

**TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE DETERMINANTS OF A SOCIAL  
ENTREPRENEUR AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While an increased focus on social entrepreneurs, social enterprises and the wider social economy has seen a parallel increase in academic literature on the topic, as of yet, there is not a single widely accepted definition of what constitutes a social enterprise and how it relates to the concept of the social economy (Forfás, 2013; Hulgard, 2010; Communities Scotland, 2006; Communities Scotland, 2007). Existing academic literature has examined how social entrepreneurs and those working in social enterprises use shared meanings and a sense of shared identity to make sense of social enterprise and the social economy (Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, & James, 2014; Seanor & Meaton, 2007) but the literature has yet to progress to a single definition (Forfás, 2013; Borzaga & Tortia, 2007).

The research question posed is:

“What influences the respondents’ understanding of what a social entrepreneur is?”

The objective of this research is to understand how certain different but interrelated variables such as background, motivation, employment status and sector, political beliefs, social support and educational interventions can lead to an explanation of changes in respondents’ attitudes towards the potential role of social enterprises and the social economy and to an understanding of the defining characteristics of these attitudes in the university environment. This research topic is important to investigate because many social entrepreneurs fail to understand the constructs of a social enterprise at the start of their venture, resulting in a lack of strategic clarity which is especially problematic among interactions with key stakeholders (Rykaszewski, Ma, & Shen, 2014).

The research strategy being employed for this project is a multi-phased approach. The objective is to utilise a quantitative approach, with the respondent group being the participants of a level 9 Graduate Certificate in Innovation in Social Enterprise. The participants will complete a questionnaire on their understanding of social enterprise at the start of the programme (early in 2015). Further questionnaires will be completed by the respondents during the programme, which completes its main delivery in early June 2015.

In terms of findings of this research, the authors hope to gain further understanding of what helps determine the respondents’ understanding of social enterprise and social entrepreneurs.

**KEY WORDS:** Social Enterprise, Social Entrepreneurs, Social Economy Stakeholders

**DISCIPLINE:** Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management

## INTRODUCTION

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following literature review will examine the range of definitions currently used to explain the terms social enterprise and social entrepreneur. The final part of the discussion will examine the determinants that influence perceptions and understanding of what social enterprises and social entrepreneurship involve.

### **Defining a social enterprise**

While the notion of a social enterprise is not a new concept, it has only relatively recently been subject to significant academic discussion and as a result, the associated literature reveals a lack of consensus as to its definition, or as to the features which distinguish a social enterprise from a commercial one or from traditional voluntary and non-profit organisations. Not only do current definitions of social enterprise differ, but this variation in perceptions and understanding of social enterprise seem to be influenced by geographical and socio-economic factors.

The European definition of social enterprise has emerged from various regional studies. Communities Scotland (2006), for example, surveyed individuals within the public sector and voluntary groups regarding their perceptions and understandings of social enterprises and their attributes. The results of this analysis reflect “lack of clarity about terminology” (Communities Scotland, 2006:1) when referring to a definition of a social enterprise, an observation that is reiterated by Ó Broin & Hyland (2014). Agreement is found, however, when examining the ethos and service expectation of a social enterprise; that it is “community focused”, “creating employment”, “voluntary”, “local” and “customer focused” (Communities Scotland, 2006:1). The same research outlines a role for social enterprises in the development of local economies, a role that is “necessary” as social enterprises are seen as “meeting needs unmet by the public sector and private sector” (Communities Scotland, 2006: 2).

Forfás (2013:10) offer an Irish perspective on this matter, defining a social enterprise as:

- I. an enterprise that is separate from government;
- II. trades for a social/societal purpose;
- III. where at least part of its income is earned from its trading activity;
- IV. where surplus is primarily re-invested in the social objective

When defining a social enterprise from a wider European perspective, OECD (1999) places emphasis on fostering social impact over profit while seeking innovative measures within the framework of a business setup that includes stakeholders, employees and customers.

