
Summary sheet

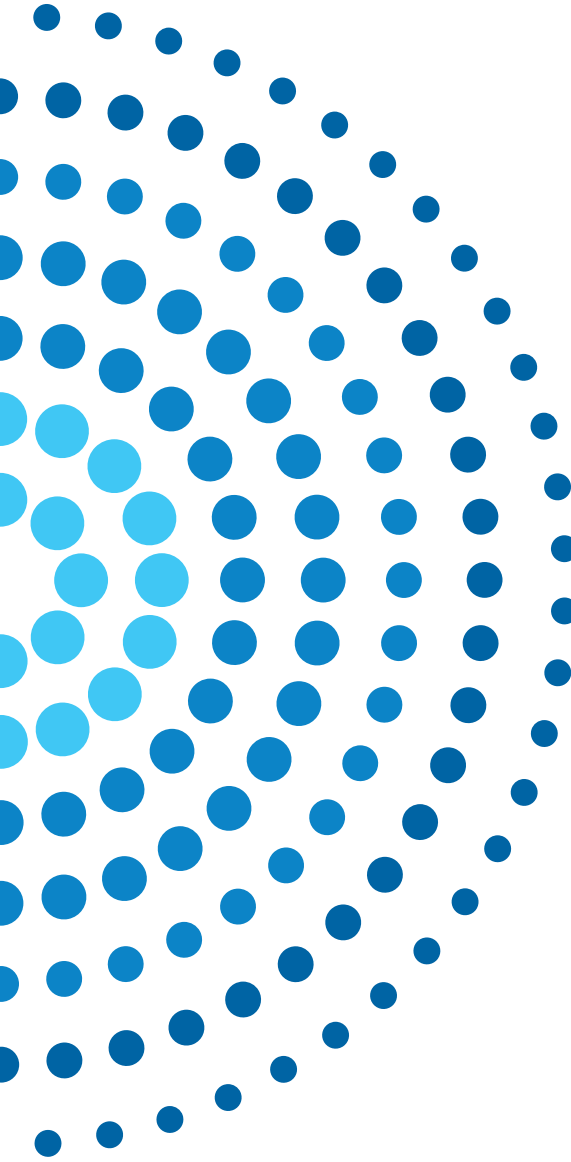
THE NOTION OF “UTILITÉ SOCIALE” (SOCIAL USEFULNESS)

Abstract

The notion of “utilité sociale,” translated in this summary sheet as “social usefulness,” and sometimes elsewhere as “social utility,” is a concept used to distinguish activities that serve the interests of society from those that serve primarily the interests of individuals (special interest) or groups of individuals (mutual interest). Social usefulness is mobilized in some countries such as France to justify special treatment (such as subsidies) (Rodet, 2008). Although it is not a method strictly speaking, social usefulness can be conceived as an approach for evaluating interventions (Cauquil et al., 2016).

THE NOTION OF “UTILITÉ SOCIALE” (SOCIAL USEFULNESS)





History

"Utilité sociale" is a concept used mainly in France as well as in other French-speaking regions such as Quebec. According to Gadrey (2005), it is a notion "that was forged to 'defend' the solidarity economy in the face of certain threats, or to promote its development on the basis of favourable rules." According to this author, the challenge "consists in drawing a boundary between the solidarity economy and the lucrative market economy. The notion of social usefulness must therefore be used to mark a territory by calling for specific, mainly legal and fiscal, regulations" (Gadrey, 2005).

"The evaluation of social usefulness consists of identifying the supplements or surpluses which the actors of this economy create for a territory, particularly compared to the capitalist economy" (Branger, Gardin, Jany-Catrice, & Pinaud., 2014, p. 4). The adoption of this concept by social economy associations and enterprises can thus be seen as a reaction to the recent emergence of a "market of evaluators (consulting firms, schools and universities) who produce arguments for selling their [supposedly] independent evaluations, and who prefer to deliver these on a turnkey basis rather than paying attention to the process and consultation" ¹ (Branger et al., 2014, p. 6).

^[1] Original quote : « Émerge un marché des évaluateurs (cabinets de conseils, écoles, segments de l'université) [qui] produisent des arguments pour être en mesure de fournir des évaluations [soi-disant] "en toute indépendance", préférant parfois fournir du "clé en main" plutôt que d'accorder un soin au processus et à la concertation » (Branger et al., 2014, p. 6).

