

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?

UNTFSSSE International Conference

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed by all United Nations member states in 2015, provides a framework for tracking progress of specific development goals, and of more holistic and integrated patterns of development. The emphasis within the 2030 Agenda on national goals and targets, however, leaves open the question of how the SDGs will be implemented at the local level and grounded in local realities. In this context, policy makers are paying increasing attention to social and solidarity economy (SSE) as a means of regenerating and developing local areas. While there is a growing body of research and knowledge on SSE, and in particular on local experiences related to specific organizations or grassroots initiatives, there has been little attempt to systematically analyse the contribution of SSE to the SDGs, with accounts remaining dispersed and anecdotal. Research which lacks robust methodologies and indicators to measure the impact of SSE on sustainable development can also be prone to romanticizing the role of SSE in achieving the SDGs. Critical analysis of the challenges and opportunities for SSE, and the development of adequate methodologies and indicators to measure the contribution of SSE to achieving the SDGs, are needed to inform policy making and advocacy on inclusive and sustainable development now more than ever.

On 25-26 June 2019, the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE) convened a conference in Geneva on *Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?* The main objectives of the conference were to:

- understand SSE development in different regions and territories;
- examine the role of SSE as a means of implementation for the SDGs in diverse local contexts; and
- identify robust methodologies and innovative solutions for measuring SSE and its impacts.

Over forty speakers presented papers during the twelve conference sessions. The speakers were identified through a Call for Papers that generated proposals from nearly 320 researchers from 125 countries. The conference drew in a broad and varied audience of about 200 participants from academia (40%), SSE and NGO sector (30%) and UN and government representatives (30%). The speakers included Chokri Ben Hassen (Minister of Social and Solidarity Economy, Tunisia), Christophe Itier (European Union High Commissioner for SSE and Social Innovation, France), Elayne Whyte Gomez (Permanent Representative of Costa Rica), María Antonia Pérez León (General Director of Social Economy and CSR at the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, Spain) and senior staff members from members and observers of the UNTFSSSE¹.

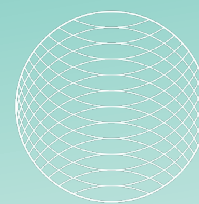
In addition to parallel sessions where papers were presented, UNTFSSSE members and observers organized two special sessions and four lunchtime sessions dealing with a number of issues associated with the conference themes (see below). These additional sessions were entitled **Social and Solidarity Economy Impacts for the Sustainable Development Goals** (organized

by ICA, CIRIEC and SSE International Forum); **Maximizing Social Impact of SSE for Inclusive Cities through Innovative Partnerships of Local Governments** (GSEF and OECD); **Building the SSE Movement from the Local to Global** (RIPESS); **European Social Economy Regions Initiative** (European Commission); **The Role of Local Governments in Promoting SSE—Networking Session for Government Representatives and Policy Makers** (GSEF); and **SSE and South-South and Triangular Cooperation** (ILO).

Box 1. What is 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 (UN TFSSE 2014: *Social and Solidarity Economy and the Challenge of Sustainable Development. A Position Paper by the TFSSE*).

Conference Summary



The forty-three conference papers provided a rich body of evidence on favourable institutional and policy ecosystems for scaling up SSE and the role of SSE in achieving the SDGs. They also introduced diverse approaches to measuring the impact of SSE on inclusive and sustainable development. These conference papers were organized through [six conference themes](#):

-  Institutions and Policies for Scaling and Integrating Social and Solidarity Economy
-  Tracing the Evolution of Social and Solidarity Economy in Different Local Contexts
-  Social and Solidarity Economy for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality
-  Social and Solidarity Economy for Food and Agriculture
-  Social and Solidarity Economy as an Eco-social Approach for the Sustainable Development Goals
-  Theories, Concepts and Impact Measurement

Key questions that were addressed and debated during the conference are outlined in this summary. Attributions in parentheses refer to speakers at the conference. Their papers and presentations can be found in the [UNTFSSSE Knowledge Hub](#) (see Box 2). A brief video with some highlights of the conference is also available [online](#).