Perspectives from the United States take a broader view of social enterprise, not limiting their definitions to those attributes that focus on voluntary community initiatives and local development. Byerly (2014) suggests that social enterprises offer more than a communal mechanism for tackling societal issues, but that they operate in a commercial vein too. Byerly defines a social enterprise as “organisations seeking business solutions to societal problems (2014: 331). This definition is echoed by the Social Enterprise Alliance (2014), who consider social enterprises as “businesses” that use business methods and marketplace power to advance their social environments (Hare et al., 2014:34).

The major difference in definitions of social enterprises between the United States and Europe, therefore, is the frequent reference to commercial business constructs that appears in literature from the United States. These definitions seem to use more business-specific terminology with a particular consideration for the generation of profit (Byerly, 2014). The European perspective, while it does not eliminate the role of profit-driven business forms or associated terminology such as “risk taking” (Hare et al., 2014; Seanor & Meaton, 2007: 90), seems to place greater emphasis on terminology relating to communities and voluntary work and on the social motivation for the business initiative (Communities Scotland, 2006).

Hare et al. (2014) have compiled a useful table of definitions from the United States and across Europe. The different perspectives can be seen as follows:

Organisation	Definition
Social Enterprise Alliance (USA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- businesses whose primary purpose is the common good.</li> <li>- use methods and disciplines of business and the power of the marketplace to advance their social, environmental and human justice agendas. (Social Enterprise Alliance, 2014)</li> </ul>
Voluntary code of practice for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- primary objective to achieve social and/or</li> </ul>

social enterprise in Scotland	<p>environmental benefit.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- profits are reinvested in the business or in the beneficiary community, not distributed to owners/shareholders/investors. (Voluntary code of practice for social enterprise in Scotland, 2014)</li> </ul>
EMES (Europe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- continuous activity producing goods and/or services</li> <li>- high degree of autonomy</li> <li>- minimum amount of paid work</li> <li>- explicit aim to benefit the community</li> <li>- an initiative launched by a group of citizens</li> <li>- a decision-making power not based on capital ownership (EMES, 2014)</li> </ul>
Forfás (Ireland)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- an enterprise that is separate from Government</li> <li>- trades for social/ societal purpose,</li> <li>- where at least part of its income is earned from its trading activity,</li> <li>- where the surplus is primarily re-invested in social objective” (Forfás, 2013)</li> </ul>

Table 1: Adapted from Hare et al. (2014: 34)

### **Social Entrepreneurship**

As with current literature on social enterprise, there seems to be no universal definition for social entrepreneurship, with academic discussion on the matter still emerging. A number of recent studies have begun to address this issue, formulating a definition that emphasises the creation of social value as opposed to personal or share-holder profit (Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O' Regan & James, 2015; Hulgard, 2010). Other key attributes mentioned are the fulfilment of social objectives and activities that instigate innovation, economic activity and the creation of social wealth (Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O' Regan & James, 2015; Noya & Clarence, 2007; Hulgard, 2010).

In a similar vein to the literature on social enterprises, one will find differences in understanding of the term social entrepreneurship between the United States and Europe. Hulgard (2010) notes that in the United States the most significant social entrepreneurship partnerships are with private commercial enterprises. Mawson (2008: 8) expands on this observation stating that social entrepreneurs “like business because businesses operate in the real world”. The two schools of thought are not strictly dichotomous, however; Seanor & Meaton (2007) draw on research from an Irish perspective of social entrepreneurship that employs terms such as “heroic” and “risk taking”. From this we can see that, as was the case with social enterprise definitions, there are differences in understandings and perceptions of terms but these are not concrete and do overlap. The following table serves as a snapshot of varying outlooks on social entrepreneurship:

Researcher(s)	Understanding of the term social entrepreneurship
<b>Noya &amp; Clarence (2007)</b> OECD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship is a key component of any strategy aimed at making our societies more entrepreneurial, innovative and competitive.</li> </ul>
<b>Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, &amp; James (2015)</b> UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social enterprise and social entrepreneurship offer a different standpoint to classic notions of enterprise and entrepreneurship. The private sector is dominated by for-profit enterprises, whose key aim is to make profit and maximize owners' value.</li> <li>• The underlying drive for social entrepreneurship is the creation of social value as opposed to personal or shareholder</li> </ul>
<b>Hulgard (2010)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship can be defined as "the creation of a social value that is produced in collaboration with people and organisations from the civil society who are engaged in social innovations that usually imply an economic activity"</li> </ul>
<b>Rykaszewski, Ma, &amp; Shen (2013)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• social entrepreneur is someone who “recognizes a social problem and uses entrepreneurial principles to organize, create, and manage a venture to make social change (a social venture)”</li> </ul>



