

## **The Utilization, Benefits, and Challenges of Online Social Enterprises Directories**

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### **Summary**

Online tools that facilitate the work of online businesses are more important than ever. This article outlines how such tools, particularly online directories, may address the needs of diverse stakeholders by overcoming common challenges in the social enterprise sector. It features a case study on the development of an online social enterprise directory in the United States. Insights from the creator and a literature review on similar directories reveal that online directories may foster opportunities related to: 1) identifying organizations, 2) facilitating large-scale research studies, and 3) enhancing online resources for social enterprise educators, students, and consumers. This paper contributes to knowledge about how online directories serve as an intermediary for online businesses, whether they are commercially or socially oriented. Strategic considerations for the development of such directories are outlined.

Social enterprises are viewed differently by different groups of scholars (Mair & Marti, 2006). One group views social enterprises as nonprofit organizations that engage in commercial activities. Another group sees them as for-profit businesses engaging in work that has a social value. Another group views social enterprises as organizations that operate on a spectrum where social goals are at one end and economic goals are at another (Battilana, Besharov, & Mitzineck, 2017; Battilana, 2018; Doherty, Haugh & Lyon, 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014). Given all these perspectives, literature has identified social enterprises as nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, and a combination of both. However, what is consistent across all definitions is the idea that social enterprises create social value by addressing social issues like poverty, hunger, and inequality, while also creating economic value through earned-income needed for organizational sustainability (Mair & Marti, 2006).

Their potential for social value creation has sparked interest in social enterprises by practitioners, policymakers, universities, and more. However, while there is a growing body of research on social enterprise education (Mittra, Kickul, Gundry, & Orr, 2019; Weaver, 2020), sustainability (Mair & Marti, 2006), and activities (Weaver, 2017; Weaver, 2019), little research exists on how social enterprises may adapt to the increasing need for organizations to have an online presence.

Online tools that connect and facilitate work in the social enterprise sector and other sectors are more important than ever before in our history. Upon the publication of this article, millions of businesses, government offices, schools, universities, restaurants, and many other institutions around the world are closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19 (Gong, Xiong, Xiao, Lin, Liu, Wang, & Li, 2020; Zraick & Garcia, 2020; Winkler & Ligouri, forthcoming). COVID-19 is a respiratory illness, similar to pneumonia, but that is highly communicable through human transmission (Gong et al., 2020; Dong, Du, & Gardner, 2020). These closures are essential to the health and well-being of people around the world, as scientists declare that COVID-19 requires social distancing in order to limit its spread (Zraick & Garcia, 2020). Many businesses have been hit hard by this crisis that is forcing them to close their doors and pivot their business models to online delivery channels.

Social enterprises are no exception to the types of businesses being affected by this crisis. As such, it is imperative that social enterprises are equipped to adapt their businesses to online and offline delivery channels. While there is a great deal of opportunity for research in this area, this article explores the emergence of online social enterprise directories as a mechanism that social enterprises may use to increase awareness of their services, foster business relationships, and possibly even use for e-commerce purposes. While little research on online social enterprise directories exists, an increasing number of government agencies and entrepreneurial support organizations have developed online, public directories for various purposes.

Examples of online social enterprise directories include Social Enterprise Scotland, SE Ontario in Canada, and the Social Entrepreneurship Support Network of the Baltic Sea Region. What all of these directories have in common is that they identify and map (usually self-identifying) social enterprises within a given region or nation. These examples are run by social enterprise support organizations, however government agencies in Canada and the United Kingdom have also created and/or funded online social enterprise directories as well. Some practitioners, researchers, and government offices have created online social enterprise directories in an effort to: 1) track and map the growth of their local or regional social enterprise sector, 2) legitimize social enterprises (often for funding opportunities), and 3) to create online shopping opportunities that sell their goods and services.

While online directories have various benefits for social enterprise stakeholders, developing and maintaining them presents challenges. This paper outlines ways online directories help social enterprise stakeholders overcome some of their biggest challenges. It also sheds light on the difficulties and rewards experienced by their creators and managers. Though social enterprises are becoming a growing medium for the delivery of public and social services (Lyon & Sepulveda, 2009), the sector is still young. As it evolves, it is imperative that we explore how online directories and other online tools may aid in creating a solid foundation from which the entire social enterprise sector may grow.

