

Cooperatives in Social Development: Supporting Cooperatives as Sustainable and Successful Enterprises

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Cooperatives and the Social and Solidarity Economy: Where is the data?

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Within the scope of the Expert Group Meeting (EGM), entitled "*Cooperatives in Social Development: Supporting Cooperatives as Sustainable and Successful Enterprises*," held under the initiative of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2023, and in an attempt to address the constituent elements of its Concept Note, this text aims to point out some relevant aspects for the reflection of the session "*Cooperatives supporting implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*."

Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is considered by the United Nations as one of the auxiliary paths that can contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in their respective territories (Morais & Bacic, 2020, 2023). This finding gains more intensity in April 2023 when, on the occasion of the 66th Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, which approved the Resolution "Promoting SSE for Sustainable Development"³ This Resolution provided an official definition of SSE, as well as reiterated the recognition that SSE does indeed contribute to the implementation of the SDGs.

However, questions arise: how to measure this finding? How to assess and monitor the impacts? How to conceive metrics for this assertion?

Retrospectively, in 2016, the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE) launched a Position Paper, stating that SSE can play a key role in achieving the 2030 Agenda by promoting inclusive and sustainable development through concrete social, institutional, and technological innovations and practices. Another finding refers to the fact that SSE could even contribute to filling the gaps left by the MDGs since they focused on global and national levels, hiding subnational levels of implementation. In this work, for the first time, a proposal for a matrix was presented, linking the SDGs and their targets with potential contributions from SSE organizations and entities (UNTFSSSE, 2016).

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³ Available at: https://unsse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/N2308675_es.pdf

Later, Utting (2018), upon observing a context marked by the increasing number of governments promoting policies aimed at supporting SSE organizations and enterprises, proposed evaluating the effectiveness of these policies, under the scrutiny of the SDGs, dividing them into incremental policies and transformative policies. In this analysis, the author contemplated four sectors, namely: food security/sustainable agriculture, access to social services, women's economic empowerment, and decent employment/work. In his view, although governments' efforts to provide technical and financial resources for SSE were positive, the results were still fragmented, given the incompleteness of regulatory and normative environments. Although the work acknowledged the existence of specific factors that reduce or amplify SSE advances in each country, the idea that is advocated is that it is fundamental to improve regulatory and normative aspects in favor of SSE, integrating policies and actions, ensuring effective transformational action of the SDGs.

In the same year (2018), UNTFSSSE launched a Global Call for Papers on SDGs and SSE with the aim of identifying and mobilizing research from different regions and territories that critically examined the role of SSE as a means of implementing the SDGs. Out of approximately 300 papers submitted, 99 were selected, paying attention to the balance between countries, gender, and types of SSE organizations. Its authors, researchers from 60 countries, presented them at the International Labour Office in Geneva (Switzerland) in June 2019.

This meeting allowed for increasing the visibility of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within and outside the UN system, as well as generating inputs for public managers and researchers in the field. Additionally, it enabled researchers to share and exchange evidence and ideas on the articulation of social and solidarity economy (SSE), different contexts, and the contribution to sustainable development and SDG implementation. Throughout the event, the following questions were addressed: What special characteristics in SSE practices contribute to the SDGs? What is the comparative advantage compared to other companies? Which actors or institutions are essential to create a suitable environment for SDG implementation? And what is the possibility of replicating positive initiatives in other local contexts?

With the content produced at this event, which is published and freely available on the UNTFSSSE website⁴, Alarcón *et al.* (2021) conducted a survey of information regarding the studies presented. The authors, including the one of this work, mostly participants of the event, aimed to identify, with the aid of Multiple Correspondence Analysis, categories such as country of origin, language, type of SSE organization, methodology implemented, and SDGs under study. One of the themes included in the *Call for Papers* was how SSE measures its scale and impact in a context where statistics often cannot capture the diversity and complexity of its actions and actors, as well as definitions and indicators varying according to the region.

The main information found in this work of Alarcón *et al.* (2021), which can be understood as the "state of the art" of international studies on this topic, were:

- i) The articles in the repository are unpublished and were written in 2019, with the exception of two from 2018 and one from 2016;
- ii) The works selected for the repository came from various countries located mainly in the continents of Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa;
- iii) Regarding language, English is the most frequent, followed by Spanish, and to a lesser extent, Korean, French, and Portuguese;

⁴ <https://knowledgehub.unsse.org/>

- iv) Although studies on SSE and SDGs have become frequent in recent years, initiatives to call for articles addressing this theme have been scarce, which means that in the past, few editors received and published articles on SSE and SDGs as a central theme;
- v) Regarding the type of SSE entity/organization, it is noted that almost half of the works dealt with cooperatives, to the detriment of other organizations such as Nonprofit or Social Enterprises of various types, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations that focused on public policies;
- vi) By types of SDGs, studies addressed, most frequently, SDGs 8, 2, 5, 1, 10, and 17, in that order;
- vii) Most studies used qualitative methodologies with an emphasis on case studies. On the other hand, concerning quantitative methodologies, none of the articles that used them presented a scientific model to measure the contributions of SSE organizations to SDGs. The statistics presented are merely descriptive without constructs that take into account the correlations between independent and dependent variables. It is understood that this is an exploratory data analysis.