Having reviewed the literature for social enterprises and entrepreneurship, some commonality can be observed in terminology; however no universally accepted definition for either social enterprise or social entrepreneurship exists. Without standard definitions, organisations are at risk of being adversely categorised by policy makers and financiers (Phillips et al., 2015) and in doing so put their societies and environments at risk of service deprivation. Borzaga & Solaru (2001) and Defourney (2001) both agree that there is already a growing issue with identifying social enterprises which can adversely impact upon organisations and communities in the social economy.

### **Determinants of understanding and perception of the role of social entrepreneurship**

Analysis of literature reveals that a person's perception and understanding of the role of a social entrepreneur is influenced by a person's personality, socio-economic background and at times geographic location. For this reason it is important to take into account the different factors involved with the social aspect of entrepreneurship.

The work of Clifton et al. (2014) indicates that a person's socio-economic background influences their perception and expectation towards services. If one is to consider persons on the low end of a socio-economic scale or in geographic locations that suffer from social exclusion and deprivation of social services, then research tells us that persons of such context exhibit a positive understanding and perception towards all forms of social entrepreneurship (K'nlfe & Haughton, 2013). Santos et al (2015) develop this point, stating that social and economic challenges create needs that can become opportunities for entrepreneurial ventures that have at least some social goals. In this context, less influence is placed on whether the venture is a for-profit commercial business or a socially driven venture addressing acute need of the vulnerable in a community.

Wood (2012) has presented work that indicates an influential role for personality when ascertaining understanding toward social entrepreneurship. Her work states that personality influences support across different types of social entrepreneurship; key personality characteristics being empathy agreeableness and openness. In each instance a variation in these characteristics show to alter a person's perception of the role of a social entrepreneur.

Bacq & Janssen (2011) discuss the influence of geography on a person's perception of social entrepreneurship. Their work indicates there is a difference of opinion regarding the role of a social entrepreneur among those on either side of the Atlantic. The difference of opinion is based upon two different schools of capitalism. This work is developed upon that of Albert (1991) who has outlined the American school as being prioritised toward short term financial profit, whereas the European school is prioritised toward collective success, where "the poor man is a victim rather than a culprit" (Bacq & Janssen, 2011:379).

Consideration of the associated literature reveals roles for each of the following when determining factors that influence the understanding of the role of a social entrepreneur:

1. Socio-economic background
2. Personality
3. Geography

These revelations provide justifiable grounds for the approach that has been taken in the research design for this paper.

### **Research Methodology**

The objective of this paper is to examine what influences respondents' understanding as to the role of a social entrepreneur. The research involved the undertaking of primary and secondary research. The literature review provided the secondary research basis. This has influenced the research design used to obtain primary data. A quantitative approach to data collection has been adopted for this research, which will be discussed in greater detail.

#### *Questionnaire*

A structured questionnaire, advised by Seale (2004) was designed that comprised two independent, established surveys being amalgamated for the first time. The two questionnaires employed, the first, the political compass test (<https://www.politicalcompass.org/>) aims to establish a respondent's socio-economic and political tendencies, placing respondents on a quadrant consisting of an economic scale from left to right (Y axis) and a social scale from authoritarian to libertarian (X axis). The second questionnaire, a Communities Scotland (2006) survey examines respondent perception and understanding of the social economy.

The first section of the amalgamated survey refers to questions from the political compass and also to basic profiling questions such as age, gender and employment status. The political compass questions examine respondent outlook on six topic areas:

1. How one views their country and the world
2. Economic attitudes
3. Personal social values
4. Wider society
5. Religion
6. Sex

In each topic area repetition of question theme is employed, this allows accuracy of results (Bryman & Bell, 2011). An example of this, when examining economic attitudes, respondents are asked 'A genuine free market requires restrictions on the ability of predator multinationals to create monopolies'; later respondents are asked if they agree with the statement 'The freer the market, the freer the people'. In both instances insight is being sought as to a respondent's attitude toward unrestricted market place conditions.

