

Sustainable Economies Due diLigence: good EXamples and the role of social dialogue

Project nr. 101126464

SUMMARY OF THE NATIONAL PEER LEARNING EVENT – SPAIN

16 July 2025

10.30 – 12.00

Webinar – Zoom

Participants:

- Samuel Barco Serrano, Senior Expert, RED DIESIS (Speaker)
- Aneta Quraishy, Senior Expert in social entrepreneurship, networking, green and digital transition, Associate Professor at ESSCA School of Management (Moderator)
- Two external participants

Introduction:

Samuel Barco opened the webinar by introducing the SEDLEX project, funded by the European Commission, with a specific focus on how social economy entities approach international due diligence concerning human rights, labour standards, and sustainability. The project hypothesised that organisations rooted in the social economy are naturally more prepared and effective at addressing such sustainability challenges compared to conventional corporations. The project spans five countries: Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, with Spain selected due to its robust social economy ecosystem and progressive legislative environment.

Detailed presentation of results in Spain:

1. COVAP (Agrifood Cooperative):

Samuel provided an extensive overview of COVAP, an agricultural cooperative founded in 1959 located in northern Córdoba, Andalusia. It includes around 7,000 members, predominantly small-scale agricultural producers, and employs over 1,000 people. COVAP is vertically integrated, managing activities from primary livestock production, feed production, industrial meat and dairy processing, to product commercialisation both nationally and internationally. Samuel highlighted the cooperative's impressive economic impact, representing approximately 3% of the GDP of Córdoba Province.

On governance, Samuel explained how COVAP uniquely integrates employee representation directly into its governance structures, promoting a balanced and inclusive decision-making process. Environmentally, COVAP was recognised for its proactive approaches such as biogas plants, renewable energy sources, innovative feed formulas significantly reducing livestock methane emissions, and a certified waste management system.

The notable initiative "*Juntos en el Círculo*" was emphasised, providing comprehensive training, technical assistance, and continuous evaluation support to local suppliers, enhancing their sustainability and competitiveness.

2. Grupo Cajamar (Financial Cooperative):

Grupo Cajamar, Spain's leading cooperative financial institution comprising 18 cooperative banks, was presented as a model for financial inclusion and sustainability. Cajamar's systemic relevance has placed it under direct European Central Bank supervision.

Samuel Barco outlined Cajamar's strong commitment to financial accessibility, particularly in rural regions with extensive branch presence in small towns. He detailed Cajamar's pioneering environmental initiatives, especially water conservation techniques initiated in Almería through drip irrigation systems introduced as early as the 1970s. Samuel emphasized Cajamar's significant investments in renewable energy and issuance of green bonds. Additionally, Cajamar operates dedicated experimental agricultural centres in Almería and Valencia, providing extensive, cost-free R&D support to local farmers and hosting incubators for international agri-tech startups, substantially contributing to sustainable agricultural practices and innovation.

3. Eroski (Retail Cooperative):

Samuel Barco extensively discussed Eroski, a renowned member of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation, operating in the retail sector. Eroski features a distinctive cooperative governance model, equally composed of consumer and worker members, enhancing participatory decision-making.

Challenges highlighted included thin profit margins and complexities associated with managing extensive and geographically dispersed supply chains. Samuel noted Eroski's strong commitment to local and regional sourcing and supplier support, including extensive free technical training.

Notably, Eroski was an early adopter of nutritional transparency, implementing nutritional traffic-light labelling ahead of national regulatory requirements. Samuel pointed out that Eroski's participative governance model significantly reduced labor conflicts and increased resilience in responding to sector-wide challenges.

Key conclusions:

Samuel Barco confirmed the project's hypothesis that cooperative governance significantly contributes to organisational resilience, sustainability, innovation, and effective social dialogue. He emphasised several critical points:

- Cooperative governance structures foster robust, sustainable business operations.
- Integrated social dialogue within governance structures leads to innovative solutions and conflict prevention.
- Social economy organisations proactively address sustainability challenges, setting exemplary practices that conventional entities can adopt.
- A clear and proportionate regulatory framework is crucial for maintaining fair competition, particularly for responsible businesses voluntarily exceeding baseline sustainability requirements.

Discussion highlights:

- The webinar's interactive session explored sustainability reporting challenges faced by SMEs and microenterprises. One of the participants highlighted the critical need for education and empowerment on social impact measurement, cautioning against regulatory burdens that could disadvantage smaller enterprises.
- Other participant emphasised collaborative opportunities across various European initiatives supporting SMEs in sustainability and international market access, inviting increased networking and resource sharing.

Future steps:

SEDLEX will culminate in a comprehensive report synthesising findings from all participant countries, alongside a final conference in Brussels scheduled for October 2025 to present the project's broader European insights and implications.

Follow-up:

Participants were encouraged to provide feedback via an evaluation form, ensuring continued stakeholder engagement and project refinement.