How have SSE organizations evolved in different local contexts? What makes them scale up?

One of the key topics discussed throughout the conference was trajectories of SSE development in diverse local contexts. “What has triggered the emergence of SSE organizations and enterprises (SSEOs)?” and “What policies and institutions constitute an enabling environment for scaling up SSE?” were the critical questions asked by the participants. In particular, the four sessions on the theme of **Tracing the Evolution of Social and Solidarity Economy in Different Local Contexts** and the session on **Institutions and Policies for Scaling and Integrating Social and Solidarity Economy** introduced various cases of SSE development and how it has been scaled up with a focus on the enabling factors and barriers. They included different local cases in Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, France, India, Italy, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sudan, Turkey and the United States. The following elements were highlighted as crucial drivers for establishing and scaling up SSE:

- constitutions, laws, or regulations at national or local levels to legally recognize SSEOs;
- provision of start-up capital with a clear purpose to improve the livelihoods of the vulnerable, and collective management;
- partnerships with international organizations and diverse local stakeholders from different sectors for the financing, production, trade and consumption of SSE goods and services.

Legal recognition is one of the central drivers to expand SSE, as the cases of Brazil, Costa Rica, France, Italy, Morocco, South Korea, Spain and Turkey demonstrate. It is a particularly important issue in integrating informal workers into legal and policy frameworks and governance structures and empowering them to play a significant role in contributing to achieving the SDGs ([Fatima Arib, Jutta Gutberlet](#)). Legal recognition without institutional mechanisms for participation, however, tends to exclude social enterprises from the process of agenda setting and the elaboration of integrated development plans, which consequently undermines the potential of SSE to contribute to a broader range of the SDGs ([Sokeibelemaye Nwauche](#)).

SSE can scale up even in the absence of legal recognition of SSE or within a weak legal framework for SSE. Social movements such as the “Land gift movement” in Tamil Nadu, India, played a significant role in establishing the Association for Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA) which collectively manages farmland given by landowners ([Yvon Poirier and Kumar Loganathan](#)). The ASSEFA spread to six other states and created thousands of self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-managed villages in India. It points to the importance of initial capital to start economic activities, which is one of the pertinent obstacles to organizing SSE in many local contexts in developing countries. Growth patterns of SSEOs are uneven depending on various factors within given political, economic, social and environmental conditions. Powerful markets such as real estate markets often influence the development of SSE, creating uneven patterns of SSE types and activities. This problem needs to be recognized and tackled by the SSE movement ([Maliha Safri](#)).

It was broadly agreed, however, that SSE is scaling up fast, and its contribution to achieving the SDGs is effective and sustainable when the economic activities of SSE are conducted in collaboration with a broad range of SDG stakeholders at all levels of governance. Prime examples are: SSEOs providing food to a Brazilian public university within the framework of

the Food Acquisition Programme in Porto Alegre, Brazil ([Ludymila Schulz Barroso](#), [Eliziane Nicolodi Francescato Ruiz](#) and [Rozane Marcia Triches](#)); cooperatives in the health sector working with health ministries and international organizations in Cameroon and Kenya ([Jean-Pierre Girard](#)); ASSEFA working in partnership with the national and state governments and with international organizations working on poverty reduction and food security ([Yvon Poirier](#) and [Kumar Loganathan](#)); rapid expansion of SSE through partnership with the government in Daegu, South Korea ([Eun Sun Lee](#)); cooperatives which established partnerships with other cooperative and capitalist companies in Emilia-Romagna, Italy ([Vera Negri Zamagni](#)); local SSEOs which engaged with local development projects based on participatory governance and public-private co-construction of public policies ([Unai Villalba-Eguiluz](#), [Andoni Egia Olaizola](#), and [Juan Carlos Pérez de Mendiguren](#)); and community cooperatives that preserve, regenerate and manage community assets and provide public services via a wide range of partnerships with local institutions in Italy ([Michele Bianchi](#) and [Marcelo Vieta](#)). The importance of paying attention to the concepts of interconnected territories and structures was also highlighted since SSE partnership is often established between actors from different fields, structures or governance systems ([Geneviève Fontaine](#)).