All questions taken from the political compass questionnaire employ a Likert scale (Bryman & Bell, 2008) ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. This uniformity and familiarity facilitates consistent response and straight forward analysis.

The decision to employ use of the political compass questionnaire was justified by secondary research that reveals a person's socio-economic background to influence their perception and understanding of social entrepreneurship (Hulgard, 2010; Seanor & Meaton, 2007; K'nlfe & Haughton, 2013; Santos et al, 2015).

The second section of the amalgamated survey refers to questions from a Communities Scotland (2006) survey that examines respondent perception and understanding of the social economy. In this section respondents are asked a number tick the box questions from a list of words and phrases that assess respondent:

1. opinion towards descriptions of the social economy
2. awareness levels of organisations within the social economy
3. understanding of terminology from the social economy
4. understanding of the roles of organisations in the social economy
5. understanding of the ethos of organisations in the social economy

6. understanding of the services provided by organisations in the social economy
7. understanding of the most significant contributions of organisations in the social economy

The use of the Communities Scotland (2006) survey was justified as a result of secondary research that outlines the lack of universal definition and terminology within the research area, (Byerly, 2014; Hare, Mizzoni, O'Connor, O'Rourke, & Stack, 2014; Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, & James, 2015; Ó Broin & Hyland, 2014)

Amalgamation of these two questionnaires allows consideration for factors that were revealed to be influential during secondary research, namely; personality, socio-economic background and geography.

### **Research Question**

As outlined previously this paper aims to build on fragmented research carried out to date on the factors that influences peoples understanding as to the role of a social entrepreneur. Present literature points to a knowledge gap on this topic. There is indication of definition variation of social entrepreneurship, stemming from different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds on research data. As such the research question for this paper is, “what influences the respondents’ understanding of what a social entrepreneur is?”

### **Research Objectives:**

1. Identify the socio-economic perspective of respondents
2. Examine respondents’ awareness , understanding and perceptions of the social economy

### **Sample selection**

The sampling techniques used in this research were snowball sampling and convenience sampling. Both techniques are typically used when financial and time limitations exist. Snowball sampling which includes use of interpersonal relations and connections as a recruitment technique (Browne, 2003) was utilised due to a low population of potential participants. Convenience sampling was then utilised to build the sample, in effect MSc students of Social Enterprise were sought due to their proximity to the researchers and also their familiarity with the research question.

Distribution of the questionnaire was electronic, with 24 respondents completing it.

Advantages of the sample selection and distribution techniques used include:

- Simple and time efficient distribution of questionnaires
- Simple and time efficient collection of data
- Development of sample networks
- Straight forward analysis

### **Research Limitations**

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The survey had distinct three components:

- (a) General biographical, demographic and employment profile;
- (b) Analysis of respondents' "political personalities";
- (c) Respondents' perceptions of the social economy in Ireland.

As noted above a key objective of the research was to examine the possible influences on respondents' views about the social economy, social enterprise and social entrepreneurs.

The main findings of the first component of the research reflect a diverse age, gender, employment type and upbringing. Our analysis suggests that this diversity had little if any influence on the respondents' views about the social economy and related issues.

The second component was significantly more complex and respondents engaged with 62 separate propositions.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the results, at first glance it was clear that a majority of the respondents tended to cluster in the left libertarian quadrant (see Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> It's important to realise that the Political Compass instrument isn't a survey, and these aren't questions. They're propositions. To question the logic of individual ones that irritate the respondent is to miss the point. Some propositions are extreme, and some are more moderate. That's how the instrument can show respondents whether they lean towards extremism or moderation on the Compass. "The propositions should not be overthought. Some of them are intentionally vague. Their

