

# SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

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towards socially sustainable  
economy and development



International  
**Solidarity Work**

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## 1. Introduction

**THE NEOLIBERAL MODEL** of development has been rendered vulnerable for hard criticism due to the financial, food and climate crises. The pro-poor growth and structural adjustment programmes<sup>1</sup> have revealed their inadequacy for solving the complex challenges in the global South, as inequality is still increasing<sup>2</sup>. In recent years, countries like Greece and Spain in the global North have also sank deep into economic depression and are trying to find their ways out with neoliberal methods. The doctrine that was supposed to be the solution to the crisis is widely criticised, which has caused a backlash in the form of solidarity initiatives that are offering another type of solution.

At the same time, the international community is in the process of setting global development goals for the time after 2015. These new goals have been named the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Civil society actors have noted that the SDGs have good intentions, but they are not going to be able to achieve sustainable results if they do not at the same time address the problematic structures of world economy. Instead of merely pointing out development needs in the global South, it is obvious that the goals need to be extended also to apply to the rich countries.<sup>3</sup> Also, the efforts put

into actualising these goals should be transparent and open to public scrutiny in order to ensure accountability.

Large transnational corporations have had a big influence on the post-2015 agenda which reflects as neoliberal development ideas that rely on economic growth<sup>4</sup>. The UN Agency Sustainable Development Solutions Network also proposed indicators for the agenda that were in places conservative and included ideas like promoting consumerism<sup>5</sup>. This existence of neoliberal motives indicates that there is a clear presumption of what the correct development path should be and this path is set by the actors with the most power.

Under the current economic and power system in place the international community has been unable to solve the problems of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. This clearly shows that alternative development strategies have to be looked for and taken into consideration. In the future the important questions are: how are the development practices shaped, by whom, and what type of paths are going to be followed to achieve particular development goals.

One viable alternative is solidarity economy. It is an approach that helps to gener-

ate a real alternative to the current, neoliberal development model that has been the cause of multiple global crises<sup>6</sup>. Solidarity economy, together with social economy, has recently gained attention internationally within inter-state institutions, such as the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) as well as governments that have taken steps to acknowledge these new economies<sup>7</sup>.

This report offers viewpoints about solidarity economy and its potential for a change towards development thinking that aims at global justice in economic, environmental and social spheres. Chapter two introduces the concepts of social and solidarity economy. Chapter three describes the idea of comprehensive development of solidarity economy through themes that rise from solidarity economy practice. Chapter four briefly addresses main reactions from governments towards solidarity economy and chapter five offers an agenda for networking and advocacy for solidarity economy. In addition, this publication presents three cases of social and solidarity economy activities and their conditions in Greece, Brazil and Syrian Kurdistan that are based on interviews with solidarity economy experts from those countries.

## 2. What is solidarity economy?

**SOLIDARITY** economy is a worldwide movement promoting democratisation of economy that embraces a broader definition of economy than the classical economic theories. The narrow approach of neoclassical economics is challenged by recognising economy as a complex space of social relationships that creates livelihoods through many different ways, and with different motivations that include much more than just profit-maximisation<sup>8</sup>. Solidarity economy is commonly combined with the term social economy, and these two concepts together cover multiple, alternative practices for organising the economic and social life. As such, the practices of social and solidarity economy are not new, as they have been around for a long time as local economic practices.

The terms social and solidarity economy have gained public recognition in recent years as activists and social movements have started to look for solutions to the multiple global and local crises and growing inequality. Solidarity economy organisations

themselves have demonstrated resilience in the face of ongoing crises. Therefore it is worth to examine them when thinking about the building blocks for a socially and environmentally sustainable future.

The roots of **social economy** are in the cooperative movement and it has a history starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Currently, social economy refers to third sector activities that exist alongside the public and private sector and are driven by social aims. As a term, **solidarity economy** is more recent. It was to be commonly used in South America and France around 1984-1986.<sup>9</sup>

Solidarity economy can be seen as a more transformative view of the two. It aims at a global change that should cover all the three sectors of economy – public, private and the third sector. Solidarity economy explicitly criticises the nature of the current development discourse by questioning the orthodox definition of economy that justifies capitalism and the neoliberal idea of development. Instead, solidarity economy demands a sus-

tainable development approach that derives from democratic and participatory decision-making on both economy and politics.<sup>10</sup> The Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS) has recognised the systemic and post-capitalist agenda that is explicit within the solidarity economy movement. Social economy may be part of the change but it has to be recognised that some definitions of social economy imply the support of capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

The term **social and solidarity economy (SSE)** is often used as a synonym to solidarity economy. It is fairly impossible to separate the concepts of social and solidarity economy entirely. Much of the current discussion is embracing the hybrid of the two terms. All actors are not making the distinction between the concepts and might also use them interchangeably. Therefore, this paper includes references to both social and solidarity economy, referred to as SSE, but emphasises the more radical development view of solidarity economy.

### 2.1 The building blocks of solidarity economy

**ONE OF THE CORE** goals of solidarity economy is to build a democratised economy based on ethical values that determine the activities and decisions made. Democratisation happens through active citizenship that reaches all spheres of life. Decentralisation and local development are among the initiatives of its economic approach that combines economic, social, environmental and emancipatory goals.

