discourse on poverty in available documents of the studied projects. Quantitative data was collected by analyzing previously collected data when provided by the initiatives themselves (annual reports, audits, etc.), and through a written survey. This survey containing both closed and open questions, and was send to 80 organizers of social
restaurants (out of an estimated total population of +/- 120), of which 39 returned the survey. Although sufficient to give a first indication, this sample size means that our conclusions are limited. It must be mentioned that there was no central federation or network that unites the sector of social restaurants, and thus there was no general data or discourse on poverty to use.

3. THE SOCIAL RESTAURANT AS WORKPLACE

In general, our interviews and survey show that those involved in social restaurants do not think their projects deal with the structural causes of poverty, seeking their contribution mostly in the provision of affordable and healthy meals and the stimulation of social cohesion. Those who do see a connection, point towards the opportunities for social economy activities that help prevent long term unemployment. We will first discuss this aspect.

There is no general data available on total employment in the sector, but the survey provides a good indication. First of all, 12.8% of the surveyed restaurants (n39) fully rely on volunteers and don’t offer any form of (social) employment. The remaining part (n34) offers a mix of different employment opportunities. Belgian labor law allows for various types of contracts. We will briefly discuss the three main categories included in the survey. First, there are ‘labor care’ contracts, which is a type of employment for persons with a very weak profile and which is more oriented towards meaningful occupation and care than integration into the labor market. Secondly, categories are various social economy contracts that allow for longer employment. These are subsidized employment trajectories for people with a certain distance to labor market (long term unemployed, immigrants, people with light disabilities, ex-convicts, etc.). The pace of work is less stringent than in the regular restaurant/hotel sector, and is mixed with capacity building with the (government dictated) objective of eventually moving on to the regular labor market. These contracts can be given for longer periods as not all employees are strong enough (yet) to find a job on the labor market. The third variant is called ‘Article 60’ contracts, referring to the article 60.7 in the charter of the municipal social services (OCMW) that allows them to employ welfare clients on social assistance for a short duration of 1 to 2 years. This can be subsidized jobs within private or public companies, as long as the employer offers a training and guidance trajectory that will improve the chances of employment afterwards. Article 60 is thus the shortest social economy trajectory. This is meant not just to reactivate the long term unemployed, but also for new immigrants who don’t necessarily lack skills but need time to learn the language and gain work experience in the Belgian context. Additionally, by the time the trajectory ends the employee will have paid social security contributions just long enough to become eligible for federal unemployment insurance.

It is common for a social restaurant to combine the above mentioned contracts with volunteers and full regular employment (usually of chefs or social workers). On average, the social restaurants that are not only operated by volunteers (n34) employ (but not necessarily in this combination): 4.7 volunteers, 1.1 persons in labor care and 6.7 people in a social economy contract, of whom 3.3 have a temporary ‘Article 60’ contract. These are assisted by 2.2 regular employees. Taking into account that individual social restaurants are usually small enterprises we can conclude that this SI has real potential for social employment, especially in comparison to other variants of food aid like foodbanks (Ghys, 2016). Social economy firms offer an alternative to the structural production of unemployment of certain groups on the labor market in two ways. First, many social restaurants are purposefully overstaffed and thus offer more employment than a regular restaurant:

“Chef: This may be Horeca [European abbreviation for Hotel, Restaurant, Café sector], but no other restaurant has that much personnel. We have 21.

Interviewer: you are purposefully overstaffed?

Chef: Yes, because that way I can give opportunities to people who don’t have a solid profile, so they get a chance to work.” (Interview with head chef of the social restaurant).
Secondly, by sacrificing some demands in terms of efficiency they offer opportunities to groups that would otherwise find no place on the labor market, and under the Belgian welfare system would be dependent on subsistence incomes. We can observe here how deviating from the capitalist principle of maximizing profitability opens up opportunities for the inclusion of groups whom would otherwise be dependent. This does not negate the fact that social restaurants do aim at generating revenue of their own, but they ultimately depend on subsidies to achieve this.

To evaluate the potential of this SI we must also look at the quality of the employment. Since the wage is above the European poverty line working in social restaurants lifts individuals out of income poverty (unless they have dependent children). Social restaurants offer work with a low entry bar (cooking and taking orders are not rare skills) allowing learning-on-the-job, but that also allows for the development of more specific skills\(^1\). The most common jobs in these enterprises are cooks, waiters, cashiers, cleaning staff and logistics, and many of the interviewed coordinators rotate staff between these tasks to broaden their work experience. Since some jobs require more knowledge of the native language than others, this environment allows immigrants to steadily increase their mastery of the language until they eventually can communicate with costumers (most employees in the studied restaurants are migrants). Since this concerns fulltime employment but the restaurants have dead moments in between eating hours, there is time for additional training. Furthermore, many employees find the tangible results of the work and the feedback from clients motivating.