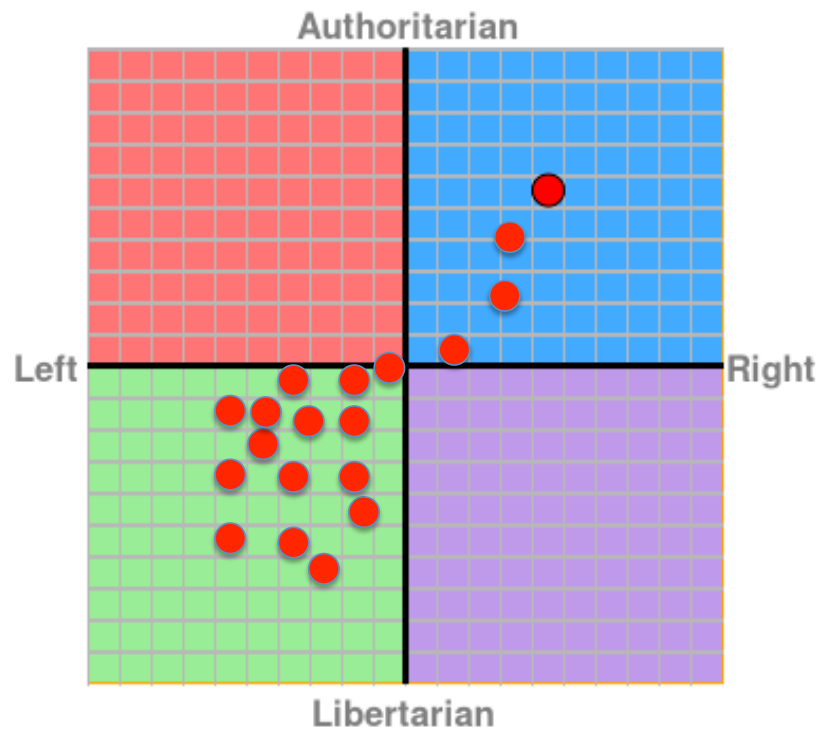
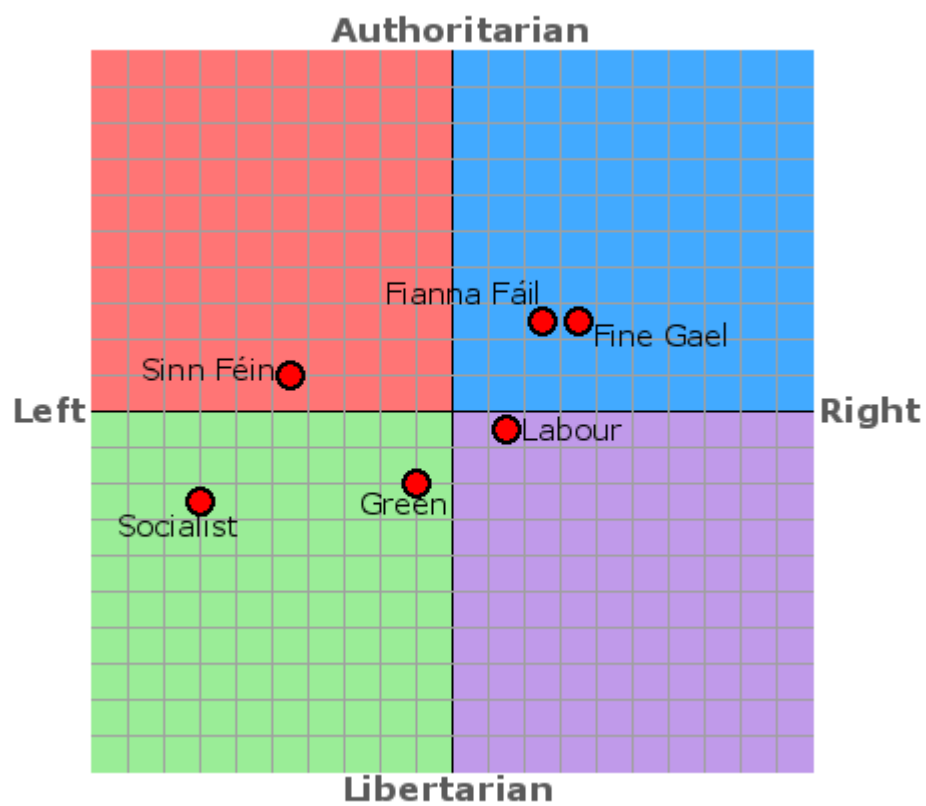


Figure 1



purpose is to trigger buzzwords in the mind of the user, measuring feelings and prejudices rather than detailed opinions on policy” (Political Compass 2015).