Method

There is no agreed-upon method of evaluation or measurement of social usefulness that can be considered universally applicable. That being said, one of the most comprehensive works on the subject, *Évaluer l'utilité sociale de son activité: Conduire une démarche d'auto-évaluation* by Hélène Duclos (2007), suggests the following 8 steps:

1. Determine the objectives of the evaluation;
2. Involve stakeholders and build a collective approach;
3. Set the framework for the evaluation;
4. Build a shared vision of social usefulness;
5. Develop criteria and indicators;
6. Collect data;
7. Analyze the data;
8. Draw lessons and build a collective perspective.

(Duclos, 2007, p. 4)

Something can also be said about the main dimensions of social usefulness. Indeed, Gadrey (2004), in collaboration with several teams of researchers in France, has developed a grid consisting of five possible dimensions of social usefulness, which are briefly summarized below.

1. Social usefulness with a strong economic component:
 - the economic wealth created or saved by the social economy in terms of collective benefits;
 - the defence and promotion of a local identity, territorial dynamics and economic, social and territorial development.
2. The themes of the fight against exclusion and inequality, human development and sustainable development:
 - the development of "capabilities" and the fight against exclusion and inequality;
 - international solidarity and human development;
 - sustainable development (local, national or international).
3. Social ties of proximity and participatory democracy (especially local democracy).
4. Social and solidarity innovation.
5. Internal social usefulness, but with possible external contagion effects:
 - disinterestedness, donations, volunteering and mutualization (of resources, skills, risks);
 - alternative and more democratic governance.

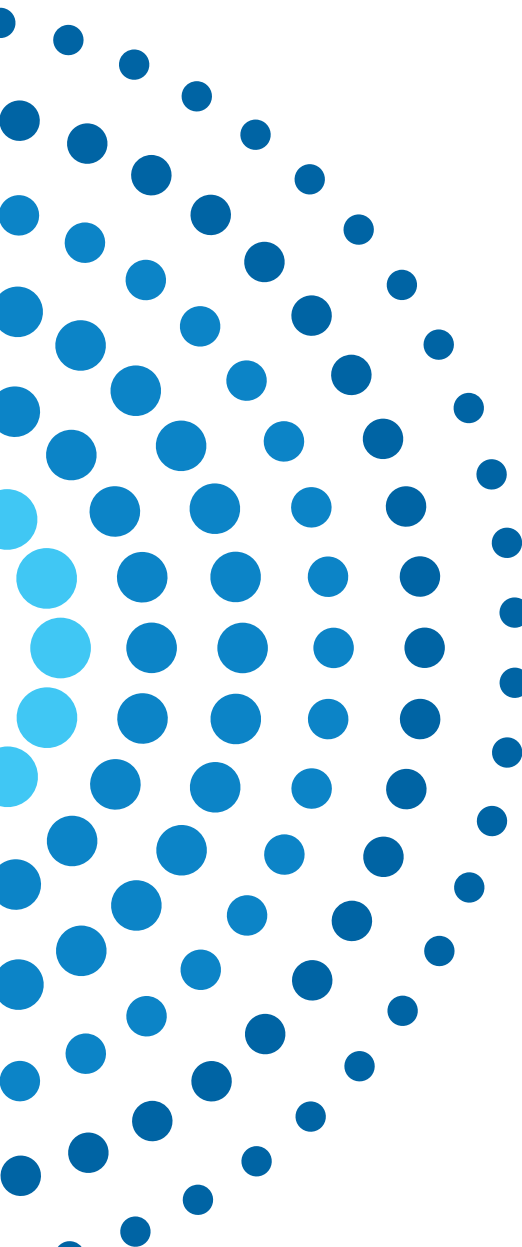
Scope and limitations

As noted earlier, there is no single method associated with social usefulness but rather a number of methods related to the theme. Branger et al. (2014) of the Corus ESS project, in their guide on social usefulness assessment, provide an overview of these methods and assess their main strengths and weaknesses in the form of a table reproduced on the next page.

Summary of the methods: Advantages and limitations

	Monetization method	Survey method	Concerted multidimensional indicators method	Valuation of existing internal practices method
Characteristics of the social usefulness:	Preferred reliance on monetary indicators	Preferred reliance on statistical indicators	Preferred reliance on multidimensional indicators	Preferred reliance on qualitative data
Characteristics of the implementation of the method				
Level of technicity of the implementation (The higher the level, the higher the likelihood that an evaluation is delegated to an external expert.)	++	+	+	-
Level of concertation required for the implementation	-	-	++	+
Consideration of stakeholders' perspectives	+	+	++	++
Allows debates on the content of social usefulness	-	--	++	++
Characteristics related to the possible uses of the results				
Ease of communicating the results	++	+	+	-
Allows comparison between organizations (fostering competition)	++	--	+	-
Allows the assessment of the organization's evolution	++	--	++	--
Allows concertation of the stakeholders and facilitates a collective process	-	-	++	+
Facilitates a multi-stakeholders collective process	-	-	++	+
Can be used to maintain relationships with external stakeholders (external regulation)	+	-	+	-
Serves as a tool to orient the project's management (internal regulation)	-	-	+	++
Type of underlying legitimacy				
Expertise-based legitimacy	++	+		
Legitimacy built on the aggregation of various subjective opinions		++		
Procedural and citizen-based legitimacy			++	
Professional legitimacy			+	++

Source: Branger et al., 2014, p. 35 (our translation).



