



Multi-stakeholder co-operative with participative governance



BELGIUM
BRUSSELLES



BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Smart is a co-operative for freelancers of all sorts, whom it supports by providing a secure framework which simplifies the administrative and legal burdens and frees them to develop their professional lives autonomously. Through its online platform, users can declare their contracts, manage their expenses and invoices, and pay their salaries.

It operates a double solidarity system. Firstly, Smart provides the members with the status of salaried workers, which entitles them to full social protection. Secondly, members mutualise means and risks. Smart offers a mutual guarantee fund that pays freelancers within 7 working days, insurance against accidents at work that is extended to private life (in order to protect freelancers even when they are not under contract), training, co-working spaces, tailor-made advice and thematic events at which they can exchange experience with their peers. Smart started life in 1998 as a non-profit association

supporting artists by managing the administrative aspects of their professional lives. Its name stands for *Société Mutuelle pour Artistes/Steungevende Maatschappij voor Artiësten*, meaning 'mutual society for artists'. It quickly opened up to the creative sector in order to support artists' multi-activity and their natural ecosystem. In 2015 it opened up further to include freelancers from all sectors of activity. Its members now include journalists, consultants, yoga teachers, coaches and caterers.

In 2017 it became a co-operative with a social purpose. Smart Belgium now has 25,000 users with short-term contracts, 30 users employed on permanent contracts, and 190 permanent employees. Annual turnover is €150 million.

Smart also exists in eight other countries: Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. It has offices in 40 cities across Europe and serves altogether over 120,000 users.





GOVERNANCE MODEL

As members of Smart, freelancers fulfil three roles: they are at the same time co-owners (they hold a share of the capital and take decisions democratically); they are entrepreneurs (they find their own clients and develop their business autonomously); and they are employees (and benefit from legal protection as such).

Smart is a multistakeholder co-operative, with two categories of members:

- freelancers, who use the co-operative's services
- others, including permanent employees, clients and partners

Smart's board of directors comprises 18 people, 12 representing users and 6 representing permanent employees and partners.

Smart in Progress¹(SIP) is a continuous process of involving stakeholders in the evolution of the co-operative. Each year three or four working groups are set up to discuss specific topics and make recommendations to the board of directors, which then validates or amends them before they are implemented.

The SIP process was launched in 2015 through blogs, a forum, questionnaires, debates in local offices ('small talks'), written documents and four thematic working groups looking at:

- Becoming a co-operative: for whom and with whom?
- Mutualist, redistributive, solidarity: a viable economic model?
- Creating and developing your business: how? With what tools?
- Is a shared and participatory enterprise realistic?

Each of these groups debated its theme under the moderation of a permanent employee, and with the presence of two board members and members

of the community (member-users, clients, partner organisations). They could access the support of specialists (experts, researchers and study visits). Their mission was to deliver recommendations that would be submitted to the board and then to a vote of the general assembly, and then translated into concrete actions. Not only did the recommendations design the legal statutes of the cooperative, but they were also used to define the 2020 strategic plan. The cooperative was officially established in January 2017 with a new governing board composed of users, employees and partners.

The level of participation is high, with 800 users taking part in a survey addressing the quality of Smart's services which was presented to the 2016 general assembly. Since the start, 11 working groups have looked at such topics as ethics, representation, economic transparency, information technology tools, ecological purchasing, social impact and creating an economic value chain.

SIP has become an integral part of Smart Belgium's governance, and in 2019 will also be implemented in Smart France. Partner organisations in other countries are looking at how to replicate the process.

Social dialogue is formalised according to Belgian law for enterprises with more than 150 employees, with employees electing representatives to the committee for prevention and protection at work as well as to the staff representatives' committee. The employee representatives are accompanied by the unions. According to the union's political sensitivity, relations can be more or less positive, as some unions struggle to understand the social purpose of the coop and do not recognise the specific features of the cooperative governance (direct participation versus indirect representation). Smart is reflecting on how freelancers can also be involved in social dialogue.

¹ <https://smartbe.be/fr/smart-progress/>



START DATE:
1998



LEGAL FORM:
Co-operative with a social purpose



N° EMPLOYEES:
190 (permanent employees)



SOCIAL IMPACT

Smart enables 120,000 freelancers in nine countries to develop their businesses as independent entrepreneurs within a secure legal and administrative environment.

It enables its users to play an active role in developing the co-operative's policies.

It facilitates social dialogue among its employees, and is investigating how to extend this to include freelancers.



STRENGTHS

- Offers a legally and administratively secure environment within which freelancers can develop their professional lives autonomously
- Has developed a structure which has been replicated in 9 countries
- The *Smart in Progress* participatory process was designed within precise parameters: groups discussed specific topics, with deadlines and moderators...
- But brought together by a supervisor with the mission to animate Smart's co-operative life

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