Figure 2: Political positions of Irish Political Parties 2011.

This suggests that the respondents are largely unrepresentative of Irish voters. This preliminary finding is based on a Political Compass analysis of Irish political party members carried out in 2011. However the tentative finding raises some very interesting issues when analysed in conjunction with the findings of the third component of the research.

This component was based on research commissioned by the Scottish Government's *Communities Scotland* agency in 2006. The research was commissioned to provide a baseline of people's perceptions of the social economy sector in Scotland and a number of widely accepted definitions were employed. For example, social economy organisations are “voluntary and community organisations that use a business like approach to delivering goods or services” (2006, 1). Such organisations were acknowledged to be diverse, from community initiatives in rural areas to those that provide employment opportunities for disabled people. This research adopted a similar approach.

There is a lack of clarity about terminology. There is no single definition of the social economy clearly favoured by the respondents. There was general (but not universal) agreement that the social economy is a 'spectrum' of organisations with social objectives. Respondents were asked to consider a list of organisations and indicate which were part of the social economy sector. 100 per cent of respondents included social enterprises, voluntary organisations, community businesses, housing associations, credit unions, co-operatives, charities and social firms in the social economy sector. 72 per cent of respondents included local development companies, i.e. LEADER and/or SICAP programme deliverers, in the social economy sector. A linked question asked respondents “How many people do you think are in paid employment in the social economy in Ireland?” Interestingly responses tended to correlate to the respondents' perception of the type of organisation in the sector, the more expansive the view the larger the number of employees. In addition 89% of respondents thought the sector in Ireland was underdeveloped.

The most popular phrases used to describe the ethos of social economy organisations, were found to be “community-focused” (100%); “community-based” (100%), “Solution-oriented”

(100%), “Service providers” (100%), “Schemes for the unemployed” (90%), and “creating employment” (83%).

In describing services provided by social economy organisations, respondent mostly selected “local” (100%), “good value” (100%), “flexible” (100%), “necessary” (92%), and “innovative” (75%). The least accurate phrases were “inefficient” (91%) and “loss making” (83%).

There was some agreement that there is a lack of clarity about terminology and that this was hampering progress. It was suggested that there was a need to specify more clearly the component parts of the social economy; to avoid jargon and to give practical real life examples.

The profile of the social economy is seen to be low. 100 per cent of respondents that felt the activities of social economy organisations were not sufficiently well known. There is a wide range of activities being carried out to raise the profile at a national, regional and local level but there is no formal co-ordination of this activity and no monitoring or evaluation of its impact.

When asked about the most significant contributions of the social economy, most respondents chose “empowering local communities” (55%), “showing different ways for communities to develop solutions to their issues (50%), “addressing government/public service failures (50%).

There was agreement that there is a lack of clarity about terminology, that this was hampering progress, and that the component parts of the social economy, with real life examples, should be specified to avoid jargon.

Respondents were asked to consider a list of organisations and indicate which are parts of the social economy sector. More than 80 per cent of respondents included social enterprises, voluntary organisations, community businesses, housing associations, credit unions, co-operatives, charities and social firms in the social economy sector. 18 per cent of respondents included local authorities in the social economy sector.



The final question asked, “Which of the following do you think are the most important and least important issues for organisations operating in the social economy?” A very large number of respondents stated “diversifying funding base” (92.8%), “developing traded income sources” (87.5%), and “increasing the quality of service provision” (72.7%).

A number of tentative findings can be drawn from an analysis of the research and the responses suggest:

- (a) Those employed, or seeking employment, in the social economy sector in Ireland appear to reflect a not-unusual gender, age, background composition;
- (b) However their perspectives on politics are much more left-libertarian than the adult population as a whole;
- (c) Those respondents in the left-libertarian quadrant have a more “social enterprise” or community empowerment perspective on the sector than those on the right-authoritarian quadrant, who tended towards a “social entrepreneur” or socially conscious individual entrepreneur perspective;
- (d) On balance the respondents had a very healthy regard for the work of the organisations in the sector and generally felt it could deliver more than it was presently doing.

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