Solidarity economy puts the well-being of people, communities, environment before profits and capital. It does not believe in the trickle-down effect of wealth but works to activate and redistribute assets to serve the essential needs of people. Economic relations in solidarity economy are also characterised by reinvestment and distribution of surplus for social and environmental goals instead of private capital accumulation.<sup>12</sup>

The power of solidarity economy originates from the grassroots activity that has grown into a global movement. Solidarity economy happens in practice as production of goods and services by many different types of organisations and enterprises that follow certain ethical values, such as cooperation, solidarity and democratic self-management. Solidarity economy initiatives take multiple forms as cooperatives, mutual health and insurance associations, foundations, service-delivery NGOs, alternative finance groups, self-help groups, community-based organisations and so forth. However, solidarity economy does not solely comprise of organisations and enterprises: it also includes different social movements that aim at transforming the economy.<sup>13</sup> The activities have faced an expansion in the 2000s in the form of revival of coopera-

tives, growth of alternative financial services and fair trade and food networks as well as the collective organisation of informal workers.<sup>14</sup>

The variety of actors in solidarity economy reflects another core principle of solidarity economy. The approach values diversity as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to economic, environmental and social

problems. In practice, solidarity economy reflects the local conditions. The practical activities and decision-making are affected by variations in material and political contexts but also the different types of institutional settings depending on the country context.<sup>15</sup> Solidarity economy is also inspired by traditional practices and indigenous knowledge of local areas.

### Solidarity economy: Commonly shared values

- ✗ **solidarity and cooperation**
- ✗ **equity and social and environmental justice**
- ✗ **sustainability**
- ✗ **democracy**
- ✗ **pluralism and diversity**
- ✗ **autonomy and self-management**
- ✗ **emancipation**
- ✗ **gender equality**

**Source: Kawano 2010; Utting et al. 2014; TFSSE 2014.**



António Cruz from Brazil (left), interpreter Aino Tuomi-Nikula, Ahmad Yousef from Rojava and Georgia Bekridaki from Greece in the final panel in an international seminar about solidarity economy that was organised by International Solidarity Work in November 2014.

## Country case 1. Solidarity economy in Brazil

**IN BRAZIL**, there are around 19 500 solidarity economy enterprises that have 1,7 million members who make up less than 1,5 per cent of the economically active population. Solidarity economy initiatives can be found in all possible sectors of the economy. There are 7500 cooperatives in the country of which 1800 are considered to be part of solidarity economy. In Brazil, cooperatives were initially promoted by the military dictatorship that supported the accumulation of land to the big landowners. Therefore, solidarity economy rose after the military regime in the second half of 1980s<sup>16</sup> as an alternative to bring about ideas of self-management, horizontal decision-making and sharing work, ownership and the economic result.

Nowadays, solidarity economy activities in Brazil are diverse and comprise of production, consumer organisations, distribution activities and financing initiatives in both urban and rural areas. One of the big solidarity economy actors is the Landless movement. In agriculture, solidarity economy offers an alternative to the agribusiness model that directs the production to the international market, uses a lot of machinery, genetically modified seeds, synthetic pesticides and fertilisers. The agribusiness model also requires very little manpower. The alternative, solidary farming is usually ecological as the farmers do not have access to expensive machines and pesticides.

The solidarity economy movement in Brazil has had an impact on government's activities on solidarity economy. In 2003, the government confirmed the establishment a Solidarity Economy Secretariat that was then founded under the Labour and Employment Ministry<sup>17</sup>. According to researcher Antônio Cruz, who has worked with solidarity economy for 15 years, the movement and the secretariat have similar views and goals and they see solidarity economy as an alternative to the current social and economic development. However, the Brazilian government is ignorant towards its more comprehensive transition potential and regards solidarity economy solely as a public and social policy for diminishing poverty.

Solidarity economy is alleviating unemployment in a collective manner. People can improve their quality of life and increase the sustainability of their actions by coming together to start a collective enterprise. In practice, these processes are aided through university-based solidarity economy incubators that support founding and developing enterprises through social technologies. The incubators help enterprises to find social technologies that facilitate, for example, the commercialisation of their products and therefore make it easier for the enterprise to succeed. The social technologies have an important role in the process of making labour force more significant than the capital. Cruz points out that the government should promote more of this type of supportive programmes that help the existing solidarity economy actors. The resources are of better use in support programmes than in the promotion of new solidarity economy groups as it is the best for the initiative to come from the people themselves to make it successful.

According to Cruz, globalisation does not need to be regarded as a negative phenomenon. Rather, he sees internationalisation as a potential, collective effort to find the best ways we can live better on our common planet. Cruz mentions Fair trade as an interesting and important movement in this sense but points out it needs to change its functioning logic. The expansion of solidarity economy relies much on the production for the conscious consumer in the niches of the market. However, the global transportation of goods is not efficient energy-wise. This would require a change in the mentality in the Global North, as the more sustainable way is to direct resources to local production and transport technologies instead of products. Many useful technologies are secret because they are owned by private companies which makes it problematic for the poor and marginalised who lack resources.

*Source: Cruz 2014b & 2014c.*

## Country case 2. Social economy in Rojava

**SOCIAL ECONOMY** in Rojava is an interesting example and is worthy of the attention when talking about the possibility of social and solidarity economy bringing about change. Rojava is the self-administration area of Kurdistan in Syria. The administration was announced amidst the Syrian civil war in the end of 2013<sup>18</sup> and after that there has been an effort to build a new economic system in an area that has been long ignored in Bashar al-Assad's regime. According to Ahmad Yousef who acts as the Minister of Finance in the Afrin canton in Rojava, the basic value determining economy is that it needs to be addressing people's needs. Rojava's local self-administration is being formed with the purpose of filling the void of governance and security that al-Assad's regime left behind. Yousef points out that the possibility of starting out with a clean slate is one of their greatest strengths for the social economy in Rojava.

