



UN

Inter-Agency Task Force on
Social and Solidarity Economy

KNOWLEDGE HUB WORKING PAPER

**Achieving the Sustainable
Development Goals through
Social and Solidarity Economy:**
Incremental versus Transformative Change

Peter Utting

APRIL 2018



**SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS**

The logo consists of the letters 'UN' in a white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue square.

Inter-Agency Task Force on
Social and Solidarity Economy

The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (TFSSE) was established to raise the visibility of the SSE in international knowledge and policy circles. We believe that SSE holds considerable promise for addressing the economic, social and environmental integrated approaches of sustainable development.

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Acronyms

ADC	<i>Asociaciones de Desarrollo Comunal</i> ; Community Development Associations
ALBA	<i>Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América</i> ; Alliance for the Peoples of Our America
BBBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
CONACOOOP	<i>Consejo Nacional de Cooperativas</i> ; National Council of Cooperatives (Costa Rica)
CONAIE	<i>Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador</i> ; Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DINADECO	<i>Dirección Nacional de Desarrollo de la Comunidad</i> ; National Directorate for Community Development
DSBD	Department for Small Business Development
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NBSA	National Basic Livelihood Security Act
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPO	Non-Profit Organization (NPOs)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHG	Self-help groups
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
TNCs	Transnational Corporations
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Acknowledgements

Comments provided on an earlier draft of this paper by Paul Ladd, Raymond Saner, Ibrahim Said and Ilcheong Yi are gratefully acknowledged. The author would also like to thank colleagues associated with the ILO SSE Academy who provided inputs and comments for several papers on public policy for SSE on which this paper partly draws.

Preface

The efforts of the United Nations to position poverty reduction and sustainable development as strategic priorities, and the lingering consequences of the Global Economic and Financial Crisis, have both intensified the search for innovative approaches to development. In this context an increasing number of governments around the world are heeding the advice of development practitioners, activists and scholars that more attention needs to be paid to the role of ‘social and solidarity economy’ (SSE). The forms of economic activity that make up SSE generally acknowledge and apply a set of principles, norms and practices that seem particularly conducive to meeting peoples’ basic needs and promoting environmental protection, decent work, the equitable distribution of resources and profits, and democratic forms of governance. Such attributes stand in sharp contrast to ‘business as usual’.

Recognizing both the potential of SSE and the limited attention being paid to the concept within the United Nations system, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) initiated, several years ago, programmes that drew attention to SSE and examined ways and means of enabling and scaling-up this approach. In 2013, these initiatives led to the formation of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force for SSE, which was tasked with “raising the visibility of SSE in international knowledge and policy circles as an alternative development pathway that better integrates the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.” Two core aspects of this work consist of organizing policy dialogues involving multiple development actors and creating a knowledge hub that gathers information on SSE and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a view to analyzing linkages, identifying and filling knowledge gaps, synthesizing key lessons and disseminating findings to policy makers and other stakeholders.

In early 2018, the Task Force initiated a research project that aims to assess the contribution of SSE as a means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Supported with an initial grant from the Government of Luxembourg, this project will examine what enabling conditions, including supportive policies, are needed to realize the potential of SSE. And in a context where systematic data on SSE are still scarce, and where definitions and indicators vary, the project also seeks to identify robust methodologies and innovative solutions for measuring SSE and its impacts.

Coordinated by UNRISD, the project will generate a series of research papers and think pieces that aim to facilitate our understanding of these aspects. In addition to commissioning a number of background papers, UNRISD is organizing a Call for Papers on ‘Localizing the SDGs through SSE’. We hope that researchers around the world who are working in this field will share with us their insights and expertise and that policy makers and advocates for SSE will continue to watch this space.



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Paul Ladd

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Summary

In a context where an increasing number of governments are promoting policies that aim to support organizations and enterprises that make up the social and solidarity economy (SSE), this paper assesses the effectiveness of such support. It does so from the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by considering whether the uptake of the SSE agenda by governments can scale up and enable SSE in ways conducive to realizing the ‘transformational vision’ of the SDGs.

In assessing progress, a distinction is drawn between incremental and transformative change. While government efforts to provide technical and financial resources for SSE, and a more conducive regulatory and governance environment, can enable piecemeal and partial gains associated with incremental change, various constraints arise that dilute or distort the SSE agenda and divert attention from the root causes of exclusionary and unsustainable development, thereby constraining transformative change.

How might we guard against such risks? Our contention is that a policy agenda that is cognizant of these risks and adopts effective measures to address them is one that leans towards transformative change. Divided in two parts, the paper first examines the opportunities and tensions associated with mainstreaming SSE in the policy arena. It provides a conceptual analysis of how mainstreaming can redefine the contours of SSE through two processes. The first is ‘instrumentalization’. This refers to the ways in which powerful state or market institutions employ SSE to advance specific goals. The second is ‘isomorphism’, namely, the ways in which SSE organizations and enterprises assume behavioural features of the mainstream institutions with which they interact. These two processes are key for understanding both the opportunities and limits associated with incrementalism.