One important advantage of social restaurants in terms of labor market integration is that they don’t operate in a specific niche but can send their former employees to the large and active Hotel, Restaurant and Café (HoReCa) sector. This in contrast to other social economy enterprises like recycle centers (Cools, Oosterlynck, 2015) or municipal park maintenance firms that form niche sectors and find it hard to channel their formers employees towards the regular economy:

“There certainly is demand for it. The social economy park maintenance firm offers an important service, but there are few private companies doing the same.” (Interview with HR agent of the social restaurant firm).

However, the employment contribution of this type of SI is not without problems. The first problem is that channeling vulnerable groups to the regular labor market ultimately depends on the willingness of regular firms to employ them. They may be responsible for the training, but the success of the trajectory untimely depends on factors beyond the control of the project. Interviews with HR staff and former employees indicate that there might be demand for labor in the HoReCa sector, but this is often for temporary or informal employment, which does not always provide a durable road out of poverty.

Another issue is that the popular article 60 contracts are only temporary (and cannot be repeated in the years to come), thus only offering a temporary escape from poverty for those who cannot find employment on the regular market. Some former workers regret this:

“I would have liked to stay, I was always happy there. I told the chef, if you give me a contract I will sign immediately. But the chef said no, we don’t need you now.” (Interview with former employee, unemployed).

“It was a good job, good boss, good colleagues. I wish I could stay, because they said I worked well and was good interacting with clients. I mailed them but they said no, you must first be unemployed for a while and then maybe you can come back. That is weird. I don’t want to be unemployed.” (Interview with former employee, unemployed).

\(^1\) Usually social restaurants have a limited menu which means the food is cooked in bulk, breaking it down into simple tasks (for example peeling potatoes). Yet within these tasks there is still a learning curve (for example making deserts or managing the supplies).
The fact that these contracts must end also mean that the restaurants cannot retain their best staff, and must always start from zero in terms of productivity. However, most defend the system on the basis that short contracts allow them to give training opportunities to more people.

4. **THE SOCIAL RESTAURANT AS AN ACCESSIBLE PLACE TO EAT?**

Although we so far focused on the relation to the labor market, most surveyed and interviewed coordinators of social restaurants see their own role in poverty reduction in terms of addressing individual needs of poor people (rather than poverty itself): the provision of affordable food and creating a space for social interaction. The justification of some of most important employment subsidies (like the ‘Local service economy’ contracts) depends on this social function.

A common practice is that social restaurants offer one or two main dishes or menus, making them more comparable to office or university canteens. In our survey (n=39) roughly one third of the restaurants use one fixed price for the main dish, while two thirds employ a system of multiple price categories depending on the position of the client (age, income, residence). In the latter system, there are thus clients who pay the normal market price, while others get a ‘social’ discount. These categories are not standardized among restaurants, but we calculated that the average lowest price for the main dish (may include soup and dessert in case it only offers a menu) was 3.1 euro. However, this varied considerably within our sample between one and seven euro. What does this mean for the use of this service in terms of poverty reduction? We can compare to the reference budgets; a method that uses focus groups to create budgets (and an alternative poverty line) for what is minimally required for full societal participation (Goedemé, Storms, Stockman, Penne, Van den Bosch, 2015). According to the latest budgets for Belgium (Storms, Penne, Vandelannoote, Van Thielen, 2015), the daily budget for food is 5 euro per person, for which we can take 2.5 euro average for the main meal. In terms of daily use eating in a social restaurant will thus not help the poor to save money. The staff of social restaurants that we interviewed seems to realize that ever their cheap price setting is no solution to the needs to the poorest.

The use of social restaurants should not be seen in terms of survival by rather as offering an affordable opportunity to eat outside the house. When seen as the cost for visiting a restaurant, 3.1 euro is cheap enough to include poorer people into this realm of social life (the same budget standard calculated 7.6 euro per month for this). Many interviewees and brochures mention social contact and inclusion as an important contribution of their project. Since in western urban environments social interaction is closely connected to consumption (‘going for a drink’), this SI could offer people an accessible space to meet and strengthen their social network. But to allow this function, the social restaurant must feel like an actual restaurant. This can be challenging, as this innovation partly emerged in a context of charity (homeless shelters, etc.) and still has stigma connected to it. Half the surveyed restaurants estimate that stigma is a barrier that stops potential clients from entering. Thus, despite the mission to keep prices low many contemporary social restaurants are concerned with presentation both of their food and of the restaurant space (open kitchen, bright interior), and especially with the service. Simulating a real restaurant environment is both in the interest of the clients and the training of the staff.