## **Literature Review**

### **Online Directories**

The concept of online directories, in general, is not new. Online directories, also referred to as electronic or internet directories, are a growing tool among businesses. They act as intermediaries for connecting customers and other interested parties to businesses (Legner, 2007). Online directories play the important role of facilitating interactions with a wider spectrum of trusted service providers. They are considered an enabling service for electronic commerce, as they facilitate searches for business information. Online directories also facilitate opportunities for business partnerships, negotiating and maintaining a business relationship, as well as consummating business transactions by financial settlements (Vladimir, 2006).

Users may use electronic directories to discover a desired good or service, assess the authenticity of other businesses for partnerships and other purposes, evaluate copyright-protection services (by possibly relying on digital watermarks), and to traffic auditing to establish the worth of an electronic site for advertising purposes (Vladimir, 2006). While directories provide benefits to consumers, having profiles of businesses alone is not a good enough value proposition (Legner,

2009). Some directories create value through information reliability (e.g. Yellow Pages), ability for reviews and ratings, and price transparency (e.g. Yelp, Tripadvisor), or the ability to purchase from the directory itself (e.g. Akcelos, EBay).

In addition, while it is tempting to assume that online commerce “levels the playing field for all businesses,” research on online directories indicates that location does matter. Wyse (2004) asserts that online commerce gives the illusion that location does not matter, but some businesses have a location dependence. Customers looking for basic necessities like food and accommodations are more location dependent. Search engines and other internet-based tools that generate, or provide access to, directories of products and services are increasingly an integral part of a consumer’s purchasing activities. The location-dependent circumstances of many small enterprises imply that the internet-based functionality that provides location information is a valuable transactional support. The results of the study suggest that for many small enterprises, reliance on the location information in web-based business directories may misinform and misdirect prospective customers (Wyse, 2004). Thus information reliability is just as important as the development of the directory itself (Legner, 2009).

Overall, previous literature on the use of online directories indicates that they are an increasingly important and utilized tool. Such directories may facilitate business marketing, enable e-commerce transactions, foster business partnerships, and increase consumer input and confidence in products and services through reviews and rating. While the online directories may benefit enterprises of all kinds, the following section of this article explores how such directories may contribute to the social enterprise sector.

### **Online Directories and the Social Enterprise Sector**

Online social enterprise directories present various opportunities for the sector. One example of this is the now debunked SE Finder in Australia that paved the way for research studies, policy efforts, and the expansion of social enterprise support organizations (Barraket, Collyer, O’Connor, & Anderson, 2010). It was created through a collaboration between the Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies and an organization called Social Traders. The SE Finder helped to increase the visibility of social enterprises in Australia. It helped Social Traders build a certification process for social enterprises that enables them to obtain government and private sector funding contracts from their social procurement membership program (Social Traders, 2010). According to their website, Social Traders has secured more than \$105 million in procurement deals (Social Traders, 2020).

Another example of how online social enterprise directories may advance the field is through serving as a launch point for social enterprise e-commerce opportunities. The Social Enterprise Alliance recently created a platform called Toasting Good so their directory members may list and sell their goods and services (Social Enterprise Alliance, 2020).

A third way that online social enterprise directories aid the sector is the addressing one of the biggest issues discussed in literature on social enterprises -- the challenge of mapping social enterprises. This issue often stems from definitional debates of the social enterprise concept in both research and practice, which has subsequently limited sector mapping initiatives (Dart, Clow, & Armstrong, 2010). Nevertheless, a variety of strategies for overcoming social enterprise sector mapping challenges have been presented in recent years. In Europe, for instance, the Belgian Science

Policy and the EMES International Research Network launched the International Comparative Social Enterprise Model (ICSEM) project to map social enterprise models around the world (Defourny, & Nyssens, 2017). The ICSEM project enlisted 200 research partners from over 50 countries to collect and analyze data on social enterprises in their respective countries (Defourny, Nyssens, & Brolis, 2018).

In another example, the Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies and a social enterprise development organization named Social Traders joined forces to conduct a nation-wide study of Australia’s social enterprise sector (Barraket, 2016; Barraket, Collyer, O’Connor, & Anderson, 2010; Haworth, 2014). After creating a working definition of social enterprises based on the results from workshops with social enterprise stakeholders, social enterprises were recruited from a variety of sources including media features, case studies, web searches, and publicly available information (Barraket et al., 2010). One outcome of this research is the aforementioned development of an online directory called the Australian Social Enterprise Finder (Barraket et al., 2010), that has since been repurposed to serve as a social procurement membership tool (Social Traders, 2019). Examples like these studies demonstrate the importance that recent research has placed on mapping the sector.