Part 2 examines the effectiveness of public policy that promotes SSE in relation to specific SDGs. These include food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), social service provisioning (SDGs 3 and 4), gender equality and women’s economic empowerment (SDG 5) and employment and decent work (SDG 8). This section identifies the tensions and challenges involved in promoting policy change and identifies the differences between policy approaches that foster incrementalism versus those that push the envelope of transformative change.

A concluding section sums up the main findings related to the opportunities, risks and dilemmas that arise when SSE becomes the object of public policy. It reflects on the implications for positioning SSE as a key means of implementation for the SDGs and for realizing the ‘transformational vision’ that Agenda 2030 purports to uphold.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through Social and Solidarity Economy: Incremental versus Transformative Change

Peter Utting¹

Introduction

“In these Goals and targets, we are setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision.” (para 7, 2030 Agenda)

In today’s discourse on development it is common to hear references to the need for ‘transformational’ or ‘transformative’ change and development agendas. This has been prompted by the ambitious aspirational language of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), coupled with recognition that development policy in the wake of the global financial crisis can no longer conform to business-as-usual. It also recognises the fact that the precursor to the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), represented too cautious an approach to addressing pressing social and environmental issues.

The growing interest among development practitioners, academics, activists and policy makers in forms of economy that are ‘people-centred and planet-sensitive’ (UN 2013) has positioned Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) as a significant element in transformative change and achieving the SDGs.

SSE refers to forms of economic activities undertaken by non-state organizations and enterprises that prioritize social objectives, and are guided by principles and practices of cooperation, self-help, solidarity, and democratic self-management. Such entities typically include cooperatives, mutual associations, community organizations providing local services, savings and loan groups, women’s self-help groups, and social enterprises, including NGOs that are transitioning from donor dependency to income generating activities. Compared to for-profit enterprises, the normative hierarchy of the economic, social and environmental objectives inherent in the concept of sustainable development is very different (UNRISD 2016).

An extensive UNRISD inquiry into the potential and limits of SSE led this author to emphasize the political economy dimension of SSE:

“SSE is fundamentally about reasserting social control ... over the economy by giving primacy to social and often environmental objectives above profits, emphasizing the place of ethics in economic activity and rethinking economic practice in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship.”²

¹ The author is Senior Research Associate with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and International Co-ordinator, Center for Social Economy (*Centro para la Economía Social* – CES), based in Managua, Nicaragua.

² The author co-ordinated the UNRISD study. See Utting 2015a:2. This definition draws on Wright 2010, Gibson-Graham 2006, Dacheux and Goujon 2011, Grasseni et al. 2015, Laville 2015 and Vail 2010.

In academic parlance, the essence of SSE has been associated with the shift towards ‘decommodified’ economic activities and circuits where ‘the social organization and practices of the circuit constitute an alternative logic to prevalent market processes’ (Vail 2010),³ and where ‘a bias to greater equality and inclusion’ defines the organised logic of the economic system and technological innovation.⁴

How SSE relates to both the MDGs and SDGs has been examined by the United Nations Task Force on SSE and others.⁵ Whether in relation to poverty reduction, food security, healthcare, women’s economic empowerment, decent work, forest protection or other goals, SSE is well positioned as a means of implementation of the SDGs.

It is important to note that SSE can play an important role in addressing various limitations of the MDGs that the SDGs seek to correct. These include:

- i. the focus within the MDGs on global and national averages. This methodology masked deficits in achievement at the sub-national level and ran the risk of diverting policy attention and resources from marginalized groups (UNGA-OWG 2014). A focus on SSE necessarily addresses the SDG aim to ‘leave no one behind’ by redirecting attention to local territories and vulnerable groups;
- ii. ignoring key structural determinants of exclusionary and unsustainable development and inequality, including dominant patterns of production, consumption and asset distribution; and
- iii. limited attention to the politics of change, including the failure to emphasize active citizenship and participatory democracy which are essential for claims making by marginalized groups and others concerned with social, distributive and environmental justice, as well as for accountability and monitoring.⁶

The potential of SSE in relation to inclusive and sustainable development is being increasingly recognised by policy makers. In recent years, numerous governments and legislatures have introduced laws to regulate and promote SSE, designed policies and programmes that specifically target SSE, integrated SSE into national development plans and created or strengthened government agencies to assume responsibility for SSE development (Fonteneau et al. 2011, Mendell 2014, Utting 2015a 2017).⁷

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