The target of the self-administration is to establish a popular economy that is based on social and civil organisations. The system is built around communes that are local solidarity and decision-making organs of 25–35 people. Communes set targets for education, health services and elect a leader for themselves. The main way of organising in Rojava's social economy are going to be cooperatives that are now used to boost production. Cooperative values are considered important and the intention is that all the production should be owned,

run and developed by the workers themselves. Self-reliance on production is held in high regard, so that local needs can be best served.

Rojava's social economy is also focusing on aspects of environmental sustainability and equality. In Afrin canton, the Center for Economic Development is evaluating the environmental impact of economic activities and has prevented the expansion of some environmentally harmful projects. The self-administration has also gained publicity because of their gender equality efforts. In the administration both males and females have to be represented in institutions at all levels. Yousef states that 40-60 percent of the representatives are assigned to each gender because it reflects the way the society is as well. Attention is also paid to the representation of different ethnicities in the representative bodies which is important considering the multi-ethnic character of the area.

According to Yousef, one of the main challenges of the area is the emigration of the educated youth. There is a lack of especially engineers and social scientists. This reflects the situation of lack of opportunity that has been created under the dictatorship. Nevertheless, Yousef also sees big driving force in the people as they do not want to see another war and repeat the mistakes of the previous regime.

*Source: Yousef 2014.*

## Country case 3. Social solidarity economy in Greece

**THE FINANCIAL CRISIS** hit Greece in 2009 and the country was predisposed to the austerity measures promoted by the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and the European Union<sup>19</sup>. As a consequence all the workers lost many rights and cuts to the minimum wage have been imposed. Youth unemployment has been as high as 64,9 percent and the general unemployment rate 27,7 percent<sup>20</sup>. The austerity policy has not treated all different actors equally as big companies, industries and ship owners still remain tax free. Georgia Bekridaki from social solidarity economy network Solidarity 4 All<sup>21</sup> notes that after the austerity measures, workers have had to be even more flexible than before and many public services, for example healthcare, have collapsed. The many unemployed people of Greece have also lost their health insurances after losing their jobs meaning even less people have access to healthcare.

The crisis made the search for alternative income generation popular in Greece. SSE initiatives and cooperatives existed in Greece also before the crisis but they were uncommon and mainly involved people who were politically active. Cooperatives were promoted in agriculture in the 1980s by the socialist party PASOK, but they were merely used as tools to access agricultural loans that were only given to cooperatives. The cooperative model remained unclear for people, and they did not embrace the socio-political values of the concept.

Thus, in Greece, social solidarity economy as such is a relatively new phenomenon that rose with the crisis. The movement is using the concept social solidarity economy as they want to build a large community around both concepts. There are now 700 social cooperatives but no research exists about the nature of their activities and working logic in order to determine if they can be characterised as social solidarity economy. The history of cooperatives in Greece has also caused some difficulties, as cooperatives were not regarded as a progressive idea. However, states Bekridaki, the crisis created a need for people to urgently find alternative ways to organise their lives, and the cooperative ideas started to be appealing again.

The SSE activities have been created locally in every neighbourhood by forming self-organised groups to cover basic needs that are

not being met anymore because of the austerity policies. Food distribution collectives, time banks, social pharmacies, cultural clubs, free evening classes, and other education initiatives are among some of the activities. Many people have wanted to start cooperatives to create an income. Many people have started cafés, restaurants and bars that are sourcing their materials directly from the producers, as there were already good service cooperatives to take cue from. The fast process of forming new initiatives has now created new necessities, for example, for commercialisation.

Bekridaki regards solidarity economy as a transformative way to organise economy which is not created only for coexisting with the current system. It is bringing a change that puts the values of cooperativism, equality and social justice in the centre instead of profit and educates people on new topics and viewpoints. However, similarly to the situation in Brazil, the Greek governments during the crisis up to this date have seen solidarity economy merely as a tool for combating unemployment. The government has created a legislative framework for social economy enterprise in 2011<sup>22</sup> but Bekridaki states their goal has seemed to be to merely outsource public tasks to the social cooperatives.

The state is also leading much of the public discourse on social and solidarity economy. Bekridaki sees that the movement needs to take back some of the leadership in the discussion, so that the new ideas are not mainstreamed and adapted to the current unsustainable system. Therefore, she points out that ethical economic activities have to be strengthened through political change and active citizenship. More resources are needed for networking and starting incubators to promote social and solidarity economy. Some of this work is done by networks like Solidarity 4 All. Bekridaki describes the role of Solidarity 4 All as an actor that creates spaces for all the structures to exchanging best practices, ideas and common visions. In addition, Solidarity 4 All is organising campaigns and trying to get more people involved in the SSE movement.

*Source: Bekridaki 2014.*



19. BBC News 2012.  
20. CBC News 2013; BBC News 2014.  
21. Solidarity 4 All is a network collective that gives practical support to various solidarity initiatives. More information: <http://www.solidarity4all.gr/sites/www.solidarity4all.gr/files/aggliko.pdf>.  
22. RELIESS 2015.

Solidarity NYE (2012) party outside the fates of the Hellenic Chalivourgia factory in support of the months' long strike of the steelworkers. Source: Solidarity for All, <http://www.solidarity4all.gr/sites/www.solidarity4all.gr/files/aggliko.pdf>

16. Lemaitre & Helmsing 2012, 750.  
17. Ibid., 752.  
18. Rudaw 2013.



# 3. Development through Social and Solidarity Economy

**SOME OF THE IDEAS** that have long been promoted by civil society organisations have been framed now as SSE and as a comprehensive economic idea. Solidarity economy is an attempt to affect the mainstream economic discussion and views, but also an active effort to take back the economy in conditions where the discourse of economic scarcity is governing the decision-making globally. Creating an alternative discourse that offers the possibility for transition through active practice and ethical principles is in the core of solidarity economy.

