



Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy

AN UNRISD CONFERENCE CO-HOSTED WITH THE ILO

Multiple global crises and heightened concerns about the social and environmental consequences of market- and corporate-led development have reignited interest in “alternative” production, finance and consumption. Increasing attention is focusing on social and solidarity economy (SSE), a term that is gaining traction in many regions and forums around the world.

On 6–8 May 2013, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) convened a conference on the Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy, co-hosted with the International Labour Office (ILO). The main objectives of the conference were to:

- assess critically the role of SSE in inclusive and sustainable development;
- raise the visibility of debates about SSE within the United Nations system and beyond; and
- contribute to thinking in international policy circles about a post-2015 development agenda, by bringing key findings and recommendations on SSE from researchers around the world to the attention of policy makers.

Over 50 speakers presented papers during 11 conference sessions (see box) and side events. The speakers were identified through a Call for Papers that generated proposals from nearly 500 researchers from 70 countries. The conference drew in a large and varied audience of about 300 participants, including senior staff members from United Nations agencies such as the ILO, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Other international organizations and networks represented included the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social and Solidarity Economy (RIPESS), The Mont-Blanc Meetings, and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

SSE practitioners and PhD candidates also presented their work at two side events: the Practitioners’ Forum and the PhD Poster Session. Back to back with the conference, the United Nations Non-Governmental Liason Service (UN-NGLS) organized a special session on Alternative Finance and Complementary Currencies, while the ILO held a meeting on trade union–cooperative relations.

The 38 conference papers yielded a rich body of evidence about both the role of SSE in development processes that aim to be inclusive, sustainable and just, and what governments can do to realize

the potential of SSE. Key questions that were addressed and debated are outlined in this brief. Attributions in parentheses refer to speakers at the conference. Their papers and presentations can be found at www.unrisd.org/sse-draftpapers.

What exactly is SSE? What is its development and emancipatory potential?

During the conference it became clear that the term “social and solidarity economy” is used to refer to a broad range of forms of production and exchange. What they have in common are explicit economic and social objectives: they reconnect economic activity with ethical values and social justice, aim

Conference sessions and papers

- Opening Session
1. Conceptualizing SSE
 2. SSE, Welfare Regimes and Social Service Provisioning
 3. SSE and Local Development
 4. SSE, Public Policy and Law
 5. SSE and Gender Dynamics
 6. Political Economy of SSE and Collective Action
 7. Scaling Up SSE through the Market
 8. SSE, Resilience and Sustainability
- Closing Session: Priorities for Research, Policy and Action
Special Session: Alternative Finance and Complementary Currencies (organized by UN-NGLS)

Papers, presentations and podcasts at www.unrisd.org/sse-draftpapers



“Collective control over surplus in the solidarity economy creates a basis for reducing the sharp inequalities that characterize capitalist society.”

—Blanca Lemus and David Barkin, Universidad Autónoma, Mexico

“A strong social economy is critical to sustainable economic development and to the creation of employment opportunities, along with productive, profitable and sustainable enterprises and a viable public sector.”

—Guy Ryder, Director-General, ILO

to satisfy human needs, build resilience, expand human capabilities, empower women, foster workplace democracy, and/or promote ways of living, producing and governing that are more caring of both people and the environment. Values and relations associated with solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity and distributive justice typically characterize SSE. The theoretical attraction of SSE and its pertinence to contemporary efforts to rethink development lie precisely in the ways it lends itself to addressing multiple dimensions of development. It simultaneously fosters economic dynamism, social and environmental protection and socio-political empowerment.

As an umbrella term, it brings together different conceptualizations and strategies: debates at the conference revealed diverse, and sometimes even conflicting, opinions. Referring to Latin America, various speakers emphasized its “non-capitalist” essence, involving non-exploitative social relations, collective ownership and alternative ways of appropriating and distributing surplus (Blanca Lemus and David Barkin, Maria Victoria Deux Marzi). Such a perspective also suggests the need for an alternative epistemological framework, beyond neoclassical economics, to understand SSE (Anup Dash, Suzanne Bergeron and Stephen Healy).

Speakers from Asia and Africa, on the other hand, often focused more on the role of community organizations and NGOs engaged in social service provision, as well as the growth of social entrepreneurship and enterprise, where the profit motive remained one of several features (Benjamin Quiñones, Michael Cañares).

Why SSE?