Uses

Social usefulness is mostly assessed in France, where it has been the subject of several studies and reports (e.g., Mounier-Saintoyant, 2016). The resulting reports are generally produced in collaboration with researchers and aim to explain the approach and justify the activity of social and solidarity economy enterprises.

In Quebec, an exploratory study conducted by the Conseil québécois du loisir uses a series of interviews and the concept of social usefulness to draw a portrait of the social usefulness of the leisure sector based on case studies of six organizations. It identifies “exceptional contributions” in four dimensions essential to the sector’s social usefulness (Lessard et al., 2009, p. v). These dimensions are: 1) social development; 2) personal fulfillment and the development of collective creativity; 3) enhancement of natural and cultural heritage; and 4) economic development. Each of these dimensions is then subdivided into several indicators (pp. 19-21). Readers are invited to consult the synthesis report or the summary by TIESS for more information.

There are several useful guides in French about social usefulness assessment. In addition to those by Duclos (2007) and Branger et al. (2014), already mentioned above, we can mention the following:

- CRES Languedoc-Rousillon. (2009). *Guide d’auto-évaluation de l’utilité sociale à l’intention des acteurs de l’économie sociale et solidaire*.
- L’atelier – Centre de ressources régional de l’économie sociale et solidaire. (2013). *Utilité sociale & mesure d’impact, quelle évaluation pour l’ESS*.

References

Branger, V., Gardin, L., Jany-Catrice, F., & Pinaud, S. (2014). *Évaluer l'utilité sociale de l'économie sociale et solidaire*. Projet Corus-ESS (Connaissance et reconnaissance de l'utilité sociale en ESS).

Cauquil, G., Delalande-Dauzié, C., Guérin, M., & Ravoux, F. (2016). *L'utilité sociale, un méta critère d'évaluation dynamique* (Les Cahiers de la SFE No. 10). Paris : Société Française de l'Évaluation.

Duclos, H. (2007). *Évaluer l'utilité sociale de son activité : conduire une démarche d'auto-évaluation*. Paris: Agence de valorisation des initiatives socio-économiques (AVISE).

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Gadrey, J. (2005). Utilité sociale. In J.-L. Laville & A. David (Éd.), *Dictionnaire de l'autre économie* (p. 564). Paris : Desclées de Brouwer.

Lessard, M., Shields, G., Allard, M.-C., Lafortune, J.-M., & Vaillancourt, S. (2009). *L'utilité sociale du milieu associatif du loisir du Conseil québécois du loisir : une réalité méconnue aux incidences majeures* : Rapport de synthèse. Cahiers de l'ARUC-ÉS. Montréal.

Mounier-Saintoyant, B. (2016, September). *Évaluation de l'utilité sociale de la médiation sociale*. Avise.

Rodet, D. (2008). Les définitions de la notion d'utilité sociale. *Économie et solidarités*, 39(1), p. 164-173.

Websites and resources

Link toward a summary of Lessard et al (2009) by TIESS: https://passerelles.quebec/system/files/upload/documents/posts/tiess_resume_lessard_et_al_2009.pdf (in French).

There are many guides about *utilité sociale* (social usefulness) in French. Beyond those by Duclos (2007) and Branger et al. (2014), already cited in the summary sheet, let's mention:

CRES Languedoc-Rousillon. (2009). *Guide d'auto-évaluation de l'utilité sociale à l'intention des acteurs de l'économie sociale et solidaire*.

L'atelier – Centre de ressources régional de l'économie sociale et solidaire. (2013). *Utilité sociale & mesure d'impact, quelle évaluation pour l'ESS ?*

This series of summary sheets is produced by Territoires innovants en économie sociale et solidaire (TIESS) as part of a project on evaluation and impact measurement for social economy organizations. Each summary sheet presents a brief description of a tool or method in circulation in the field of social impact measurement in Quebec and elsewhere in the world.

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Contributions

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Find the original version at: <https://tiess.ca/methodes/>

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