

Social and Solidarity Economy

Between Emancipation and Reproduction

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Occasional Paper 2

Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy

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Acronyms

ANIMAR	The Portuguese Association of Local Development
ANTEAG	National Association of Workers in Self-Managed Enterprizes (Brazil)
CASES	Cooperative António Sérgio for the Social Economy (Portugal)
CERCI	Network of Cooperatives for the Education and Rehabilitation of Handicapped Children (Portugal)
CNES	National Council for Social Economy (Portugal)
CONCRAB	National Confederation of Brazilian Agrarian Reform Cooperatives
IPSS	Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (Portugal)
SAAL	Mobile Service for Local Support (Portugal)
SENAES	National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy (Brazil)
SIES	Solidarity Economy Information System (Brazil)
SSE	Social and solidarity economy
UNISOL	Union of Cooperatives and Solidarity Enterprizes (Brazil)

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Summary

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) is increasingly attracting the attention of policy makers, practitioners and social scientists worldwide. For some, it contributes to social cohesion by addressing state and market failures; for others, it provides an alternative model to current neoliberal development patterns; for its critics, it is just another facet of contemporary capitalism.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine SSE in light of these different trends, while also addressing the issue of market and state relations. The paper presents a theoretical reflection and an empirical comparative analysis of the cases of Brazil and Portugal, which illustrate the different trends and challenges that SSE faces.

While the fundamental question of whether SSE is a product and instrument of the capitalist system or represents an emancipatory alternative remains unresolved, findings from Brazil and Portugal show how SSE can be envisaged in three main ways: as a market-oriented initiative, as a method of local development or as a conscious project of social transformation.

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Introduction

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) is not something new. Even if the label is recent and embodies a new framework, the idea of cooperation and self-management is present at least since the nineteenth century. Defourny and Develtere (1997) find its roots in the most ancient forms of human association, such as the primitive artisans' guilds in Africa and pre-colonial America.

However, in recent decades, the context of growing contradictions and failures in the dominant capitalist system has opened up the space for different theories and experiences worldwide that proclaim SSE as a form of resistance and emancipation from neoliberal globalization, a pathway for a more equal and sustainable society. Numerous meetings, forums and networks of SSE partisans and activists claim the integration of solidarity as a core principle for an alternative globalization. This can be seen, for instance, in the World Social Forums or in the recent United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), in which a large group of organizations and social movements proclaimed a declaration of support for SSE.

Long-standing mainstream debates tend to contrast the self-regulating market with the role of the state in the foundation of social organization and the delivery of social welfare. SSE proponents, instead, introduce another component of social life, which is neither the business sector nor the state.

Our research is focused on the positioning of SSE initiatives within a global restructuring context. The paper presents a theoretical reflection on SSE and draws on preliminary empirical evidence from the cases of Brazil and Portugal. The goal is to analyze the dynamics that characterize this "sector" within the context of wider changes in the world system, while questioning its role in social transformation or reproduction. Is SSE a counter-hegemonic and emancipatory alternative or is it a product and an instrument of the capitalist system, contributing to its reproduction? In this paper we provide some clues to begin analyzing this question.

Background

Historically, SSE has its origins in the social economy that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, as an attempt to counter the individualism and competition of the political economy born in industrial societies. It is connected to the "social issue" and the emergence of new situations of poverty and social exclusion. Charles Gide (1905) defines it as the economy of the poor, of those who remain outside the political economy.

According to this perspective, the aim was to fight poverty through a collective approach, in opposition to the dominant individualism. On the other hand, it also intended to address social needs through economy, thus the term *social economy*. Social economy involves both practical initiatives, such as workers' cooperatives, and philosophic and ideological debates and experiences, such as utopic socialism and anarchism, among others. Its typical forms are cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations.

The concept of *solidarity* economy only arises in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in a francophone European context (Laville and Eme 1988), to designate new forms of social economy that emerge in response to a “new social issue”, related to new social needs. Thus, it encompasses issues related to the environment, citizenship, long-term unemployment, the living conditions of elderly people, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable populations.

Hence, the term *social and solidarity economy* intends to embrace a diversity of terms and experiences worldwide, from the most traditional forms of social economy to the multiplicity of formal and informal initiatives that have emerged more recently under the name of solidarity economy. Therefore, the concept of SSE can be defined as a set of economic activities based on collective patrimony and cooperation. It generally assumes autonomy and democratic decision-making processes as distinctive features, and the realization of economic activities aims not at the individual distribution of profits (as in the business sector), but at the satisfaction of collective purposes, related to employment, citizenship, environment, social justice, education or culture.

However, it is worth noting that there is no consensual terminology for SSE and its acceptance varies according to national specificities. The boundaries are vague, which denotes a lack of theoretical foundations and empirical structuring.

The Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (see, for instance, Salamon et al. 2000) provides a set of theoretical and analytical tools to approach this sector in a comparative manner. However, it excludes cooperatives, which are a relevant actor of SSE both in Brazil and Portugal. My definition differs from that of the strictly *non-for-profit sector*, since there may be profit (as in the case of cooperatives), but it should be reinvested for collective purposes, so that the logic of the market should be subordinated to that of solidarity.

In this context, SSE has been highlighted, both by scholars and its protagonists, as an alternative to capitalist domination and reproduction. Thus, it can be theorized as part of the movement of “counter-hegemonic globalization”¹ (Evans 2008). Using the analytical key provided by Wright (2010), SSE may be conceived as a “real utopia” since it presents a plausible vision of a radical alternative and a project of emancipatory social change.

The ‘social economy’ constitutes an alternative way of directly organizing economic

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