In relation to the two previous functions it is also important to look at what audience social restaurants reach. 89.5% of the surveyed restaurants (n=39) are open to the general public, where the others have a specific audience (only the poorest, elderly, etc.). Because of many different categorizations, it is difficult to calculate how many middleclass clients visit social restaurants, but we estimate that a) they do visit, b) they are a small minority. The survey shows that the elderly are a large part of the clientele: 60% are 65+ (100% in some restaurants), 36% is between 18 and 65, and only 4% is younger than 18. The failure to reach young families (despite this being an objective of many governments) can be related to various factors. One are the opening hours, the survey shows that 86% are only open during midday (n=36), and only 18% in the weekend (n=39), blocking exactly the times when families with children could visit. The other reason for the overrepresentation of the elderly is that roughly one third of the restaurants are connected to municipal ‘local service centers’ for the elderly (these are
The survey also shows how the audience is not only predominantly old but also white: 90% of the clients are ethically Belgian, while only 10% is of foreign decent (up to 2nd generation). We suspect this 10% is even an overestimation caused by one outlier of 40%. The exclusion of this group matters, since according to EU-SILC survey data (Eurostat, 2016) Non-EU citizens have a significant higher poverty rate (41.5%) than the average population. Further research is required to pinpoint why these stay away, but one factor that surfaced in our research is the menu. Social restaurants try to cater their weekly menu to their older audience, whom according to interviews with chefs are very intolerant of foreign dishes or any deviation from traditional national cuisine. This can be a special obstacle for Muslims that follow the religious (halal) rules concerning meat. According to an interview with the director of one of the biggest social restaurant enterprises, opening this SI up to a wider audience to meet its inclusive ambitions can be challenging, since restaurants and bars in general have a specific audience. This can be easier when starting in a new context, when one does not have to fear losing the core audience by making changes.

The third factor of our analytical framework was building the will and climate for structural changes. Social restaurants rarely contribute to this, nor do they intend to. As both our interviews and newspaper analysis indicate, the vast majority of projects take no particular public stance on poverty reduction. Interview data shows that this is partly connected to the fact that many organizers don’t consider their project a poverty organization and thus claim no expertise on the topic, either perceiving themselves as simply a restaurant or an employment project. The latter case is interesting, because in their approach poverty is limited to the clients, not to workers (who would otherwise be in poverty), hinting at a non-structural understanding of poverty reduction – even when according to our analysis they contribute to it. Another factor is that many social restaurants try to stay politically low profile to safeguard their commercial interests while depending on government support.

5. GROWTH OF THE SECTOR AND CONNECTIONS TO THE WELFARE STATE

Before exploring the exact relation to government, we will briefly discuss the scale and coordination of this SI. Social restaurants have slowly grown since the late 1970’s to 120-150 enterprises. Compared to the for example the 600+ food handout centers in the foodbank network that originated at the same time (Geerts, Ghys, Dierckx, 2013), this growth has been slow. The field of social restaurants can best be described as fragmented. First there is no national coordination between restaurants, although some restaurants are part of social employment enterprises operating on a city scale. There is no federation, and a loose network for shared learning only emerged during our research. This means that there is no general strategy for expansion, no data collection and no collective bargaining with the government or suppliers. The reason or this is that most projects value their independence. Secondly there are big differences in the performance of individual restaurants. For example, the survey (n39) show that on average a social restaurant serves 65 main dishes per day, but median only 57 (taking into account not all clients order this). This is because of the enormous variation between restaurants: between 4 and 160 per day (45,056 standard deviation).

These facts show us that there is still a lot of space for this SI to grow, both in terms of territorial expansion and in expanding the operation on the scale of the individual restaurant. Most surveyed restaurants see future possibilities for expansion. This is partly because they think to social needs this SI reacts to will increase, and partly because they think there is potential to reach a bigger costumer group. However, they also feel financially threatened regarding the long term future, both because of increasing food costs (while their prices cannot rise) and because of uncertain subsidies. The concept of this SI depends on niche markets and government support since it is inherently financially troubled: by definition social restaurants sell meals below market prices to poor customers and purposefully employ less efficient workers.