In addition to the examples above, online social enterprise directories may be used to identify social enterprises, track their growth in a given area or industry, facilitate networking in the field, promote their work, and overcome common issues faced by social enterprises as shown in Table 1. However, while online social enterprise directories may benefit a diversity of stakeholders, managing directories can be difficult.

**Table 1.** Potential Benefits for Various Social Enterprise Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Common Challenges	Potential Ways Online Directories Help Overcome Common Challenges*
Social Entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurs have issues marketing their products and services (Hynes, 2009)</li> <li>• Social enterprises struggle with public and investor legitimacy concerns (Battilana, 2018)</li> <li>• Many social enterprises engage in institutional collaborations for service delivery and resource acquisition and thus need opportunities for collaboration (Weaver, 2017)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include social enterprise directory profile for promotional and networking purposes</li> <li>• Gain validation as a social enterprise by an independent organization</li> <li>• Improve online visibility and website traffic</li> <li>• Find local social enterprises for networking opportunities</li> </ul>
Private Businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A number of for-profit businesses aim to work with social organizations in accordance with their corporate social responsibility policies (Aguinis &amp; Glavas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find social enterprises for social service delivery or donations</li> <li>• Identify social enterprises to work with for corporate social responsibility purposes</li> </ul>

	2019; Barnett, Henriques, & Husted, 2020).	
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social procurement is the acquisition of a range of assets and services, with the aim of intentionally creating social outcomes (both directly and indirectly) (Furneaux &amp; Barraket, 2014). A number of governments around the world are using it to advance community development led by social enterprises.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster social procurement by identifying and certifying social enterprises in a given community</li> </ul>
Educators and Mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is an increasing number of social enterprise academic programs around the world (Murdock, Tekula, &amp; Parra, 2014). Educators need speakers and field visit opportunities to provide an experiential component to their programs.</li> <li>• Graduating students need careers that align with their training in social enterprise (Weaver, 2020).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find social enterprises for field visits and guest speaking opportunities</li> <li>• Help students find jobs and internships at social enterprises</li> </ul>
Government Policymakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping tools may help some governments with planning, allocating, and distributing resources to the social enterprise sector (Muñoz, 2010).</li> <li>• Need to track the spread of social enterprise in a particular region to improve understanding of their work (Terjesen, 2017).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Map social enterprises in your municipality</li> <li>• Discover patterns in the kinds of social problems that social enterprises are addressing in a given community</li> <li>• Design policies and programs that relate to the needs or services of your social enterprises</li> <li>• Identify social enterprises for social procurement purposes</li> </ul>
Researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty identifying social enterprises for studies, which has limited theoretical development on social enterprise as a concept (Short, Moss, &amp; Lumpkin, 2009; Hoogendoorn, Pennings, Thurik, 2010)</li> <li>• Conflicting definitions of social enterprises (Young &amp; Lecy, 2014; Bacq &amp; Janssen, 2011)</li> <li>• Need to provide financial (e.g. national or regional funding for social enterprise research) and non-financial resources for advancing the field at large (Wolk, 2008)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit social enterprises for research studies</li> <li>• Access databases with information about social enterprises for empirical research purposes</li> <li>• Online directories can publicly acknowledge the spectrum of social enterprises.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to develop research databases related to social enterprise for academic research (Bloom &amp; Clark, 2015)</li> </ul>	
<p>Social Enterprise Support Organizations (e.g. incubators, investors, law firms)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for task-based training programs among social enterprises (Weaver, 2016)</li> <li>• Establish legitimacy among investors (Battilana, 2018; Battilana, Walker, &amp; Dorsey, 2012)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify social enterprises for service provision (e.g. to work with/ support)</li> <li>• Learn about the propensity of social enterprises in a particular geographic area</li> <li>• Can serve as a launch point for social enterprise support services</li> </ul>

\*Note: Future research should assess the efficacy of the potential benefits of online social enterprise directories.