Inclusion of diverse actors should be a key principle in designing and implementing partnerships. SSEOs whose production and sales are solely dependent upon, or predominantly shaped by, local government procurement tend to suffer from incoherent policies, conflicts between political parties ruling different levels of government, or both. Dairy cooperatives in Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, Turkey, faced precisely these problems and had to stop providing milk products to public schools ([Aylin Çiğdem Köne](#) and [Güneş Kurtuluş](#)). Political autonomy of SSE is particularly important in conflict and post-conflict contexts. In Nepal, non-partisan cooperative membership and activities to address people's concerns at grassroots level during the period of conflict (1997-2007) were one of the significant factors which explain the rapid expansion of cooperatives in numbers and share of the economy ([Kanak Kanti Bagchi](#) and [Ganesh Prasad Gautam](#)).

How is SSE contributing to achieving the SDGs in the local context?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes implementation at the local or sub-national level. SSEOs, with their wide range of competencies,

Box 2. What is the UN TFSSE?

The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (TFSSE) was established in 2013 to raise the visibility of 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. The UN TFSSE brings together UN agencies and other inter-governmental organizations, as well as umbrella associations of SSE networks as members and observers. The SSE Knowledge Hub for the SDGs, a platform that gathers research on the potential of SSE for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put forward by the 2030 Agenda, was established in 2018. UNRISD is the implementing agency of the SSE Knowledge Hub for the SDGs.

have the potential to play a great role in supporting the design and implementation of development policies and programmes to achieve the SDGs, ranging from territorial or urban planning to building safe, inclusive and resilient infrastructure and the delivery of essential services. The diverse pathways by which SSE contributes to achieving different SDGs were a subject of much discussion at the conference.

Figure 1. The SDGs addressed by the 43 conference papers



Note: The size of the circles represents the number of papers discussing how SSE contributes to achieving the specific SDG. The thickness of the lines represents the number of times two SDGs were discussed together in the same paper.

During the conference, all papers provided evidence that SSEOs contribute to achieving multiple goals and targets. In particular, the papers presented at the three sessions on **Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality**, **Food and Agriculture**, and **Eco-social Approach** explained diverse pathways, enabling factors and obstacles faced by SSE in achieving the SDGs.



Women's empowerment and gender equality

Many speakers' presentations featured SSEOs in which more women than men actively participate. Women's knowledge, experience and skills have been critical assets for SSEOs, whether producing manufactured goods, providing care or supporting other informal and unpaid work ([Teresa Cunha](#)). SSEOs often transform women's knowledge and skills typically used for unpaid work into remunerated labour. Women's contribution to achieving the SDGs has been particularly notable during times of economic recession, conflict and post-conflict ([Ana Oliveira Blanco and María Bastida Domínguez](#); [Vanêssa Pereira Simon](#); [Judith Hitchman](#)).

SSE organizations can be more attractive to women in the labour market than for-profit enterprises since the intrinsic values of SSE such as equality, solidarity and cooperation are more likely to empower them. For instance, in Galicia, Spain, more women than men organized and participated in SSEOs during the 2010-2011 economic crisis and those organizations became a primary vehicle for women's empowerment and gender equality after the economic crisis (SDGs 5 and 10) ([Ana Oliveira Blanco and María Bastida Domínguez](#)).

SSE's role in achieving the United Nations' [Women, Peace and Security](#) agenda directly related to SDGs 5 and 16 was also highlighted. Women-centred savings and credit cooperatives in Nepal and producer and worker cooperatives belonging to the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, India, demonstrated the role of SSEOs in restoring eroded trust between communities and framing the discourse for livelihoods and survival. Their activities and mode of operation were different from those of organizations leading the process of neoliberal peacebuilding and reconstruction based on competition and growth-oriented economic policies ([Smita Ramnarain and Suzanne Bergeron](#)).