There seem to emerge two paths forwards for this SI. One is upscaling towards larger enterprises that employ a franchise model, like was successfully done by the aforementioned recycling centers that became the largest network of ecological social economy firms in Belgium (Cools, Oosterlyck, 2015).
According to managers of the already larger social economy enterprises, this would bring well-known scale advantages like better prices for food, knowledge sharing, stronger bargaining position with governments and the possibility to rotate personnel between restaurants. The other option is to stay local but to cooperate even more closely with local actors and charities. This could involve for example using food leftovers from supermarkets or industry and employing more volunteers. This could increase the sustainability of these services, but it is unclear how it helps increase their even territorial access (Martinelli, 2012).

Last, we turn to the relation with the government. The interviews with policy makers and our media, and document search indicate that social restaurants fulfill multiple functions for policy makers. First, they are spaces for labor market activation, which if successful can lead people (temporary) out of welfare dependency. Secondly it helps to secure the duty of providing access to qualitative food to vulnerable populations. And thirdly this can be framed within a narrative of social cohesion.

Governments are involved in the functioning of this SI multiple ways. To start slightly less than one third of the surveyed restaurants operate directly under local governments as they are part of local service centers for the elderly or other municipal services. Local social services also play an important role to independent enterprises by screening and sending customers from their own clientele. These matters because many restaurants use a discount system for vulnerable groups, but the interviewed coordinators don’t want to be responsible for judging who is eligible and whom not. They prefer to go from the more objective judgment of a social worker. Another regulatory function of the government is to set standards for health and hygiene, although this is not specific to social restaurants.

The most significant involvement of the government is in funding. This can take three forms: one is direct project (startup) subsidies or material support to the restaurant or the organization it is part of. This is welcome support but not essential to the specific concept of social restaurants. A second type of subsidies can be to sponsor the consumption of the client by paying for the difference between the production cost and the reduced tariff for vulnerable groups. This works well in tandem with the referral system, allowing the restaurants to be break-even per plate and built an economic model around that. While important in practice, in theory this subsidy could be replaced by working with donations or charging a higher price (losing on the social function). The third type of financial support is subsidies for social employment. This allows restaurants to become more professional and lower their wage costs in case they don’t fully depend on volunteers. From the perspective of structural poverty reduction this is a key contribution since it causally lifts people from poverty and separates social restaurants from other (more efficient) form of food relief. The regional government (responsible for most policy domains relevant for this SI) has explicit attention for social restaurants, but recently it seems keener on promoting and expanding the low-cost and charitable aspect than the employment side.

This much state involvement of course makes the SI vulnerable to government pressure. This can vary from quality standards, to increasing pressure on labor market integration (which comes with the risk of only hiring stronger profiles, see Frans, Seynaeve, Vranken, 2002) and demands to open up to new groups such as in this case families with children. Yet in general the relation to the government is constructive. Since: a) in most locations the government does take responsibility; b) social restaurants don’t replace any key functions of the welfare state, the risk of offloading and welfare retrenchment seems low.

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, we analyzed the potential of the approach of social restaurants for structural poverty reduction. While failing in playing an advocacy role for poverty reduction, we saw that social restaurants have potential to be a suitable sector for social economy employment of vulnerable groups. They are alternative to the structural production of poverty on the labor market by giving access work for vulnerable groups in a context that potentially prepares them for work in the active hotel, restaurant and café sector. This is combined with an accessible restaurant or canteen service for poorer citizens.
Although offering good quality, in this latter function social restaurants are not efficient in controlling hunger, nor effective at structurally improving the financial situation of the poor. The contribution to the position of poor clients must be sought more indirectly, in terms of addressing specific social exclusions (eating outside) and stimulating social cohesion. Especially for older citizens this could be useful for example in allowing them to longer stay active and independent in their neighborhood.

Two additional conclusions might be recognizable in other cases (compare Ghys, 2016). First, in order to make a durable structural difference, social innovators often need cooperation from more powerful actors. We saw that effectively fulfilling the labor market integration objective of this project requires openness from the private sector to (formally) employ their graduates. In the beginning this type of corporate responsibility might require devoting resources to extra guidance. At the same time this SI is hard to maintain without government support. This case uses specific Belgian laws like ‘Article 60’ employment, but in general the SI must be compensated for employing less competitive staff. The only way to do this besides subsidies or tax breaks would be in an environment with quasi-guaranteed demand and tolerance for noncompetitive prices such as airports or music festivals. This would however sacrifice the social function as a collective and accessible service. A second conclusion is that certain ‘best practice’ functions cannot be assumed in the average practice. As we saw the food price, the economic activity and employment, and the degree of stigma varied between cases. Objectives concerning diversity where not always met. These points towards the need for active learning and strategic spreading of good practices and standards in relation to poverty reduction. Some issues such as achieving diversity or coordination are difficult to achieve on the short run in the Belgian context. But once identified some of the pitfalls can be avoided when transplanted to a new institutional context.

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