Whether using online directories for mapping purposes or for conveying business information online as a convenience to consumers, at the core of these directories is a database of information. The reliability of that information is, in and of itself, a value proposition of online directories (Legner, 2009). As such, it needs to be valid, reliable, curated, and sustained over time. In the social enterprise sector, information in these databases must also have clarity in regard to how social enterprises are being defined (Bloom & Clark, 2011). In a study that aimed to map social enterprises in Ontario, Canada, Dart, Clow, & Armstrong (2010)'s convey obstacles they faced related to distinguishing between: 1) the diversity of social enterprise activities, 2) the role that social enterprise mission plays in the organization (activity-based (functional) vs. organizational identity-based approaches), and 3) social enterprise legal structure.

In addition to simply offering reliable information, online directories do well when they are interactive as opposed to simply being a stagnant entity on the internet. A qualitative study by Dow, Comber, & Vines (2018) shows how a public directory may be used to convene people in particular regions and spread awareness of resources. However, the authors argue that directories need to enable members to exchange information, as opposed to simply being a static source on the internet. They should allow for members to exchange information on community development advancements and resources.

Online directories can be made more engaging by including online communities around them (Ariza-Montes, 2013), creating opportunities for consumers to read and rate products and services (Legner, 2009), and providing up-to-date local information on businesses (Wyse, 2004). Ariza-Montes & Muniz (2013) suggest that virtual communities and ecosystems should be developed for social entrepreneurs to provide ongoing training opportunities that defy space and

time. Such communities are important because there are few non-academic training programs for aspiring and early social entrepreneurs to obtain training that aligns with both the social and economic goals of their businesses. While there is a growing number of academic programs that focus on social enterprise education (Murdock, Tekula, & Parra, (2014), many small business social entrepreneurs do not have the financial resources or time to attend them.

In summary, the previous paragraphs outline a number of ways that online social enterprise directories may benefit social enterprise stakeholders. They also outline some challenges related to developing and managing online directories. However, given the newness of using online social enterprise directories, there are opportunities for understanding the various opportunities and challenges that they present for the field. In an effort to advance such knowledge, the next section of this article provides insights on the experience of developing a social enterprise directory in the United States. These insights derive from my field notes related to the experience of creating a directory.

### **Insights About Developing an Online Directory**

#### **Online Directory: Weaver's Social Enterprise Directory**

In April 2018, **Weaver's Social Enterprise Directory** (shown in Figure 1) was created with the goal of resolving the issue of identifying and tracking social enterprises in the United States. It was inspired, in part, by research that suggests that the United States has the highest rate of social enterprises in the world (Lepoutre, Justo, Terjesen, & Bosma, 2013). However, despite having a large social enterprise sector, no one knows the exact count of social enterprises in the nation (Abramson & Billings, 2019). Another inspiration for developing the directory derived from my own journey into the field. Years ago, as a student seeking to understand and possibly to develop a social enterprise, I felt there was a lack of guidance regarding "how" to develop an organization that both addresses social problems and is economically self-sufficient. Thus, my dissertation examines the social, economic, and legal activities of social enterprises in the United States with the goal of advancing knowledge about their business models. The directory is one outcome of my dissertation research. Creating it is a way to celebrate self-identifying social enterprises, while also educating aspiring social entrepreneurs on the various entrepreneurial models that they may utilize or adopt in order to address social problems.

Figure I. Directory homepage



My dissertation research aimed to define social enterprises based on their social, economic, and legal characteristics, as there is a lack of consensus about the definition of social enterprise in academic literature (Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009; Hoogendoorn, Pennings, Thuriik, 2010). As mentioned earlier in this article, some research refers to social enterprises as nonprofit organizations engaging in commercial activities (Litrico & Besharov, 2019). Other research suggests social enterprises are for-profit businesses engaging in socially conscious activities (Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014). Another stream of literature defines social enterprises as truly hybrid organizations that cut across the boundaries of legal structure and instead pursue both social and economic goals (Shepard, Williams, & Zhao, 2019). Findings from my dissertation reflect the latter definition. They reveal that self-identifying social enterprises in the United States all aim to combat a social problem and use commercial activities in order to do so (Weaver, 2017). However, they operate under a variety of legal structures. Thus, the definition and criteria for the types of social enterprises that are included in the directory are a reflection of the research findings. Specifically, a social enterprise in the directory is defined as “an organization that operates under any legal form and that uses commercial business activities to combat one or more social



problems (Weaver, 2017). Social enterprises are social interventions in that they aim to create positive social changes in society (Weaver, 2017).” The directory features social enterprises that have the following characteristics:

- Having a dual bottom-line that consists of creating social value and economic value.
- Being locally embedded organizations or large-renown companies (because they grow over time).
- Being an organization that seeks to address a diversity of social problems. There is no one social issue that social enterprises combat. Social enterprises are often “locally grown” organizations that seek to address issues the social entrepreneurs have faced themselves or have witnessed.
- Having a flexible organizational structure in that they can be for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, or a combination of both. Social enterprises may also be established under “hybrid laws” such as the Benefit Corporation or the Low-Profit Limited Liability Company (L3C).”

