Social and Solidarity Economy Web Information Systems: State of the Art and an Interoperability Framework

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the state of the art on interoperability developments for the social and solidarity economy (SSE) community web based information systems (WIS); it also presents a framework of interoperability for the SSE’ WIS and the developments made in a research-in-progress PhD project in the last 3 years. A search on the bibliographic databases showed that so far there are no papers on interoperability initiatives on the SSE, so it was necessary to have other sources of information: a preliminary analysis of the WIS that support SSE activities; and interviews with the representatives of some of the world’s most important SSE organisations. The study showed that the WIS are still not interoperable yet. In order to become interoperable a group of the SSE community has been developing a Dublin Corre Application Profile to be used by the SSE community as reference and binding to describe their resources. This paper also describes this on-going process.

Keywords: Dublin Corre Application Profile, Interoperability, Semantic Interoperability, Semantic Web, Social and Solidarity Economy

INTRODUCTION

The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) can be broadly defined as a type of economy in which the goals are different either from the ones of the market economy or from the state’s (Lechat, 2007). Allegedly, these goals are neither centered in profit nor in individualistic needs. It is an economy that presents itself as a material and human alternative to capitalist economy (Cattani, Laville, Gaiger, & Hespanha, 2009).

Social and solidarity economy organisations are composed of self-organized communities (e.g. geographical or sectorial). These organisations have machine-to-machine communication needs that are internal or external to them, for example to other kind of organisations like governmental organisations. In order to
support these machine-to-machine communication needs, there is the need to provide interoperable solutions among the software platforms that support their activities. As we are talking about exchange of information between machines (software), full compliance with international standards is essential. The search on bibliographic databases revealed no initiatives of interoperability between SSE Web Based Information Systems (WIS), so it was necessary to replace the literature review with two other sources of information: 1) Preliminary analysis of the WIS that support SSE activities; and 2) Interviews with the representatives of some of the world’s most important SSE organisations. They showed that, in fact, the WIS are still not interoperable, but that there are efforts in this direction promoted by these organisations.

The objective of this article is to draw the state of the art on interoperability developments for the SSE world community, to present a framework of interoperability for the SSE and the developments made in the last 3 years in a research-in-progress PhD which aims to contribute to achieve this framework.

This document proceeds as follows. Section 2 shows presents the context in which the concepts of SSE, semantic Web and semantic interoperability are explained in more detail. Section 3 presents the methodology used for each of the tasks carried out in defining the state-of-the-art on interoperability developments for the SSE. Section 4 presents the state-of-the-art mentioned above and the developments in the framework of SSE interoperability. Closing conclusions and future work are drawn in the final section.

CONTEXTUALISATION

The Social and Solidarity Economy

The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), reported in the literature as the “other economy” is a third way, distinct from the market economy and the state power (Cattani et al., 2009). It boils down in a pragmatic way to the union or association of people with a common purpose for the group and the society around them, where new values are born in opposition to practices of the capitalist world that are considered predatory. The SSE is characterized by solidarity and equality, the collective ownership of the work and its non-alienation (Cattani et al., 2009). The concepts of Social Economy and Solidarity Economy are quite similar but yet different, and because they are used by the organisations we studied to define themselves, we will detail them and their differences.

In the Social Economy the stress lies, as Cattani et al. (2009) stated, on the “search for an economic democracy associated to social utility” (p. 156). The Social Economy was born to solve social problems that the state did not manage to solve. This form of economy has always existed, we can see it in the most remote human associations in Egypt, Greco-Latin antiquity, the Middle Ages in Europe, Imperial China or Pre-Columbian America (Cattani et al., 2009). These were systems of mutual support, both professional and religious or artistic.

Currently sociologists and other social scientists characterize the social economy in two ways:

1. The standpoint of identifying the main legal and institutional forms found - either if they are e.g. cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations;
2. By identifying the common features of the companies or organisations - e.g. secondary profit, management autonomy, democratic control or the primacy of people and of the social object over the capital upon the distribution of surpluses) (Lechat, 2007).

Solidarity Economy is a concept broadly used in several continents, with varied meanings all around the idea of solidarity (Cattani et al., 2009). This form of economy has also always existed, but it was only spread as a concept at the beginning of the nineties, with the appearance of many initiatives of citizens that gathered according to the “principles of
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