SSE is more a framework for development rather than just a sector. SSE's aim is to replace the corporate-led development framework by structures based on justice, protection of the environment, cultural diversity, social inclusion, gender equality, active citizenship, preservation of the commons, and the freedom of movement. The development strategy promoted through different initiatives expresses that reproduction of life should matter more than capital and profit-making. The goal of the movement is, therefore, to define the agenda instead of merely influencing it.<sup>23</sup>

The SSE-oriented actors are actively promoting the development vision of SSE on different fora. They have, for example, taken part in shaping the post-2015 development agenda. In 2013, the UN Non-Governmen-

tal Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) was consulting civil society actors for recommendations for future development. SSE rose as one of the strongest topics across different continents. Many actors, including RIPESS, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, and African Youth Panel, were emphasising the importance of putting the SSE in the core of an alternative economic model that meets the expectations of multi-dimensional sustainable development. SSE was presented as one of the solutions to avoid the homogenising view of development that focuses on modern, urban and global societies. It was regarded important to reshape economic relations and promote diverse lifestyles that could be based, for example, on indigenous practices and other so far marginalised views of life.<sup>24</sup>

In 2014, RIPESS gathered insights from SSE actors to form the SSE movement's recommendations for future development. They were partly based on the UN-NGLS report that RIPESS had given an input in but it also included some additions. The recommendations document emphasises a need to change the indicators to measure poverty, inequality, development and material and immaterial well-being. It stresses also the need to select SSE as an overarching development framework for transition to a fair, social and solidarity economy. RIPESS also recom-

mends the adoption of a human rights-based approach in all development and participatory and transparency approaches to be implemented in international processes like the post-2015 development.<sup>25</sup> The attention to human rights-based approach in SSE is important and it mirrors the progress in the development field where some NGOs and even states have adopted the human rights-based approach. The human rights-based approach is based on analysis that takes into account things like systematic marginalisation and power relations which is essential in any approach trying to change the current economic and development model.

The transition to SSE economy happens through different initiatives and forms of action that reach several sections of service provision, production and other economic activities. SSE is contributing to democratisation, defining work in decent terms, environmental sustainability, greater access to solidarity finance, and emancipation. The next subchapters gather together some of the recent research and analysis of SSE. The chapters focus mainly on the findings of the UN-RISD SSE project occasional paper (Utting et al. 2014) and the position paper of the UN Inter-agency Task-Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (TFSSE 2014) that have provided a thorough review of SSE research and knowledge of many institutions and researchers.

## 3.1 Towards inclusive and democratic local development

**GROWING INEQUALITY** has been the driving force for many to start solidarity economy activities. For instance in Brazil, solidarity economy has been developed due to a large inequality gap and lack of income and land for the lower social classes that are not served by the social and economic policies<sup>26</sup>. In the self-administration area of Rojava, inequality has taken place during the many years of repression of the Kurdish people under the dictatorship in Syria. Now the people in the Kurdish area have chosen the path of social economy to improve their economic and social conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Inequality derives from long-standing practices of skewed power relations and marginalisation of the poor and minorities. Power asymmetries have to be questioned and this can happen through political sensitisation and political empowerment. In solidarity economy, the objective should be that political empowerment goes hand in hand with the economic empowerment in order to make the systemic change. According to Silva, promoting solidarity-based development and economy means pursuing

social processes that are focusing to change the structures of political and economic exclusion.<sup>28</sup>

One of the main characteristics of the systemic change through SSE is the ubiquitous democratic and collective decision-making. This is promoted through means of participatory local governance, decentralisation and internal democratic management of SSE initiatives. SSE's idea of the local economic development broadens the traditional view by taking into account a wider set of activities in the local economy and labour market and addressing unmet service and welfare needs<sup>29</sup>. Local economic development processes need to go hand in hand with decentralisation. Power from the upper levels of decision-making have to be shared with people in the local level. Decentralisation processes should also improve the capacity of the local authorities to engage in the development of participatory local economic planning and creating partnerships between local authorities and SSE organisations. SSE producers are already supported by public policies in many countries when policies are

encouraging public institutions and local governments to purchase products from the local area. Local governments can also be valuable in building an enabling environment to SSE through supportive social policies, capacity-building and facilitation of support services.<sup>30</sup> Participatory governance and economic inclusion together with empowering methods can essentially diminish power and income asymmetries.

The internal structures of SSE initiatives can further enhance the local economic development. Many SSE groups are deliberately aiming at supporting local development and the organisations may play a role in community-based risk management. In some cases, SSE groups are providing social security when it is not provided by other institutions. Surplus of solidarity economy enterprises tends to be invested in the community and for social purposes. Solidarity networks that unite solidarity economy initiatives can further reduce risks and challenges of economic activity.<sup>31</sup>

Other important attributes among SSE organisations are the principles of equal

voting rights and focus on social cohesion. These practices can help with feeding into the civil society space and facilitating the participation of local population and representativeness in the local development processes.<sup>32</sup> However, the ability to take decisions requires accumulation of social capital. Cruz (2014b) points out the need for practical learning experiences and information-sharing amongst SSE actors in order

## 3.2 Better work

**THE CURRENT ECONOMIC** and political system has proved to be unsatisfactory in providing better conditions for work and the necessary amount of jobs, which has resulted in more and more informal jobs. Decent work has been seen as one of the main challenges in setting future development goals across the globe. Informal economy is prone to offer workers precarious and in many ways unreasonable working conditions. This is problematic because many people in the global South can only find work in the informal sector.<sup>35</sup> In addition, precariousness is also affecting working life in the global North by demanding more flexibility and entrepreneurship-like working relations. Thus, the uncertain working conditions have an effect in the growing inequality worldwide.