This definition and the characteristics of social enterprises listed above are used to determine what social enterprises are featured in the online social enterprise directory. Today, the directory shares information about the location and activities of self-identifying social enterprises in the United States with scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and the general public.

It currently features approximately 1,200 social enterprises. While there is no way to completely assess the reasons users utilize the directory, some users report using it for: 1) Identification and tracking of social enterprises, 2) teaching/ education, 3) academic research on social enterprises, 4) networking, and 5) socially conscious shopping. These users consist of social entrepreneurs, researchers, educators, students, consultants, and socially conscious consumers. However, it should be noted that the novelty of the directory presents many undiscovered uses and users. The following subsections highlight opportunities that have resulted from the creation and utilization of the directory, as well as challenges related to creating and managing it.

## **Opportunities**

**Identification of Social Enterprises at the National Level.** The directory geographically maps self-identifying social enterprises, therefore creating opportunities for a variety of uses by different stakeholders. Users utilize the directory for networking with social enterprise employees, finding socially conscious shopping opportunities, finding social enterprises to recruit for fellowships, training programs, as well as social procurement and grant opportunities. Surprisingly, many students also use the directory to find internships and employment in the social enterprise sector. These purposes for using the directory show that such directories may help address challenges social enterprises face such as marketing their products and services (Hynes, 2009). In addition, directories present opportunities for social enterprise support organizations seeking to promote task-based training programs among social enterprises (Weaver, 2016) or to connect social enterprises to social procurement opportunities.

**Opportunities for Large-Scale Empirical Research.** Bloom & Clark (2011) argue that the problem that many social enterprise databases are specifically designed to serve specific data needs of particular organizations. They are not designed for empirical, scholarly research. However, the primary purpose for creating this online social enterprise directory is to facilitate empirical, academic research related to social enterprise. A number of academic researchers have either utilized the database or have inquired about how they may use it for research. The directory database may

be downloaded for a fee in order to cover expenses related to webhosting, the directory email address, and other maintenance costs. These fees anchor the directory in a sustainable business model that supports costs associated with maintaining and growing it over time (Bloom & Clark, 2011). There are currently two databases with information in the directory - one that has all of the information and one that only provides contact information for social enterprises. However, in the future, additional directories will be created to meet the requests of researchers looking to study social enterprise or organizations looking to do market research.

Figure II. Social Enterprise Database

Timestamp	#	SE Name	Parent Company Name	Website	Main Street Address	City	State	Zip Code	Main Phone Number	Director
Apr-18	43	Chinook Enterprises		<a href="https://chinookenterprises.org/">https://chinookenterprises.org/</a>	2026 N Laventure Rd	Mount Vernon	WA	98273	(360) 428-0140	Rob M
Apr-18	44	Chrysalis Enterprises	Chrysalis	<a href="http://www.changelives.org/">http://www.changelives.org/</a>	13545 Van Nuys Blvd. #1	Pacoima	CA	91331	(818)794-4200	Mark L
Apr-18	45	Chrysalis Enterprises	Chrysalis	<a href="http://www.changelives.org/">http://www.changelives.org/</a>	1853 Lincoln Blvd.	Santa Monica	CA	90404	(310) 401-9400	Mark L
Apr-18	46	Chrysalis Enterprises	Chrysalis	<a href="http://www.changelives.org/">http://www.changelives.org/</a>	522 S. Main St.	Los Angeles	CA	90013	(213) 806-6300	Mark L
Apr-18	47	Cincinatti Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired		<a href="http://www.cincyblind.org/">http://www.cincyblind.org/</a>	2045 Gilbert Avenue	Cincinnati	OH	45202	(513) 221-8558	John M
Apr-18	48	Civicorps Recycling	Civicorps	<a href="http://www.cvicorps.org/">http://www.cvicorps.org/</a>	101 Myrtle St.	Oakland	CA	94607	(510) 992-7800	Alan U
Apr-18	49	Cincinnati Union Co-op Initiative		<a href="https://www.cincinnatiunioncoop.org/">https://www.cincinnatiunioncoop.org/</a>	215 E 14th Street, Rm 232	Cincinnati	OH	45202	(513) 549-3381	Kristen
Apr-18	50	Event Centre	CLIMB CDC	<a href="http://www.climbcdc.org/">http://www.climbcdc.org/</a>	1316 30th Avenue	Gulfport	MI	39501	(228) 864-6677	Lori V
Apr-18	51	Clovernook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired		<a href="https://www.clovernook.org/">https://www.clovernook.org/</a>	2693 Union Avenue, Suite 101	Memphis	TN	38112	(901) 523-9590	Christophe
Apr-18	52	Clovernook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired		<a href="https://www.clovernook.org/">https://www.clovernook.org/</a>	7000 Hamilton Avenue	Cincinnati	OH	45231	(513) 522-3860	Christophe
Apr-18	53	CoBiz Cares Foundation	CoBiz Financial	<a href="http://www.cobizfinancial.com/Pages/default.aspx">http://www.cobizfinancial.com/Pages/default.aspx</a>	1401 Lawrence St., Ste. 1200	Denver	CO	80202	(303) 312-3412	Steve B
Apr-18	54	Solutions SE	Community Housing Partnership	<a href="https://www.chp-sf.org/">https://www.chp-sf.org/</a>	20 Jones Street, Suite 200	San Francisco	CA	94102	(415) 852-5300	Gail G