Various economic, institutional, political and cultural shifts currently appear to be favouring the expansion of SSE and promoting changes in organizational form. These include:

- market pressures, and failures, that are prompting individual workers or producers to associate in an attempt to secure livelihoods, increase bargaining power and reduce transaction costs;
- the increasing number of governments and regional and international organizations with laws, policies and programmes supporting forms of SSE;
- movements of workers, small farmers, women, consumers, environmentalists and others, as well as NGO and academic networks, advocating and otherwise supporting SSE; and
- the diffusion of values and philosophical currents, such as those reflected in terms and concepts like food sovereignty, Buen Vivir, décroissance, business responsibility and voluntary simplicity.

Speakers also emphasized the importance of different forms of collective action where workers and producers come together to mobilize resources and exert claims—for example, women coming together in self-help groups, urban workers in “recovered factories”, national and international movements of waste pickers, and rural producers in cooperatives. Community governance of common pool resources, such as forests, is another feature of collective action (Bina Agarwal).

The scope for gender justice and improvements in labour standards within different types of SSE organizations and enterprises was also a topic of debate. While some speakers highlighted the emancipatory potential of SSE, others pointed out that, in fact, structural conditions or cultural settings—such as traditional gender relations—may inhibit the ability of women to participate in SSE organizations and enterprises. In such contexts, “second-class citizenship” may be reproduced even within SSE (Carolina Contreras Arias et al., Isabelle Hillenkamp et al.).

The debate around the character of SSE also extended to the field of alternative finance. Clear differences in approach were noted between, on the one hand, community or complementary currency schemes that have a collective and territorial focus, and, on the other hand, more conventional forms of micro-finance aimed at empowering individuals and micro-enterprises (Jean-Michel Servet, Marie Fare).

Various speakers stressed the need for a conception of SSE that takes into account multiple forms (José Luis Coraggio, Peter Utting, Jean-Louis Laville, Emily Kawano, Joana S. Marques), which could also serve as a basis for building a broad-based global movement.

How might SSE expand?

The considerable potential of SSE in terms of both sustainable development, and social and environmental justice, was the subject of much discussion at the conference.

Many speakers suggested that SSE was an approach whose time had come, given the current multiple—financial, ecological and food—crises. These circumstances present windows of opportunity for SSE to complement, or even replace, some traditional forms of business (Carina Millstone).

At the same time, the conference highlighted tensions that characterize the process of “growing” SSE. As SSE organizations and enterprises scale up, or as SSE spreads horizontally, trade-offs may have to be made among its economic, social,

environmental and emancipatory features. Market pressures and limitations, political ideologies, weak managerial capacities and lack of know-how can transform the character of organizations (Abhijit Ghosh). As cooperatives or fair trade organizations become more embedded in market relations and global value chains, cooperative values may be diluted, democratic governance may wane, and the practices of corporate social responsibility may overtake the SSE ethos of small producer empowerment (Darryl Reed).

Expansion in the field of social service provisioning has sometimes seen SSE organizations become little more than service-providers for the state, which is problematic in cases where this threatens to decrease the state's responsibility for providing for people's basic needs.

Scaling up and scaling out, therefore, involve major challenges. Speakers emphasized the following elements that are essential for SSE to expand while retaining its essential features.

- How far certain SSE initiatives can scale up will depend on the interpersonal transfer of trust, the reputation of leaders acting as a lynchpin for the system, and the ability to sustain the processes of institutional innovation (Georgina Gómez).
- SSE organizations should “brand” themselves more effectively, emphasizing the ethical value their activities add to society and how this can be measured and increased. In doing so, they can

Why at the UN?

While attention to Social and Solidarity Economy has increased significantly in civil society, academic and some governmental circles, the same cannot be said in relation to inter-governmental bodies and processes. This is surprising given the significant potential of SSE vis-à-vis the twin approaches to development championed by the United Nations, namely sustainable and rights-based development. From the perspective of key contemporary development challenges—for example, food security, rural development, gender equality, informal economy and decent work—the potential of SSE seems particularly pertinent.

But can this potential of SSE be realized in practice? The United Nations is uniquely placed to address this question. It can examine experiences from all regions of the world, and convene diverse sectors of society. While particular types of SSE organizations such as cooperatives have received significant recognition, attention to SSE more generally within the United Nations has been sparse and fragmented. A notable exception to this is the pioneering work done by the ILO's SSE Academy.

create space for themselves within economic and social policy making (John-Justin McMurtry).