Solidarity economy has shown potential in creating jobs that can resist in times of financial hardship and can help in reducing power and information asymmetries in the job market. SSE organisations put in practice many principles that reflect the ideas of decent work. They make decisions in a participatory way and manage workplaces democratically and labour standards and workers' rights are often intrinsic for SSE groups.<sup>36</sup> These practices increase the power of the workers on their own working conditions and also plays a part in the democratisation of economy.

to reach an adequate level of social capital for running the solidarity economy organisations. He also recognises the necessity of people to learn how to make decisions in a collective manner in their everyday life to strengthen the participatory processes.<sup>33</sup> In Brazil, the support of solidarity economy actors has been taken on by incubators that have started working in universities since the mid-1990s. The role of the interdisci-

Work in social and solidarity economy is organised in diverse collective forms. Cooperatives are one of the best known examples of collective action in SSE and one form of social enterprise. Cooperatives<sup>37</sup> are among some of the largest employers in many countries worldwide. They provide 100 million jobs, which is 20 percent more than the multinational corporations. For instance, cooperatives in Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia and Kenya employ between 250 000 and 300 000 people in each country. Social enterprise has also diversified economic activities and generated income in Europe, East and Southeast Asia.<sup>38</sup> The interest in cooperatives has increased after the financial crisis. In many cases cooperatives have been resisting the effects of the crisis in Europe due to their connection to the local economy, cooperative model of governance and long-term approach to the accumulation of capital. The cooperatives have committed in participatory decision-making internally to carry out changes that are needed because of the crisis. Thus, they have succeeded in alleviating the negative social impact of harsh economic conditions.<sup>39</sup>

Informal workers have also found the power of collective action in SSE. They have sought solutions to the differing conditions in income, status of employment, and social and employment protection. Collective

plinary solidarity economy incubators is to assist groups in questions such as technology, administration, law, and publicity. The incubators also do research about solidarity economy and some of them undertake teaching responsibilities.<sup>34</sup> The incubator model of Brazil could also be used in any other country to further solidarity economy activities and enhance learning and sharing of information.

organising of informal workers has been on the rise especially in Latin America and Asia. For example, street vendors, waste pickers and domestic workers have formed collectives that have enabled them to facilitate advocacy, defend their rights and access support from municipalities and government. The collectives of informal sector workers can offer access to finance, information about the market, inputs, technology, and support services. They can also improve the workers' capacity to have an impact on prices and their own income through negotiation.<sup>40</sup>

Some challenges still remain in transforming informal economy activities to be part of SSE. Leadership and cultural norms of informal economy might be against the change and especially among the social economy actors. Also, some important labour standards might not be maintained with all the actors.<sup>41</sup> The prevailing power structures play a significant role for these changes and resistance to SSE originates from the ones who want to hold on to their power that is questioned by new practices. This might be the case in some of the cooperatives that are not worker-managed. Therefore, it is important to support SSE groups to overcome these difficulties through solidarity economy incubators or other means.

## 3.3 Environmental and food sustainability

**SSE ORGANISATIONS** are interested in taking responsibility for the common environment and sustainability. As these actors are not driven by profit maximisation, they can more easily avoid externalising the environmental costs of their activities. They tend to have lower carbon footprints and explicit environmental goals and hold biodiversity in high regard. Many SSE organisations, like forestry cooperatives and community forestry institutions, have been part of creating sustainable management practices of natural resources. Local trade and development practices and agro-ecological farming practices that are inherently part of SSE can also reduce the negative impact on the environment.<sup>42</sup>

Social and solidarity economy practices are trying to stop commodification of common resources. The so-called green economy is usually offering market-centred and corporate-led solutions to the environ-

mental crisis and applying private property rights to common natural resources. Additionally, the green economy is often renewing power inequalities by top-down designing.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, solidarity economy embraces a commons approach in which water, public land, energy, air, forests, and biodiversity should be protected from becoming merchandise. RIPESS states that SSE approach can guarantee the local management of commons through local economic initiatives. Solidarity economy is also closely related with the concept of Buen Vivir<sup>44</sup> that has been adopted in Ecuador and Bolivia and includes the idea of rights of nature. This means that nature is considered as something that has rights of its own and should not be used merely as a resource.<sup>45</sup>

Food insecurity is one of the problems caused by climate change and environmentally ignorant policies. Food insecurity troubles

many countries in the global South and withholds the fulfilment of basic human rights. One of SSE's prominent features is the pursuit of food sovereignty which is key to the eradication of food concerns. The increase of social and local control of food systems and promotion of local trade (e.g. local food markets) are possible approaches in creating a self-sufficient food economy. Collective efforts are empowering smallholders through self-help groups and cooperatives in which millions of rural workers and producers are participating. Farmer cooperatives have also played a role in securing self-managed employment. Small producers are usually dependent on the price fluctuations of the international market. The membership in cooperatives enhances their bargaining power over the prices and ensures the ability to keep producing and participating in the rural community development in case of changes in the external conditions.<sup>46</sup>

23. Tygel 2014, UN-NGLS 2013.

24. UN-NGLS 2013.

25. RIPESS 2014.

26. Cruz 2014b.

27. Yousef 2014.

28. Silva 2014.

29. Greffe 2007.

30. Utting et al. 2014, 33; TFSSE 2014, 6–7.

31. TFSSE 2014, 5.

32. Ibid, 5–6.

33. Cruz 2014b.

34. Cruz 2014a.

35. Utting et al. 2014, TSSE 2014.

36. TFSSE 2014, van Zee-land 2013.

37. In the source it is not specified whether all these cooperatives follow the principles of social solidarity economy.

38. TFSSE 2014.

39. Utting 2014, 151; Utting et al. 2014.

40. Utting et al. 2014.

41. Utting et al. 2014, TFSSE 2014.

42. TFSSE 2014, 3.

43. Ibid, 3–4.

44. Buen vivir derives from the Andean indigenous communities that consider living together with nature and all peoples as inherent to their lifestyle (Utting et al. 2014).

