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Regional Policy Frameworks of Social Solidarity Economy in South America

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) discourse has been deployed at the regional level by UNASUR and MERCOSUR and the implications of these new policy frameworks for the advancement of SSE practices. Though civil society groups have presented SSE as a new economic paradigm, regional policy frameworks implement it as an add-on or compliment to dominant capitalist economies. This happens in two key ways: 1.) The SSE sector and cooperatives in particular are cast as drivers of regional integration and socio-economic policy, however limited involvement in major integration projects represent missed opportunities for SSE to be mainstreamed; and 2.) Though SSE policy is portrayed as a kind of intervention that combines social and economic policies, implementation almost exclusively by ministers of social development means that SSE is institutionally limited to the realm of poverty eradication not restructuring of the dominant economy. SSE is also fiscally dependent on those dominant industries, which ultimately does not reverse or challenge the ongoing process of economic centralization in key sectors.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- AECID - *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo*. Spanish International Cooperation Agency for Development
- AIN - *Auditoría Interna de la Nación*. Office of National Internal Auditing
- ALADI - *Asociación Latinoamericana de Integración*. The Latin American Association for Integration
- ALBA - *Alianza Bolivariana para América*. Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas
- BNDES - *Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social*. National Economic and Social Development Bank
- BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
- CAN - *Comunidad Andina*. The Andean Community
- CELAC - *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*. Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
- CONPACCOOP *Confederación Paraguaya de Cooperativas*. The Paraguayan Confederation of Cooperatives
- COOPERAR - *Confederación Cooperativa de la República Argentina*. The Argentine Cooperative Confederation
- COSIPLAN - *Consejo Suramericano de Infraestructura y Planeamiento*. Infrastructure and Planning Council
- CPESS - *Centros de Promoción de la Economía Social y Solidaria*. Centers for the Promotion of Social and Solidarity Economy
- CSDS - *Consejo Suramericano del Desarrollo Social*. South American Council on Social Development
- CUDECOOP - *Confederación Uruguaya de Cooperativas*. The Uruguayan Confederation of Cooperatives
- DENACOOOP - *Departamento de Cooperativismo e Associativismo Rural*. Department of Rural Cooperativism and Associativism
- FAO - the Food and Agriculture Organization
- FCES - *Foro Consultivo Económico-Social*. Economic-Social Consultative Forum
- FOCEM - *Fondo de Convergencia Estructural del MERCOSUR*. MERCOSUR Structural Convergence Fund
- GIP - *Grupo de Integración Productiva*. Group on Productive Integration
- GRESO - *Grupo Red de Economía Solidaria de Perú*. The Network Group of Solidarity Economies of Peru
- IIRSA - *Iniciativa para la Integración de la Infraestructura Regional Suramericana*. Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure in South America
- ILO - International Labor Organization
- INACOOOP - *Instituto Nacional de Cooperativismo*. National Institute of Cooperativism
- INAES - *Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social*. National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy in the Ministry of Social Development

INCOOP - *Instituto Nacional de Cooperativismo*. National Institute of Cooperativism

ISM - *Instituto Social de MERCOSUR*. MERCOSUR Social Institute

MERCOSUR - *Mercado Común del Sur*. Common Southern Market

MIDES - *Ministerio de Desarrollo Social*. Ministry of Social Development

OAS - the Organization of American States

OCB - *Organização das Cooperativas Brasileiras*. the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives

ON - *Oficina de Negocios*. Business Office

PANES - *Programas de Atención a la Emergencia Social*. Programs for Attention to Social Emergency

RECM - *Reunión Especializada de Cooperativas de MERCOSUR*. The Special Council of MERCOSUR Cooperatives

RELACC - *Red Latinoamericana de Comercialización Comunitaria*. The Latin American Network for Community-based Marketing

RILESS - *Red de Investigadores Latinoamericanos de Economía Social y Solidaria*. Network of Latin American Researchers of Social and Solidarity Economy

RIPESS - *Red Intercontinental de Promoción de Economía Social y Solidaria*. The Intercontinental Network for the promotion of Social and Solidarity Economies

RMADS - *Reunión de Ministros y Autoridades de Desarrollo Social*. Council of MERCOSUR Ministers and Social Development Authorities

SENAES - *Secretaría Nacional de Economía Solidaria*. The National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy

SSE - Social and Solidarity Economy

UN - The United Nations

UNASUR - *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*. Union of South American Nations.