- SSE organizations should strategize and identify growth opportunities within their specific sociopolitical contexts.
- SSE organizations may be able to overcome or circumvent constraints associated with conventional money and finance through social banking, complementary currencies and new partnerships with national development banks.
- SSE organizations should take measures to ensure that the voices of disadvantaged groups within SSE organizations are still heard.

How can, and should, governments promote SSE?

The appropriate roles for governments in promoting SSE were a key area of debate at the conference.

In some cases, governments and intergovernmental organizations are enabling SSE through public policy and law (Leandro Morais, Justine Nannyonjo). Presentations referring to Latin America, Europe and Quebec identified numerous instances where state support or legislation is facilitating the ability of SSE organizations to consolidate, expand and operate on a more level playing field vis-à-vis for-profit enterprise. In some instances, it may be local governments, with closer connections to civil society, which are playing a key role in enabling SSE (Milford Bateman).

However, as many speakers observed, the relationships between SSE organizations and the state are complex. Changes in cooperative law, for example, which purportedly aim to address the competitive disadvantages of cooperatives, may in fact weaken their capacity to contribute to sustainable development (Hagen Henry). Also, when states contract SSE organizations to provide services such as health care, this can arguably be a route for governments to avoid direct responsibility for providing services (Golam Sarwar). Such relations may also have implications for the autonomy of SSE organizations. While the efforts of certain governments to support SSE have been laudable, some forms of government intervention may foster dependency and threaten managerial autonomy, which is what sets SSE apart from the public sector (Bénédicte Fonteneau, Lynn Ossome, Cecilia Rossel).

In some cases, state efforts can even be detrimental to the goals of SSE, when policies demarcate a confined operational and political space within

“The solidarity and social economy has really become a worldwide movement.”

—Paul Singer, National Secretary of Solidarity Economy, Brazil

“The power of social and solidarity economy is that it pulls together these seemingly disparate and separate practices and tries to articulate... an alternative economic system.”

—Emily Kawano, Center for Popular Economics and RIPPES

which SSE organizations must operate (Marcelo Saguier and Zoe Brent). Finally, instances were also noted where government support for SSE is sorely lacking (Cristina Grasseni et al., Neetu Choudhary).

How does collective action further the goals of SSE?

Whatever the policy-making context, the capacity of SSE actors to organize collectively to influence and control resource mobilization and decision-making processes and institutions that affect their lives remains a crucial factor. The following dimensions of collective action were emphasized during the conference presentations and discussions:

- the need for effective and legitimate intermediary organizations, speaking on behalf of SSE actors, which represent and express SSE interests and participate in the co-construction of policy through consultative processes (Marguerite Mendell and Béatrice Alain);
- advocacy at multiple—local, national and international—levels (Angelique van Zeeland);
- the need for cross-sectoral alliances among different SSE actors and networks (Marlyne Sahakian and Christophe Dunand).

The internal dynamics of SSE organizations are also an important factor which can facilitate or limit the achievement of their social and economic aims. Internal dynamics are influenced by factors such as social capital and membership homogeneity (Manase Kudzai Chiweshe). As organizations accept a larger and more heterogeneous membership, increasing transaction costs (for example, coordination) represent considerable managerial challenges (Roldan Muradian). How well SSE organizations achieve the social goal of women's empowerment can depend, for example, on the proportion of women versus men in the organization, and governance structures.

Several speakers argued that collective action can aid in realizing the emancipatory potential of SSE.

For marginalized groups, such as poor women, SSE organizations can be a way to increase their voice and challenge power imbalances (Ananya Mukherjee-Reed and Darryl Reed). On a broader level, SSE movements have the potential to highlight and provide a platform for those goals, practices and values that are sidelined or misinterpreted in policy (Ana Cecilia Dinerstein).

What happens next?

The research findings that were presented at the conference are being summarized by UNRISD and will be published in a forthcoming policy brief and overview paper. Draft conference papers, powerpoint files and podcasts of each presentation can be found at www.unrisd.org/sse-draftpapers. Selected papers will be revised for publication in other formats.

Conference findings are expected to be presented at various regional and global events, including the 5th RIPESS Intercontinental Meeting of Social Solidarity Economy (Philippines, October 2013), the Convergences 2015 World Forum (France, September 2013), the Second World Forum on Local Economic Development (Brazil, October 2013) and The Mont Blanc Meetings (France, November 2013). The findings are also being used as input for United Nations processes crafting a new development agenda beyond the current Millennium Development Goals.

Support for the conference

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The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues.

Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

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