45. UN-NGLS 2013, 55; RIPESS 2014.

46. TFSSE 2014, 11–12.



## 3.4 Solidarity finance

**THE FINANCE WORLD** is particularly governed by neoliberal ideas and models of entrepreneurship. However, solidarity economy is contesting the vision of the international financial institutions by avoiding single-solution thinking and embedding good governance principles in the activities<sup>47</sup>. Solidarity economy is offering an alternative to transform finance through a set of diverse finance schemes. These include, for example, community-based saving schemes and complementary currencies that are already contributing to community risk management and local development.<sup>48</sup>

SSE organisations start often with a weak asset base, their members mostly belong to low-income groups and the SSE groups do not always have a legal status. All these characteristics make it difficult for SSE initiatives to access conventional finance. In some cases, SSE groups have had to give up their principles to be able to access funding. This compromises the whole idea of the alternative economy. Therefore, SSE finance schemes have been created so the actors can prioritise social objectives and environment goals. Similarly to any other SSE activities, the schemes are based on solidarity values and they are directing finance towards so-

cial and ethical objectives that differ from the operating principles of conventional finance. The alternative finance schemes are democratising access to funding for low-income groups and small producers. An important dimension of the SSE finance is the reintroduction of solidarity and reciprocity which is changing the logic of the field so that it is less vulnerable to crisis.<sup>49</sup>

There are also interesting new options rising through virtual currencies, like Bitcoin, that could bring about new opportunities for solidarity finance. Bitcoin has showed that it is possible to create an alternative decentralised global currency without the involvement of banks as intermediaries. Bitcoin is already used as a tool for remittances from immigrants and providing them with interest-free possibility to transfer their money.<sup>50</sup> SSE finance can be developed through these kind of interesting initiatives and new technologies.

There have been examples of solidarity finance schemes that have grown fast and that have ended up in a failure. This has been due to problems in maintaining the required level of trust and creating necessary regulations when the volume of the financing activities has increased.<sup>51</sup> This

implicates that solidarity economy initiatives are maybe not meant to grow endlessly. In capitalist economy, companies often need to grow in order to stay competitive but in the solidarity economy market the key should rather be in initiatives and enterprises that stay close to the user. Thus, the decision-making can stay in the hands of the people who are involved and the impact of the different schemes can be seen by themselves.

Solidarity economy finance should be seen different from the popularised microfinance schemes. For example, the failure of the Andra Pradesh microfinance industry displayed several shortcomings of the microcredit system. Excessive lending, high interests and harassment of the indebted members who were not paying back their loans do not reflect the values of solidarity economy. Conventional microcredit schemes have also not been able to reach the people that are in the biggest need of access to finance. Microcredit has been presented as a one-size-fits-all tool for diminishing poverty which might have been a harmful assumption as microfinance has also been used as a substitute for public social spending.<sup>52</sup>

tive solutions to economic, social and environmental challenges and impose cross-cutting ethical ideas to economic activity. The ethics of solidarity, equity and democratic governance can have a transformative impact in any situation and not just in times of crisis.<sup>60</sup> This impact should be long-lasting and applied throughout society. Since SSE is bringing about an alternative to the dominant market economy, it can also have a role to play in avoiding future crises that come along the neoliberal model.

At the moment, SSE is stepping in to fill gaps in service provisioning and Utting and others ask if SSE is actually merely a part of the trend of privatisation of public services.<sup>61</sup> It is a relevant question given that objectification of SSE without the bigger picture of a thorough transition in economy will only subordinate the alternative practices to the capitalist system. Solidarity economy should not be reducing the responsibility of the public institutions and other duty bearers. Rights-based approach has to be combined with SSE in order to demand accountability from the institutions, decision-makers, corporations and other actors who hold power. This is essential for the aim to share the decision-making power among more people and serve the needs of many instead of few.

Rights-based approach also implies that there needs to be a set universal frameworks for guaranteeing the same basic services and rights for everyone. Many SSE actors are place-based and lack the institutional structures that states have. Thus, the main

responsibility of delivering the wider guarantee for services, like education, healthcare and social welfare, lies on the states and SSE groups should take part in the political push towards this goal. The role of SSE actors may be important for the service provision but this is one of the big questions still to be discussed and solved.

The process of claiming for accountability can happen through cooperation. SSE actors and governments have to work together to take things forward for an enabling environment that would take SSE actors' complex needs into account. The cooperation is crucial for the future of SSE but sets challenges to both to SSE actors and governments. SSE networks have to secure the representativeness and participatory decision-making principles whereas governments needs to ensure full participation in the cooperation processes. Research has showed that in countries where the diversity of SSE is addressed by different means and policy, innovation takes place among civil society organisations, government actors and between these two. Only functional and participatory collaboration can guarantee an enabling environment that maintains the autonomy of SSE actors.<sup>62</sup> The independence is crucial in order to keep up the questioning of power and wealth inequalities.