UNDP - The United Nations Development Program

UNICAFES - *União Nacional das Cooperativas da Agricultura Familiar e Economia Solidária*. The National Union of Family Farm Cooperatives and Solidarity Economy

UNISOL - *Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários*. Center for Cooperatives and Solidarity Enterprise

Introduction

The financial and ecological crises have exposed the limits of the dominant conceptions of development that underpinned the neoliberal hegemonic order and shaped globalization processes with more intensity since the 1990s. In South America, the failure of the neoliberal experiment resulted in sweeping socio-political transformations in national polities where the state was recaptured as a legitimate instrument for development and citizenship rights (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela). At the core of calls for alternative economic models is a concern with the social injustice caused by unchecked capitalist development. In this context, ideas that seek alternatives to market-based development are well received in current policy debates. This is the case of social development and social solidarity economy (SSE). In recent years several governments have set up national institutions and policies to promote this agenda.

A renewed drive for regional integration has also been a key feature of the transformations carried out by popular progressive governments in the aftermath of the crisis of neoliberalism. The creation of UNASUR, the expanded membership of MERCOSUR with the incorporation of Venezuela and its greater political character beyond its market integration orientation, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), and the creation of Council of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) are indicative of emerging forms of post-neoliberal regionalism (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012, Rodríguez-Garavito, Barrett and Chávez 2008). Unlike regional integration under the hegemonic mantle of the Washington consensus, current regionalism seeks diplomatic decision-making procedures in cases of internal as well as extra regional conflicts. Likewise, it also pursues political cooperation in an increasingly broad range of policy issues.

Governments are taking up the SSE agenda as part of region-building efforts. MERCOSUR and UNASUR have begun to incorporate SSE discourse into their agendas and frame organizations like cooperatives as drivers of integration, specifically in frontier zones. The Southern Market (MERCOSUR) is the leading space for the regionalization of the SSE agenda while Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) has only recently adopted it as another goal for policy coordination in addition to defense, infrastructure, energy, health and others.

The construction of regional policy frameworks of SSE is far from being a linear and uncontested process. One of the core points of contention is the scope of

the SSE agenda and the policy strategies that can be articulated through a regional platform.

One view sees SSE as a means to create more socially inclusive forms of capitalist development. The creation of a common SSE language and experimentation with policy options of SSE generate new institutional and political capacities but also a sense of common regional identity. This perspective is consistent with the leadership of popular leftist governments - notably from Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela - in attaining unprecedented levels of cohesive regional governance in South America with the aim of building a regional political bloc. It is also inscribed in ongoing efforts to develop autonomous regional instruments, such as a South American Development Bank.

The scope of the SSE agenda in each country is nonetheless conditioned by the particular configuration of ideological orientations of member states, political economy conditions and arrangement of socio-economic actors at play. Where Chile, Peru, and Colombia seek integration into globalization through export-led market strategies based on extractive sectors, other countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay (and to some extent Ecuador, Venezuela and Paraguay) pursue a more balanced approach that seeks economic diversification of production and an active role of the state in development policies. The margins to advance substantive SSE agendas at the regional levels are related to such cleavages. SSE is therefore one of the discursive policy spaces where a debate on region-building takes place in the context of post-neoliberalism.

Another view conceives of SSE as a political opportunity to leverage support for the creation of new economic paradigms beyond capitalism. The current regional context is favorable for the advancement of more horizontal forms of economic and social relations that challenge capitalist organizing. The alignment of progressive governments in support of socially inclusive policies and regional integration is unprecedented in Latin America. Likewise, the crisis of neoliberal hegemony, manifested in the political disarray facing Europe and the uncertainty that social turmoil may lead to uncertain outcomes, creates conditions to explore different agendas that can be implemented both nationally and regionally. This is interpreted by advocates of SSE as a unique historical conjuncture.

The aspiration of this more ambitious SSE perspective also understands that

there are structural constraints to how much a SSE agenda can effectively change the economy. Despite the transformation attained in some countries - in terms of the expansion of citizenship rights through employment generation, access to health and education public services, political representation - there is also continued reliance on concentrated economic sectors, which have in many cases become consolidated further. This is the case of extractive industries and agri-business (Manzanal, 2007) as well as of the some manufacturing and construction sectors in Brazil. These played a key role in sustaining economic growth (Stewart, 2011; Baer, 2008: 1), enabling countries to successfully withstand and mitigate the impacts of the global economic crisis. The increased standing of these economic sectors also set limits to the transformative potential of current progressive governments, which social actors committed to alternative forms of economic organizing aspire to overcome.

This understanding of SSE as a new paradigm threatens centers of existing economic power and therefore the advancement of this political agenda is likely to come up against strong resistance from those interest groups and/or get watered down in the policy-making process to a point that it does not in fact present such a threat. Here, SSE is not seen as a closed agenda but as a dynamic process of social movement construction; a discourse coalition that exploits the contradictions of ongoing national processes in South America and regional agendas aiming at the construction of a new economic paradigm.

The lack of precise definitions apparent in the SSE regional policy framework leaves space for a set of competing discourses where political, economic and social actors' expectations and influence converge and contest each other. In the context of this debate, this paper looks at how the SSE discourse has been deployed at the regional level and the implications of these new policy

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