Conceptualizing SSE Towards Sustainable Consumption and Production

Learning across Contexts and Cultures, from Geneva to Manila

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Conceptualizing SSE towards sustainable consumption and production: Learning across contexts and cultures, from Geneva to Manila.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide a snapshot of social and solidarity economy (SSE) institutions and activities in two very different regions in order to reflect on how the SSE is being conceptualized and practiced in varying contexts and cultures, towards 'sustainable consumption and production' transitions. We consider the case of Geneva, Switzerland – where the APRES Chamber federates more than 260 SSE enterprises – and that of Metro Manila, the Philippines – where Asia's solidarity economy council will be headquartered. The two regions are at very different stages when it comes to establishing their local SSE network, with actors in Geneva more focused on putting established SSE guiding principles into practice within their organizations, and actors in Metro Manila engaged in a broader vision of achieving solidarity across supply chains. One of our main findings is that greater coherence is needed, not only within organizations, but also between organizations and regions of the world.

BIOS

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1 Introduction

Known under the acronym ESS (*économie sociale et solidaire*) in Spanish, French and Portuguese-speaking countries, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) emerged as a concept in Western Europe, and North and South America in the latter part of the twentieth century. While each region of the world can attest to a different historic tradition, the SSE builds on the social economy, which traces its roots to the early period of industrialization in Europe. SSE escapes any single definition but is generally understood as placing human beings at the centre of economic and social life, towards a new economic paradigm (ISGC, 1997). Interest in the social economy waned in the post-war period, at a time when market economies were the primary vector for regulating labor, property and currencies, while the welfare state was responsible for social action through the redistribution of wealth (Laville, 1994).

One of the main reasons for a renewed interest in the social economy in the 1980s and 1990s – albeit in new forms – was the failure of current forms of 'development', which have proven to be 'un-sustainable'. Widening inequalities and environmental ails, within countries and at a global scale, attest to the weaknesses of the 'sustainable development' paradigm and, more generally, what has been called a "crisis of values" (Laville and Cattani, 2006). In the oft-quoted Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) definition of 'sustainability', economic growth is seen as being compatible with social equity and environmental promotion – what is sometimes referred to as the triple bottom line. Yet in practice economic growth continues to trump social and environmental considerations. The focus of this paper is on how the social and solidarity economy may prove useful, both conceptually and in practice, towards a more 'sustainability' society.

Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) is a growing area of research and policy-making that is concerned with achieving higher standards of living for more people with a more equitable sharing of the global resource pie, while reducing energy and material consumption, avoiding resource depletion, and curbing local and global pollution. In the past, environmental problems were seen as being the sole responsibility of 'producers' with early pro-environmental efforts focused on cleaning up 'end of pipe' pollution. In the last thirty years, there has been a shift upstream to cleaner production processes and, in the past decade, consumption has been placed in the forefront (Cohen and Murphy, 2001). Our main hypothesis in this paper is that

upholding the values of the social and solidarity economy could lead to more sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The social and solidarity economy is increasingly being seen as a social movement (Draperi, 2011), made up of activities world-wide that include product and service offerings, as well as forms of fair trade, social entrepreneurship, community currencies and micro-credit programs, among others. These activities can be organized institutionally in different ways – from non-profits to mutual societies and cooperatives – depending on where they are based and on existing legal and institutional frameworks. What have been primarily local SSE actors have begun to federate into regional and international networks of members, including the *Réseau Intercontinental de Promotion de L'Économie Sociale Solidaire* (RIPESS) platform. In English-speaking countries, SSE is being explored as 'new economics' (Seyfang, 2008) or under the banner or the 'people' or 'human economy' (Hart et al., 2010). While the SSE has been very active in Latin America (Hillenkamp, 2011; Arruda, 2004; Singer, 2002), less is known about SSE initiatives in Asia and Africa.

This paper proposes to explore how the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has evolved in two very different cultural contexts – that of Metro Manila, the Philippines, and Geneva, Switzerland[1] – and how this economy may lead to more sustainable consumption and production (SCP) practices. The novelty of this approach is to bring together two parallel areas of research, practice and policy-making: the SSE and SCP. We begin with a theoretical exploration of how both SSE and SCP are conceptualized then follow with case studies based on research in each region. Our aim is to provide a snapshot of SSE institutions and activities in two very different parts of the world in order to understand how SSE is conceptualized and practiced in varying contexts and cultures, towards 'sustainable consumption and production' transitions.

2 Conceptual framework

In this section, we further define the terms 'social and solidarity economy' and 'sustainable consumption and production', highlighting certain concepts that we find relevant to analyzing SSE initiatives in Geneva and Metro Manila towards greater sustainability.

[1] We recognize that we are discussing two geographic regions of very different scale; our approach is not to compare, but to look 'elsewhere' in order to reflect back on lessons learned in each context.