**Teaching Tool.** Given the increasing number of social enterprise educational programs around the world (Murdock, Tekula, & Parra, 2014), it is important to show students examples of their work. The directory has been a useful teaching tool in academic courses and for training research assistants. Given the lack of a concrete, universal definition for social enterprise, the directory has been used to show students and research assistants what social enterprises are by example. It is also used to find local social enterprises for site visits and to recruit social entrepreneurs for guest speaking opportunities (Weaver, Mbacke, & Gallagher, 2021).

## Challenges

**Data Management.** As Bloom & Clark (2011) suggest, the main challenge faced when developing this social enterprise directory relates to its design, development, and maintenance. This directory contains information for over 1,200 social enterprises across the United States. Information on twenty variables for each social enterprise is identified, entered, and checked over time. Finding a web designer and developer that could take on this project and do a great design was expensive and time-consuming, but it worked. The main challenge after developing the directory, however, related to updating and managing the directory. Because of the platform where the directory was built and the type of package that the web designer chose, certain features such as (e.g. tracking visits to the site or managing the number of profile views users can have) would come at an additional cost. To conserve financial resources, the research team learned how to design websites on the particular website platform it was built on. Thankfully, the team had professional experience managing websites in the past, facilitating the already intense process.

In addition, maintaining the directory requires a constant and systematic pulling of information, preferably from diverse sources. Originally, information was acquired from various social enterprise membership sites, along with contacting government offices for social enterprises incorporated under social enterprise laws. Once the directory was launched, media outlets started writing articles on it that led to social enterprises taking the initiative to add themselves. Lastly, public presentations (e.g. conference presentations, campus talks) on the directory usually inspire a drove of social enterprises to reach out. While increased visitors to the directory site is wonderful, it takes time to manually enter and meticulously track social enterprises in the directory itself, as well as in the database.

**Definitional Issues.** The second most common challenge faced when founding, curating, and promoting this directory relates to the definition of social enterprise. An important theme in feedback from users is concerns about the definition used. While most users have not had an issue, there have been sharp criticisms about what constitutes a social enterprise. These concerns have deepened the research team's understanding of the practical implications of definition-related challenges that social enterprises face. For instance, social enterprises face concerns related to their legitimacy and credibility as hybrid organizations (Battilana, Lee, Walker, & Dorsey, 2012).

Some people are strongly against calling an organization a social enterprise if it does not donate more than 50% of its profits back into the organization. While this definition has been adopted by organizations such as the Social Enterprise World Forum (Social Enterprise World Forum, 2020), new research contends that social enterprises operate on a spectrum where social goals are at one end and economic goals are at another (Battilana, Besharov, & Mitzinneck, 2017; Battilana, 2018; Doherty, Haugh & Lyon, 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014). This spectrum is reflected in the rise and prominence of benefit corporations like Greyston Bakery in Yonkers, New York (that has an open hiring policy). Thus, such criticism may not be fair. On the other hand, the people concerned about profit distribution are often fearful of greenwashing and the consequences it may have on legitimacy perceptions of genuine social enterprises.