The success of SSEOs in prioritizing the "social" over "profit" is good news if, and only if, they can successfully incorporate their cultural, political and ethical values and principles into their operations. Without them, SSEOs framed by narrowly defined social objectives such as poverty reduction can significantly undermine the autonomy and potential of women to contribute to achieving the SDGs. When there are more men than women in SSE, or men are in dominant management positions while women take on highly gendered functions, this also indicates a crisis in the values and principles of SSE ([Vanêssa Pereira Simon](#)).

Realizing the potential of women in the context of SSE requires institutional and policy support at all levels of governance: subnational, national, regional and international governance, and including organized civil society and social movements, as seen in the case of fair trade cooperatives in Colombia ([Marco Coscione](#)). The national framework is particularly important given its scope of influence. In Argentina, cooperative promotion programmes in place from 2003 to 2015 created numerous SSEOs with great potential to reduce poverty (SDG 1) and inequality (SDG 10), generate decent work (SDG 8) and empower women (SDG 5). The abolition of the programmes resulted in a significant reduction of SSE's capacity to achieve these SDGs, in particular generating decent work and gender equality ([Malena Victoria Hopp](#)). Without carefully designed policies and institutions to reduce fragility and vulnerability and enhance capacity, SSEOs which have already become significant players for community development in countries like India cannot fully realize their potential to achieve the SDGs ([Anup Dash](#)).

Food and agriculture

Sustainable food and agricultural systems are crucial to achieving multiple SDGs within and beyond local areas since they cut across all the SDGs. The session on **Social and Solidarity Economy for Food and Agriculture** addressed the question of how SSE reduces environmental harm, social injustice and



democratic deficits in agri-food systems. Speakers discussed diverse pathways by which SSE is contributing to building sustainable agri-food chains from both micro and macro perspectives.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), by definition, refers to SSE based on the agroecological model of production and consumption. Using CSA to pursue food sovereignty by linking consumers with producers and sharing the risks and benefits can contribute to achieving most of the SDGs, namely SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 ([Judith Hitchman](#)). One form of CSA presented at the conference was a consumers' cooperative in Athens, Greece, which was established during the post-2008 economic crisis. It rationalized the purchase of foods, optimized the cost-benefit ratio, increased quality of food, built awareness of broader social and political goals and ultimately generated reciprocal transformative impacts on both the small farmers and consumers by linking consumers and producers directly ([Maria Partalidou and Theodosia Anthopoulou](#)).

The cases of the Food, Culture and Community Collaborative in Northern Manitoba, Canada, and the Association of Settled Women in the municipality of Araraquara, Brazil, showed another form of agroecological SSE which is anchored in the local area ([Jennifer Sumner, M. Derya Tarhan, and J. J. McMurtry; Leandro Pereira Morais](#)). Community ownership and control of SSEOs are central to the success of the sustainable food chains managed by these SSE organizations. Multiple mechanisms were needed to produce and consume in a way that shares risks and benefits and shortens the supply chain without sacrificing efficiencies in delivery time, inventories and costs. Among the multiple mechanisms used to guarantee food security for those facing chronic food risk and socio-economic

to which small farmers and their organizations have easy access, and institutions ensuring food chain transparency about locality and quality ([Maria Partalidou and Theodosia Anthopoulou](#)).

Eco-social approach



The principles and values underpinning SSE are a perfect fit for the circular economy, a concept closely aligned with SDG 12 and SDG 8. To realize their potential for a circular economy, SSEOs require a regulatory framework and appropriate policies. The session on **Social and Solidarity Economy as an Eco-social Approach for the Sustainable Development Goals** addressed the question of what institutional and policy support is needed to realize the values and principles of the circular economy and maximize the potential of SSE to contribute to achieving the ecological and social goals and targets of Agenda 2030.

SSEOs in Antwerp and Gent in Belgium and various local areas in the Netherlands have made efforts to move beyond the conventional approach to the circular economy. Shifting the focus from the reuse of clothing and shoes to transforming textile waste into a new product, they have showed to what extent SSE can be true to ecological principles and values in the transition to the circular economy. It was emphasized that creating a new area of recycling

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