There are already some states are showing an example of supporting SSE. France, Ecuador, Greece, the Philippines, Portugal, Spain and Mexico have established legislation about social and solidarity economy. Countries like Brazil, Colombia, Luxem-

bourg, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and France have ministries or secretariats working on the issues of social and solidarity economy.<sup>63</sup> Luxemburg is also forwarding social and solidarity economy among its ministries. They are handling topics of SSE in the Ministry of Labour, Employment and the Social and Solidarity Economy<sup>64</sup>. In regard to development, Luxemburg has incorporated SSE into the official development assistance (ODA) by directing support to SSE micro-entrepreneurs in developing countries<sup>65</sup>. This indicates there are possibilities for states to include the SSE framework in their development policy and cooperation if there is enough political will to do so. States have resources that could essentially feed into building a stronger SSE practice in the grassroots but also a capable network for advocacy.

State efforts also have a new means to be advanced through as an international leading group of SSE was established in 2014. The initiative for a group that would promote social and solidarity economy internationally came from a network of SSE entrepreneurs, the Mont-Blanc Meetings. The leading group met the first time in September 2014 with the five member states, Ecuador, Luxemburg, Morocco, Ecuador, Colombia, France, the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE and civil society organisations. The objective of the group is to act as a promoter of SSE and to enable SSE entrepreneurship to everyone through recognition and public policy implementation. The group will also make concrete suggestions to national and international bodies in regard to SSE.<sup>66</sup>

## 3.5 Emancipation

**IN MANY PLACES**, SSE activities and ideas have been rising from marginalised groups, like the indigenous people. Emancipatory goals, like gender and ethnic equality, are intrinsic to the ideals of solidarity economy. SSE organisations have, for example, shown ability to have an input in gender equality. Women have gained access to economic and socio-political activities and they are frequently in the core of community forestry initiatives and agricultural self-help and savings groups. A considerable amount of social enterprises has been directed to the care sector which can have a positive impact on women's time management.<sup>53</sup> A review of several Latin American SSE initiatives has also found that the initiatives have created safe spaces and provided information about gender equality and in

some cases there has been some change in the male dominance at home and in the community<sup>54</sup>.

However, in many cases the membership of women is not always reflected in leadership positions and the empowerment of women has not expanded outside the economic dimension. This is due to lack of attention to structural constraints and persisting cultural practices. Some problems can also be observed in the practice of some social enterprises that stress social protection and dismiss the need for emancipation. The issue of gender and ethnic equality still requires more attention and clear review of the differences between social and solidarity economy initiatives as an explicit emancipation focus has demonstrated its importance for improving equality.<sup>55</sup>

SSE practices have not always reached the poorest sections of the population. The typical member of an SSE organisation belongs to the lower middle class. Also actors of different sizes do not benefit from SSE activities equally. For example farmers with middle-size holdings gain greater advantage of collective action whereas smaller and poorer producers are troubled with the costs of collective activities.<sup>56</sup> This shows that emancipation an solidarity need to be put into the core of the initiatives and also implemented in practice. These kind of problems require more analysis about the practices and implementation of decision-making and solidarity. For example, the human rights based approach<sup>57</sup> might offer some guidelines for analysis that would help reaching the most marginalised people.

# 5. SSE advocacy and networking

**TO BRING ABOUT** the full potential of solidarity economy, there needs to be active aspiration for a suitable environment for it. SSE is already a global movement but alliances can always be strengthened and more networks and cooperation built. Utting and others state that collective action should be directed in promoting SSE goals and to create enabling policy settings in local, subnational, regional and global levels. Cross-sectorial alliances can play a role in enhancing the solidarity structures in the practice of SSE but also increase the influence of SSE advocacy for a more sustainable economy.<sup>67</sup>

The advocacy activities that aim at establishing a supportive environment for SSE have many objectives<sup>68</sup>:

1. *The recognition of SSE*: The practices of SSE organisations are having an impact on sustainable development and securing livelihoods and this needs to be acknowledged by states, international institutions and decision-makers.
2. *Maintaining the autonomy of SSE* through rights-based approaches that guarantee freedom of association and information and channels for SSE actors to participate in policy processes.

3. *Governments' promotion of SSE*: Governments should become involved in promotion of SSE through policy, resources, and legislation<sup>69</sup>.
4. *Ensuring support*: Government efforts are required to guarantee a sufficient level of support to SSE actors. The support mechanisms are now neglected because of the prioritisation of conventional entrepreneurship
5. *Resources for knowledge generation*: The potential and challenges of SSE have to be explored more and this means a need for allocating resources for knowledge generation about the outcomes and results of SSE activities.

All of these goals have to be put forward with the comprehensive promotion of SSE principles. Governments need to take into account the participatory ideals and not pursue SSE policies with a top-down approach. The process of forwarding the policy change will also be more successful if it is preceded by developments in democratic governance in order to permit the participation of beneficiaries and their advocates. These changes can then contribute to reconfiguration of social and political forces. Policy change also requires a raised awareness of the policy-makers.<sup>70</sup>

There are already SSE networks and collectives in and across different countries and continents, for example the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS), the Asian Solidarity Economy Coalition (ASEC), and the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network. There is also a solidarity economy network in Finland whose mission is to map existing actors of solidarity economy and create networks of solidarity economy<sup>71</sup>. Other actors that are promote solidarity economy in Finland include, for example, Eetti ry that is running a European Union funded project about solidarity economy and Siemenpuu foundation that is forwarding solidarity economy perspective with their partners in the global South. The Finnish umbrella organisation for development NGOs, Kepa, is publishing a report about solidarity economy and other new economies that are contesting the dominant economic model based on growth (see Kepa, forthcoming).

