


The United Nations logo, consisting of the letters 'UN' in a white, bold, sans-serif font on a blue rectangular background.

Inter-Agency Task Force on
Social and Solidarity Economy

Social and Solidarity Economy and the Challenge of Sustainable Development

Three large, thick, blue curved arrows arranged in a circular pattern, pointing clockwise. The top arrow points right, the bottom arrow points left, and the middle arrow points down, creating a continuous loop.

**A Position Paper by the United Nations
Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and
Solidarity Economy (TFSSE)**

Social and Solidarity Economy and the Challenge of Sustainable Development

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June 2014

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Executive Summary

This position paper has been prepared by members and observers of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy. It responds to the concern that the process of crafting a post-2015 development agenda and set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has paid insufficient attention to the role of what is becoming increasingly known as the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). SSE refers to the production of goods and services by a broad range of organizations and enterprises that have explicit social and often environmental objectives, and are guided by principles and practices of cooperation, solidarity, ethics and democratic self-management. The field of SSE includes cooperatives and other forms of social enterprise, self-help groups, community-based organizations, associations of informal economy workers, service-provisioning NGOs, solidarity finance schemes, amongst others.

The Task Force believes that SSE holds considerable promise for addressing the economic, social and environmental objectives and integrated approaches inherent in the concept of sustainable development. This paper illustrates this potential by examining the role of SSE in selected issue areas which, we believe, are central to the challenge of socially sustainable development in the early 21st century. They include:

i) The transition from informal economy to decent work

SSE is a complementary pathway to tackling the ongoing growth of precarious employment and acute decent work deficits connected with the informal economy. Within an enabling policy and institutional environment, cooperatives and other social enterprises can play a key role in realizing the goal of decent work. From an aggregate point of view, cooperatives are among the largest employers in many countries in both the global North and South. SSE organizations can facilitate access to finance, inputs, technology, support services and markets, and enhance the capacity of producers to negotiate better prices and income. They can reduce power and information asymmetries within labour and product markets and enhance the level and regularity of incomes. The low capital requirements needed for forming certain types of cooperative can be beneficial for informal workers seeking to engage in enterprise activities.

ii) Greening the economy and society

From the perspective of environmental protection the challenge of decoupling growth and environmental impacts, and crafting economic transitions that are both green and fair, SSE organizations have a number of fundamental advantages over conventional business. There is little, if any, imperative to externalize environmental and social costs or fuel consumerism as part of profit maximization and competitive strategies. Such organizations also tend to have lower carbon footprints due not only to their environmental objectives but also to the nature of their systems of production and

exchange. Furthermore, organizations such as forestry cooperatives and community forestry groups can play an important role in the sustainable management of natural resources, particularly in contexts where they constitute common-pool resources.

iii) Local economic development

SSE provides a vision of local development that proactively regenerates and develops local areas through employment generation, mobilizing local resources, community risk management and retaining and reinvesting surplus. SSE can serve to widen the structure of a local economy and labour market and addressing unmet needs with various goods and services. It can build trust and social cohesion and play an important role in participatory local governance. SSE principles can introduce added value within the sectors in which they operate owing to SSE's compatibility with local interests and its capacity to pursue simultaneously several objectives.

iv) Sustainable cities and human settlements

Social enterprises and community-based organizations possess features with considerable potential for helping build sustainable cities. They can promote social and environmental goals through, for example, proximity services (including healthcare, education and training), promoting local culture, urban and peri-urban agriculture, community renewal, fair trade, access to affordable accommodation, renewable energy, waste management and recycling, low-carbon forms of production and consumption, and broader livelihood security. Their rootedness in local knowledge and their internal democratic structure offer some means of achieving integrated forms of socially and politically sustainable urban development.

v) Women's well-being and empowerment

Women often have a strong presence in SSE organizations and enterprises and have assumed leadership roles in national, regional and international associations. Employment in SSE organizations can be particularly important for poor women facing labour market discrimination and work-family conflict. SSE organizations and enterprises often facilitate flexibility in time management, providing opportunities for paid work that can be managed alongside responsibilities associated with unpaid care work. Moreover, much of the rise of social enterprise has centred on provision of care and other services. Gaining voice and networking and advocacy skills has also been key for women's emancipation and political empowerment, allowing them to renegotiate traditional gender relations and make demands on external institutions.

vi) Food security and smallholder empowerment

Around the world millions of rural workers and producers are organizing in self-help groups and cooperatives in ways that bode well for smallholder empowerment, food security and the more transformative notion of food sovereignty. By organizing economically in agricultural cooperatives, and politically in associations that can engage in policy dialogue and advocacy, SSE organizations and enterprises can address

both market failures and state failures (not least the neglect of agriculture in recent decades). Furthermore, their tendency to employ low-input, low-carbon production methods and respect the principles and practices of biodiversity and agro-ecology bodes well for sustainable agricultural intensification. Alternative food networks associated with fair trade, solidarity purchasing and collective provisioning highlight the role that solidarity can play in fostering more equitable agri-food systems.

vii) Universal health coverage

The difficulties in realizing international goals related to universal health coverage has directed attention to alternative approaches that go beyond public, private or charitable provision. Such a context has opened the space for SSE organizations to emerge as important partners in both health service delivery and health insurance. Various types of SSE organization are playing a significant role in developing and providing locally accessible and affordable routes to improved healthcare in areas such as ageing, disability, HIV/AIDS, reproductive rights, mental health, post-trauma care, rehabilitation and prevention. While SSE should not be perceived as a substitute for state provision of healthcare, it is well placed to play a complementary role in health service delivery, given the proximity of SSE organizations to their members and the communities they serve.

viii) Transformative finance

Financial crises, limited access to affordable credit on the part of SSE organizations and the commercialization of microcredit all point to the need to transform financial systems. SSE has a significant role to play in this regard. Large financial cooperatives have become important sources of funding in several regions of the world, and have proven to be resilient in times of financial crisis. SSE promotes responsible financing or investment through strengthening the investor's accountability for social, cultural and environmental impacts. A variety of alternative finance schemes such as community-based savings schemes and complementary currencies are playing an important role in community risk management and local development. While they often operate best at local level and on a small scale, these and other SSE initiatives

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