**Size of the Nation.** Factors such as population size, land area, and political support of social enterprises may influence the funding, time, and support that someone may have for developing a social enterprise directory. For instance, the United States has over 327 million people (United States Census, 2019). It is a very large country in comparison to Scotland, which has a population size of 5.4 million (National Records of Scotland, 2018). While both

nations have social enterprise directories, the number of channels to go through to acquire information about social enterprises is vastly different. As aforementioned, one source of information for this directory is government offices for different states. This takes a great deal of time in a country that has 50 states, and that is only one source of information for the directory. Other sources could potentially include accelerators, incubators, universities and more.

As the directory approaches two years old, we are working to make it a more collaborative community development tool for the social enterprise sector. Dow, Comber, & Vines (2018) argue that online directories should not be static pages on the internet. Instead, they should be collaborative environments that enable users to exchange information. As such, the research team is exploring opportunities to build both digital and in-person spaces for community building in the sector.

## **Discussion**

This article outlines various benefits and challenges associated with the development of online directories, particularly in the social enterprise sector. It also offers insights about the experience of creating an online social enterprise directory that visually maps social enterprises at the national level. In doing so, this research contributes to literature on using technology to advance social enterprise as a field. While there are studies on the role of crowdfunding platforms and social media in the social enterprise sector, there is little research on the benefits and challenges on the use of online directories in the sector. Given the increasing need to have alternative options for connectivity (e.g. COVID-19 social distancing), it is important for future research to advance knowledge about such tools.

Future research on online directories, particularly in the social enterprise sector, should explore ways to make data management more efficient for online social enterprise directories, as information reliability is important to their value proposition (Legner, 2009). Future research should also explore the role that location plays in online social enterprise directories, as some businesses have a location dependence that may be helped or hindered by the accuracy of information provided in online directories (Wyse, 2004). Lastly, more studies on e-commerce in the social enterprise sector should explore whether and under what circumstances online social enterprise directories facilitate searches for business information, opportunities for business partnerships, and increase ability for service and product purchasing. Given the growth of online business, this area of work may be influential to entrepreneurship as a field in general.

Furthermore, another stream of literature that this article speaks to is research on mapping the social enterprise sector. For instance, Defourny & Nyssens (2017)'s ICSEM study that maps social enterprises around the world could have an online social enterprise directory component. Given that directories are particularly effective when they allow for participant engagement (Ariza- Montes & Muniz, 2013), projects like the ICSEM project could create an online community that engages stakeholders throughout the global social enterprise ecosystem.

Similar to the work of Lyon & Sepulveda (2007) and Dart et al. (2010), mapping the social enterprise sector has proven difficult. While their mapping techniques differ, issues related to defining social enterprises and mining the data are similar. Future research should explore ways to overcome such challenges by asking questions such as: 1) Are social enterprises defined by their social mission or by the redistribution of profits that they generate?, 2) What socioeconomic

and historical factors have led to the emergence and/or propensity of social enterprises in a particular region? And 3) What types of sources may be used for collecting data on social enterprises for social enterprise directories?

While this article explores the utilization, benefits, and challenges of using online social enterprise directories it has limitations. The directory case featured in this article was developed by the author and thus is subjective to the author's experiences. In addition, it is only one directory case, limiting the generalizability of the insights. Nevertheless, this creates opportunities for more research on the use of online social enterprise directories in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Interest in the social enterprise sector is growing throughout the world. However, contemporary social enterprises, like all organizations, are operating in a context that is increasingly digital. As such, a number of online directories have been developed to facilitate searches for businesses online, among the other reasons outlined in this article. These directories act as intermediaries between consumers seeking information on products, services, and the location of businesses and businesses that possess an online presence (and increasingly e-commerce capabilities). In a world where online business capabilities are more important than they have ever been throughout history (e.g. COVID-19 lockdown), knowledge about the value that online directories may bring their consumers is incredibly valuable.

This paper explores the characteristics, purposes, and benefits that online social enterprise directories may have on social enterprise as a field. They may serve as a launch point for social enterprise support organizations like the SE Finder in Australia. They help legitimize social enterprises for socially conscious consumerism like the Social Enterprise Alliance's website Toasting Good in the United States. Online directories, like the case discussed in this article, may also serve as a tool that researchers use to recruit social enterprises for studies. Lastly, some students may use online social enterprise directories to search for employment and internship opportunities. While these are some ways that online social enterprise directories may contribute to the social enterprise ecosystem, their potential creates many, undiscovered opportunities for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. In an effort to encourage more work on this topic, some strategic considerations for research, practice, and policy are outlined below.