2.1. Defining the social and solidarity economy

Polanyi argued that the economy is 'embedded' in the social realm (2001, originally published in 1944); it has a social purpose, and is subordinate to and inseparable from social relations – a framework that is very much at the heart of the SSE movement today. He famously proposed four ideal-type models that have been present in both pre-capitalist and contemporary societies: 1) the market economy; and non-market economies including 2) house-holding (relations between family members), 3) redistribution (usually through government), and 4) reciprocity. Conceptually, the SSE economy is associated with the notion of reciprocity, which is understood as going beyond duality to giving, receiving and the obligation to give in return that crosses through different subgroups, binding people together in solidarity (Polanyi, 1957). Polanyi expert Servet goes beyond this transactional definition: reciprocity also entails complementary relations based on voluntary interdependence (2007: 264), or being "invested with the potential of solidarity, consciously interdependent on others" (2006: 18). SSE activities therefore *foster solidarity* by placing more importance on people than on capital and profit, but also by working towards social benefits for a community or region through *the engagement of voluntarily interdependent people*.

In practice, a solidarity economy includes more than the reciprocity economy. As Laville (2003) has suggested, the different ideal types proposed by Polanyi are interdependent and function together towards greater solidarity, contributing to *a more plural economy*. Fair Trade initiatives, for example, are a form of reciprocity that engage with the market economy and can benefit from 'redistribution' in the form of State support. How the SSE either confronts or indeed bypasses the neoliberal market economy is a matter of some debate. Fraisse (2003) notes that the SSE is being interpreted in different ways around the world: for some, the SSE is about being *complementary to the market economy*; for others, social and political transformation comes about through the *transformation of the economy* as a whole, towards a post-capitalist agenda – a radical reading of SSE for some (Kawano, 2013). In this scenario, the SSE would eventually replace the current form of our increasingly globalized market economy.

For some, the SSE should also aim to promote *democratic processes* within organizations. As neither State actors, nor for-profit entities, SSE entities are self-managed and self-organized, with the exact type of management style dependent on the type of institutional arrangement they

adhere to (ranging from 'one person one vote' in cooperatives, to more participative management systems in non-profits[2]). According to Laville, SSE is also about "the desire to promote democracy on the local level through economic activity" (2003: 396), or the '*democratization' of the economy* based on the participatory engagement of all citizens (Defourny and Develtere, 1999; Fraisse et al., 2007). The vision is to include all types of people in economic life, engaging them to participate as economic actors.

2.2 Defining 'sustainable consumption and production'

The social economy predates the early environmental movement of the 1960s-1980s, in Western Europe and North America. This may explain that while environmental considerations are increasingly being introduced into SSE activities, they are not always central. In the 'sustainable consumption and production' research community, however, there is consensus that our global society is pushing up against biophysical limits. Researchers and practitioners agree that current patterns of resource consumption are leading to negative environmental impacts, such as local/global pollution and loss of biodiversity, and that these patterns are generally unequal, within localities and between regions. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (Georgescu-Roegen, 1966; Georgescu-Roegen, 1971), the father of bio-economics and later ecological economics, can be credited with moving from the solely price valuation of economic activities to quantifying their material and energy flows.

Understanding patterns of consumption and production through this lens is common practice; there is much less consensus, however, on how people or society might actually shift towards more sustainable patterns with a more equal and environmentally sound use of resources. SCP transitions would include *reduced material and energy throughputs,* in order to minimize the flow of resources, such as fossil fuels and raw materials. Driving towards more localized production and consumption systems by shortening supply chains could also be a factor under this criterion[3]. Tied to this would be the goal of *reducing negative impacts*, such as local and global

[2] An analysis of existing practices would still be needed to determine if the type of management style made explicit 'on paper' is actually taking place 'in practice', as this is not always the case. A cooperative requires democratic decision-making, but this may not always be the case.

[3] The environmental benefits of localization would need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, as not all local production systems are necessarily more 'sustainable' than more distant production systems. See Born B and Purcell M. (2006) Avoiding the Local Trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26.

pollution (including carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases), the loss of biodiversity, as well as the depletion of non-renewable resources.

How to conceptualize ‘pro-environmental behavior’ has occupied social and environmental scientists for quite some time, with differing perspectives on where the potential for change is located: at the individual level in cognitive processes, in interactions between people and technologies, or in cultural and institutional contexts (Sahakian, in press). The understanding of social life in ‘sustainable consumption’ research and policies continues to be dominated by the view of individuals as central to change, drawing from behavioral psychology approaches (Stern et al., 1997). While the goal of a more sustainable society, based on strong environmental and social considerations, is acknowledged as necessary, how to actually get there is less clear today, as the ‘individual’ approach based on raising awareness and attempting to affect behavior has not born fruit.

In the past ten years, there has been a revival of interest in social practice theory (Røpke, 2009; Wilhite, 2008; Warde, 2005; Shove, 2003; Reckwitz, 2002) in ‘sustainable consumption’ studies. In deflecting attention away from the individual as central to change, researchers in this area have been increasingly been attracted to the changing nature of practices over time, in relation to people, things and cultural contexts. Increasingly, empirical research is focusing on practices that relate to grassroots innovations, community-driven efforts, and habits and routines (Warde and Southerton, 2012). This is where the social and solidarity economy could prove useful, as potentially economic activities in this area could tangibly illustrate what ‘sustainable consumption and production’ actually looks like in practice.

3 Case studies