On international level, one of the recent important efforts for SSE promotion was proposed in the UNRISD seminar about the potential and challenges of SSE in Geneva in May 2013. Different UN agencies have then formed the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (TFSSE) that is strengthening the recognition of

47. Dacheux & Goujon 2011.

48. TFSSE 2014.

49. TFSSE 2014, 17–18, Utting et al. 2014, 18.

50. Utting et al. 2014, 23, Bendell 2014, Van Eyk 2014.

51. Utting et al. 2014.

52. Utting et al 2014, 21.

53. Utting et al 2014.

54. Kumpulniemi 2013.

55. TFSSE 2014, Kumpulniemi 2013, Utting et al 2014.

56. Utting et al. 2014.

57. For more information on human rights based approach, see for example Uvin (2004). Human Rights and Development.

58. TFSSE 2014, Utting et al. 2014.

59. Bekridaki 2014; Cruz 2014b.

60. TFSSE 2014, xi.

61. Utting et al. 2014, 36.

62. Mendell and Alain 2013.

63. Utting et al. 2014.

64. Ministère du travail, de l'emploi et de l'économie sociale et solidaire 2014.

65. UN-NGLS 2014b.

66. Mont-Blanc Meetings 2014.

67. Utting et al. 2014.

68. TFSSE 2014, Utting et al. 2014.

69. Examples of state level recognition of SSE can be found in several countries. See TFSSE 2014 for more information.

70. Utting et al. 2014.

71. commons.fi (2012)



SSE, promoting SSE, supporting the necessary changes for an enabling environment for SSE and assuring coordination of international efforts for SSE.<sup>72</sup> This initiative will hopefully have a real and coherent impact on the work of UN organisations in their work towards supporting solidarity economy and especially affecting the post-2015 development agenda.

The UN level efforts are important but they also have to reflect the will of the SSE movement. NGOs, federations, associations, trade unions and global level organisations supporting the ideas of SSE should all have a role in the process of gaining more voice and influence. In the networking processes and advocacy activities on all levels, one has to keep in mind the pitfalls of cooperation in situations of unequal access to resources that are usually evident in North-South cooperation. Bendell and Ellersiek (2012) point to cases where development NGOs are the dominant drivers of networks. These kind of networks might focus in meetings and lobbying amongst the educated and ethically concerned and at the same time ig-

nore part of the movement and its view on confronting the underlying problems of power inequality. NGOs that are dependent on grants and donations might have to compromise some of the crucial message for not to lose their status.<sup>73</sup> This needs to be acknowledged especially by the SSE actors and development NGOs in the global North.

However, one of the strong advantages of SSE is its powerful presence in the global South. Some previous global movements driving for economic and social justice have rather been rooted in the global North and have worked as a tool for comforting the consciousness of some people without really questioning their material well-being. SSE fosters a discourse that sees also the poor, marginalised or otherwise labelled people of the global South as actors that are capable and have their own agendas to advance. SSE essentially combines two dimensions of struggle for justice and human rights in the South and challenging the unsustainable lifestyles of the North.<sup>74</sup> Solidarity economy could be part of a more empowering

development view by taking a new stance on the relations of cooperation. Relations among partners in the global South are an important way to advance learning for solidarity economy. South-South partnerships can be supported by northern partners and this type of triangular cooperation should be based on solidarity and cooperation between equals. South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) has already had a role to play in the current crisis through putting the focus on employment and social protection. Learning between SSE actors from North and South has also happened for example in the SSE academy organised by the International Labour Organization. SSTC has been acknowledged among UN organisations to be an important means to supplement the more prominent ways of development cooperation.<sup>75</sup> SSTC is already a substantial part of solidarity economy and could be forwarded by many more organisations in the development field as part of their efforts to create more equal cooperation and essentially also embracing the learning of Northern actors from the South.

## 6. Final remarks

**SOLIDARITY ECONOMY** is working in the grassroots level and spreading wider. Some governments have embraced solidarity economy and are using it as a tool to combat unemployment. The need for permanent and sustainable solutions has directed people and movements to search for alternatives, and social and solidarity economy have shown good results in providing people with livelihood and democratising decision-making and the economy. SSE cannot be implemented as a universal and homogenous solution that solves all the problems of humankind but instead it is a movement that takes into account the diversity of needed changes for people and the environment. The inequality, unsustainability and poverty that have been created by the current economic and power structures need to be changed fundamentally. SSE is intervening in these structures through participatory methods and decentralisation of power that are intrinsic in creating

possibilities for a more equal conditions for all.

The economy based on ethical values is achievable and the SSE movement is working towards a socially and environmentally sustainable way of living. Its achievement requires cooperation between SSE actors, civil society and governments on national, continental and international levels. Better work, sustainable relation with the environment, access to finance and empowerment for all can be reached towards by power-sharing and rationalising economic practices on the basis of needs of people and environment – not on the basis of the “needs” of the economy. SSE can also be creating more equal opportunities for international cooperation between global North and South and enhance learning about solidarity economy that goes both directions.

International organisations within the UN and some states have already started paying attention to SSE due to the resilience

of its practices in crisis. However, the ability of SSE to create alternatives for social, economic and environmental problems still have to be recognised by many others and this recognition has to feed into support and research to SSE, so we can get to know more of its potential. States are recommended to support solidarity economy in their development policy and official development assistance and also permeate the principles of solidarity economy throughout its policies and programmes and encourage a change towards a more sustainable lifestyle globally. States also have to take an active role in promoting SSE on the international level, especially for the Sustainable Development Goals. Development NGOs and social movements both in global North and South can have an important role to play in this process of advocating towards the states and international actors and also to make sure that solidarity economy is not co-opted and downplayed by the states.



In Rio Grande, Brazil, a group of women have formed a cooperative called Mulheres da Lagoa for fishing and processing their catch. Source: TECSOL, Federal University of Pelotas.

72. Utting 2014.

73. See Utting et al 2014.

74. Ibid.; Bullard & Müller 2012.

75. UN-NGLS 2014a.

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