## **Strategic Considerations Related to Managing an Online Social Enterprise Directory**

***Creating State or Regional Teams for Social Enterprise Recruitment.*** One data collection strategy for building an online social enterprise directory is to organize state or regional research teams. For instance, the ICSEM research team connected with over 200 researchers throughout the world. This strategy may also be employed on a smaller scale. For instance, this article discusses the challenge of mapping social enterprises in the United States, which has over 327 million people. This challenge may be best dealt with by creating state or regional social enterprise networks that work to recruit social enterprises for the directory. However, this effort is not easy or inexpensive so resources should be allocating to plan and implementing such teams.

***Definitional Issues.*** Defining the concept of social enterprise and subsequently identifying social enterprises are both difficult. As such, any online social enterprise directory will face criticism about the kinds of social enterprises they accept into the directory. To address this issue, online social enterprise directories may use an evidence-based spectrum of social enterprise organizations to outline the diversity of social enterprises featured. This strategy would reflect the

growing number of studies emphasizing that social enterprises operate on a spectrum where social goals are at one end and economic goals are on the other (Battilana, Besharov, & Mitzinneck, 2017; Battilana, 2018; Doherty, Haugh & Lyon, 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014). The key here is transparency of information for your users, however intellectual property concerns (e.g. trade secrets) related to how information for the directory is sourced should also be considered.

***Workload Management.*** Building an online social enterprise directory is a heavy lift. Acquiring funding, developing a website, and taking the time needed to collect, manage, and disseminate the data is a good deal of work (Clark & Bloom, 2011). Thus, it is important to create a system for adding social enterprises from different sources and to have a clear definition or spectrum that indicates the kinds of organizations that qualify to be in the directory. Managers should make themselves familiar with *various* website hosting companies. Consider doing trial offers for a website before purchasing a domain name and a website, as you may want to change hosts. In addition, managers should take a course in directory development in order to learn the best practices for managing and curating directories.

***Directories as a Launchpad for More Opportunities in the Sector.*** The lack of social enterprise mapping allows for a variety of community and economic development opportunities such as the establishment of social procurement relationships (organizational commitments to purchase social enterprise supplies), the development of new research studies, and the creation of entrepreneurial support organizations that provide operational and leadership training opportunities for social entrepreneurs. This article outlines how online social enterprise directories may help different social enterprise stakeholders overcome challenges they face. Every challenge presents an opportunity to meet a need through (social) entrepreneurship.

### **Strategic Considerations Related to Dedicating Resources to an Online Social Enterprise Directory**

***Planning, allocating, and distributing resources.*** Social enterprises are a medium for social service delivery. While there is a great deal of unfulfilled potential in the sector, the sector needs nurturing to evolve. Muñoz (2010) asserts that mapping tools may help governments with planning, allocating, and distributing resources to the social enterprise sector. Government-based resources may include things like providing financial and non-financial resources, promoting their work, and facilitating the implementation of their programs and services (Korsec & Berman, 2006). Thus, it is not essential for government offices to create and maintain online social enterprise directories. Instead, they may choose to collaborate with researchers and practitioners that manage them in order to meet goals that involve strengthening the social enterprise sector.

***Tracking social enterprise establishment, success, and failure.*** Online social enterprise directories may facilitate tracking the establishment, success, and failure of social enterprises in a given region. Terjesen (2017) suggests that tracking social enterprises may even help assess the success or failure of social enterprise-related policies. As a result, it paves the way for the writing of white papers that may use data from the directory to highlight the importance of social enterprise in a nation. This kind of information may also aid in the planning and allocation of national-level resources for the social enterprise sector.

**Legitimacy Assessments.** Some government offices around the world and social enterprise support organizations have developed criteria or certifications for what constitutes a social enterprise. Certifications, for example, may help social enterprises qualify for social procurement contracts. Directories can serve as a strategy for targeting social enterprises for procurement contracts to subsequently test the impact that such contracts may have on community development. For example, the SE Finder in Australia served as a temporary tool that helped identify social enterprise for procurement contracts and other services. While the finder no longer exists, it helped to strengthen the foundation of Australia's social enterprise support organizations, research centers, and paved the way for policy development.

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