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Solidarity Economy as Part of Popular Security Enhancing Practices

A Neo-Polanyian Conceptual Framework

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Draft paper prepared for the UNRISD Conference

Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy

6–8 May 2013, Geneva, Switzerland

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Abstract

Based on a neo-Polanyian framework, this paper develops a conceptualization of solidarity economy as part of a ‘popular economy’ aiming at the securization of livelihoods. It relies on an original cross-analysis of case studies collected in *Securing Livelihoods. Informal Economy Practices and Institutions* (Hillenkamp, Lapeyre and Lemaître [eds.], Oxford University Press [*forthcoming*]). We argue that popular and solidarity economy can be analyzed through the four principles of economic integration identified by Karl Polanyi – market, redistribution, reciprocity and householding – when understood as modalities of interdependence. This conceptualization allows a critical distinction between solidarity, protection and domination. Besides, it draws attention to the formal *and* informal institutions of protection and solidarity and to the importance to explore cross-scale influences to formulate and implement relevant policies to strengthen adaptive capacities in the popular and solidarity economy.

Introduction

The concept of ‘popular economy’ (*economía popular*) can be traced back to the 1980s in Latin America. Introduced by sociologists and economists of the region, notably Razeto (1984), Coraggio (1994), Nuñez (1996) and Sarria Icaza and Tiriba (2006), it proposes a new approach to practices of production, financing, exchange and consumption outside the public and the private capitalist sectors. Three features of this economy are emphasized:

- (a) popular economy is based on the use of labour and locally available resources (Coraggio, 2006);
- (b) it follows a rationality of “reproduction of life” which does not ignore, but subsumes instrumental rationality (Hinkelammert and Mora Jiménez, 2009);
- (c) it aims at securing livelihoods in contexts of vulnerability, prior to expanding activity or accumulating capital (Hillenkamp *et al.*, forthcoming).

This approach has found resonance in the Francophone development studies (notably Nyssens, 1994; Peemans, 1997; Charlier, 2006; Hillenkamp, 2009; Lemaître, 2009). More recently, it is also being used by anthropologists in the English-speaking world to address monetary transactions (Guyer, 2004) and financial practices (Hull and James, 2012) in contexts of high informality in Africa, taking into account “the embeddedness of economic practices and institutions in broader cultural milieus” (*ibid.*: 9).

Popular economy focuses on the logics of a wide range of activities, ranging from mere subsistence strategies to individual and family-based initiatives, micro- and small enterprises, unions of producers, associations and cooperatives. As an approach, popular economy is opposed to modernization theories which, by focusing on investment, productivity and competitiveness, widely ignore these inner logics. It also differs from informal economy. While informality may indeed be high within popular economy, the focus here is not on the relationship to the State and the process of rationalization (Hart, 2006), nor on the conditions of employment and lack of social protection (ILO, 2009). Popular economy recognizes the relationship with the public and private sectors and institutions starting from its own socioeconomic logics. Far from idealizing popular groups and practices, it has led, in particular, to a renewed debate on the internal expression of dependence in peripheral countries, by showing evidence of heterogeneous forms of labour control (Quijano, 1990) and the risk of subordination to national and international capital (Coraggio, 2006).

In the paper, we consider solidarity economy as part of popular economy. It helps contextualizing it, by considering it as part of multiple strategies implemented by individuals, families and communities to enhance the security of their livelihoods in contexts of vulnerability. It leads to address solidarity throughout the interdependences and multiple socioeconomic practices – consumption, debt and credit, production and exchange – and coordination mechanisms which help securing livelihoods. It leads to consider different types of relationships – from alter egos to hierarchy – and logics – from voluntary commitment to obligation – upon which solidarity can be based, avoiding any idealization. Giving priority to contextualization rather than defining solidarity economy as an “alternative” from the outset thus allows analyzing the tensions between solidarity economy and the market, considering the risk of distension of solidarity along with hopes of success and opportunities for emancipation.

Finally, contextualizing solidarity economy within popular economy helps us deepening our understanding of local capabilities and identifying the existing and missing connection to multiscalar public policies – i.e. public policies aiming at strengthening adaptive capacities and development dynamics at micro, meso and macro levels (Lapeyre, 2013). The idea that actors from the popular economy have capabilities, and not just vulnerabilities, has received increasing recognition in policy-making during the past 30 years (Scott, 1985; Anderson and Woodrow, 1989/98; Cannon, 2008). When this was “discovered” in the early 1970s, it signaled the beginning of a shift in perceptions about popular socioeconomic practices that went beyond automatically associating them with poverty and dualistic conceptions of the economy whereby they were the remnants of a traditional, pre-capitalist sector (Hart, 1973). Instead, popular economy actors came to be recognized for their capacity to combine production activities, the construction of networks of reciprocity and solidarity, and their adaptive capacities to secure their livelihoods despite the multiform vulnerabilities they faced (Trefon et al., 2004). This is at the heart of approaches which recognize that local social systems can, and do, self-organize, despite limitations and stress factors (Berkes et al., 2003). In many different places, people have been rethinking local risk management strategies and how scarce or declining resources should be allocated using multidimensional and associative strategies.

Setting the scene

This paper is based on a collection of case studies forthcoming in *Securing livelihoods. Informal economy practices and institutions* (Hillenkamp, Lapeyre and Lemaître [eds.], Oxford, Oxford University Press). The book's overall aim is to contribute to a broadening and deepening of our understanding of the logic and socio-economic practices of actors operating in the popular economy. It focuses on the vulnerabilities of these actors, resulting from high exposure to different risks combined with low social protection, and on the interactions between vulnerability and poverty. It considers the security of livelihoods as the guiding principle for multiple practices in this economy. Thirteen studies, based on careful analyses of first-hand qualitative and quantitative empirical data in different contexts in Africa, Latin America and Asia, contribute to this multidisciplinary discussion.

Especially, several chapters of the book analyze the adaptive capacities of popular economy actors. They describe how people develop their own strategies to solve their problems through the use of interpersonal networks, associations and other community-based arrangements. Moreover, they show that popular economy actors systematically reposition themselves vis-à-vis the State, markets, international and national policies with the aim of enhancing their economic and social security, and they may do this either individually or collectively. The book emphasizes how adaptability of the popular economy can be influenced by such factors as the macroeconomic context, access to financial, technological and information resources, infrastructure, social protection schemes and the institutional environment within which adaptations occur. The case studies stress the need to reformulate questions relating to policy intervention based on a more thorough understanding of the perspective of these actors.

Theoretical framework: towards a substantive understanding of the economy

We build on a *substantive* understanding of the economy derived from Polanyi's (1944) intellectual legacy. Polanyi sought to reconceptualize the economy in a pluralistic sense, moving away from a focus on utility-maximizing behaviour in a context of scarcity of resources (Robbins, 1932). He believed that for understanding an economy it is necessary to study all phenomena related to interdependencies, both among human beings and between human beings and their natural environment. Based on this

understanding, he showed that societies embody a plurality of principles of economic integration – the market, redistribution, reciprocity and householding – in diverse ways in time and space.

The recognition of this plurality first draws attention to the multiplicity of existing resources: those originating from the market, redistribution mechanisms at various levels and those issued from relations of reciprocity as well as from the households. This recognition also leads to a reflection on the multiplicity of forms of exchange based on the principles of integration. More importantly, according to Polanyi, the principles represent the fundamental logic that gives unity and stability to the economic process (Polanyi, 1957: 249). The principles underlie different types of resources and exchanges, but are not limited to the sphere of circulation alone; they include all spheres of activity that make up the economy in a substantive sense: circulation and exchanges or transfers, as well as production, financing and consumption by which people sustain themselves. They represent ideal modalities of interdependence in these different spheres: interdependence resulting mechanically from price fluctuations in the case of the market; interdependence based on centralized systems in the case of redistribution; instituted complementarity, for example based on a symmetric pattern, in the case of reciprocity; and lastly, interdependence within a group through sharing – usually a domestic group – in the case of householding (Hillenkamp, 2013) (see table 1). The principles of economic integration therefore generate different types of institutional structures, which can be combined in multiple configurations. They form a conceptual framework that takes into account the diversity of socio-economic practices of popular actors, without assuming them to be evolving towards a model of a “modern” capitalist enterprise.

Table 1: Polanyi’s principles of economic integration as modalities of interdependence in production, financing, exchange or transfer, and consumption

Principle	Reciprocity	Redistribution	Householding	Market
Type of interdependence	Instituted complementarity	Instituted centrality	Varying (instituted complementarity or centrality or other)	Mechanical competition
Type of institutional structure	Horizontal (e.g. symmetric)	Vertical (e.g. hierarchical)	Domestic group, in some cases autarkic	Market system
Logic of action	Obligation among peers	Obligation in a (personal or functional) centralized system	Sharing production and work for satisfying the needs of the group	Bargaining in one’s own interest

Source: adapted from Hillenkamp (2013)

A closer observation of the way popular actors secure their livelihoods shows multiple patterns of petty accumulation based on a diversity of resources and types of interdependencies within families, communities, and professional, religious and other types of groups. These interdependencies not only give structure to economic practices; they also create different forms of protection, depending on the types of relationships mobilized: protection based on solidarity and obligation among peers, according to the principles of reciprocity or householding; vertical or hierarchical protection in the case of redistribution or other forms of householding.

It should be noted that the Polanyian approach to the economy has similarities with feminist approaches (Degavre and Lemaître, 2008). Indeed, it goes beyond the conventional approaches that have a narrow market and monetary view of the economy in order to highlight and legitimize all forms of production and circulation of goods and services, i.e. diverse economic means of securing livelihoods. In that sense, it sheds light on women's contributions to the economy and on their role in social protection, in general, and in economic solidarity initiatives, in particular.

Polanyi's principles of economic integration hence provide a heuristic framework for analyzing grassroots socio-economic practices for securing livelihoods. In the paper, we apply it to popular and solidarity economy. Solidarity economy is viewed as a set of practices aiming both at securing livelihoods and at democratizing the economy (Coraggio, 2002; Sarria Icaza, 2008; Hillenkamp, 2009; Lemaître, 2009). While popular economy encompasses diverse types of activities and organizations, one main common issue is the recognition of its economic and political structure. Solidarity-based initiatives could represent its "most advanced pole" (Sarria Icaza and Tiriba, 2006: 265): relying on a new application of the Polanyian principle of reciprocity in a context of democratic self-management, these initiatives have organized themselves at the political level in several countries, e.g. in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Brazil.

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