Encouraged by the results of this work, particularly with regard to the finding raised in the last point (vii), of a scarcity of quantitative studies that prove the presumed positive correlation between SSE and SDGs, Mariosa *et al.* (2022 a) conducted further studies. Starting from the hypothesis that quantitative studies in this area are in an experimental stage, through a systematic literature review, the authors searched for potentially eligible texts in the EBSCO (Academic Search Complete) and Web of Science databases, using the terms "social economy" and "SDGs", from January 2016 to June 2020, in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French. After eliminating duplicate cases, the texts underwent a reading of titles and abstracts. Once potentially relevant documents were identified, they were subjected by the authors to a full-text analysis to determine their eligibility.

The results of the systematic review suggest that the selected articles are at different stages of analysis development. It is interesting to note that among these works, some bring us case studies, while others focus on intersectoral specificities through the SDGs, such as the relationship between SSE and the digital economy, the health sector, gender, and climate change. By type of SDG, studies were found that discussed how SSE entities can be relevant to achieving some of the SDGs, such as 2, 8, 14, and 17. Other cross-cutting themes appear, connecting SSE and SDGs to public policies, local development, and international entities. However, the authors conclude that, despite these studies pointing to a promising research field, in general, the "metrics" of the connection between SSE contributions to the implementation of SDGs are not fully developed and, in many cases, the assertions are not supported by mature methodological elaborations. Additionally, in many cases, they present qualitative methodologies without empirical or quantitative evidence. Therefore, it is understood that studies in this area still lack more robust quantitative methodologies, as also pointed out by the aforementioned work by Alarcon, Álvarez & Morais (2022).

Regarding attempts to analyze local experiences related to specific SDGs, Morais (2020) and Morais & Bacic (2020) allow us to visualize a practical application, albeit incipient, of the relationship between SSE and SDGs. The first study aimed to use a practical SSE experience in a municipality to explain its contributions to implementing some SDGs. The study focused on food production in a settlement in the municipality of Araraquara (SP), specifically through the Association of Seated Women (AMA) of Monte Alegre.

This study aimed to initiate reflection on proposals for creating indicators for SDGs 1, 2, 5, 11, and 12 that could be reapplied in other experiences⁵. Subsequently, Morais & Bacic (2020) advanced the construction of these indicators, with a closer look at each of these SDGs. It is understood that the results still need further progress, especially regarding access to data for the development of this type of work. Another weakness found is the need to develop quantitative and qualitative methodologies to move forward in this direction.

This observation constitutes an important challenge at the international level. There is a need to quantify (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the socioterritorial impacts of experiences involving various entities of SSE in their respective territories. The complexity of the phenomenon - given its impacts not only on the economy, but also on social, political, cultural, and environmental aspects - therefore requires a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

For UNRISD (2018), although positive impacts of SSE actions can be inferred in their operating territories, we still experience the stage of "*underdevelopment of methodologies to collect and analyze data on the impacts of SSE*" (p.17). From a quantitative point of view, progress in the area has been observed through two studies: the International Labour Organization (2017) and Monzon & Chaves (2017). The first presented an overview of how key SSE variables are measured. However, they present the traditional measurements of employment and product (ILO, 2017). The second study was conducted for 28 European countries and brought us a leap forward in terms of quantitative SSE information up to 2015. However, they recognize the fact that this task is still in its embryonic stage, understanding it as a challenge for our times. It is also important to mention the efforts made within the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), held in October 2018 in Geneva (the headquarters of the ILO)⁶, where methodologies were discussed and addressed that will assist in this great challenge of quantification.

Regarding qualitative aspects, it is interesting to mention the work of Castro & Oreamuno (2017), who suggest a different approach to understanding the impacts of SSE in their respective territories, beyond the traditional quantifications of income and jobs generated. This is because, in their view, "*rather than producing specific impacts, cooperatives develop a series of social roles within their communities, which allows them to influence the dimensions of development in a more dynamic way*" (p. 148). In other words, for the authors, complex social phenomena require "holistic" measures and metrics of understanding that, in their methodology and work, were created based on four analytical categories inspired by the *United Nations Human Development Report*, namely: health, education, income, and public goods and services - collective capabilities.

Subsequent advances were made by Álvarez & Alarcón (2019), who sought to relate the theory of cooperative principles and the economic theory of social transfers as a conceptual support for generating a concrete instrument for measuring the contributions

⁵ It's worth mentioning that this work was selected, after careful international selection, to be presented at a global event on the topic of SDGs and their relations with SSE, titled "Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy? UNTFSSSE International Conference", held at the headquarters of the International Labour Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2019. Additional information at: [https://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BD6AB/\(httpEvents\)/ABE0A432A9D42782C12583AE004AF31C?OpenDocument](https://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BD6AB/(httpEvents)/ABE0A432A9D42782C12583AE004AF31C?OpenDocument)

⁶ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_646530/lang--en/index.htm

of SSE to the implementation of the SDGs. Also, ILO (2020) proposed methodologies for computing the economic contributions of cooperatives and relating them to some of the impacts generated, although recognizing the numerous challenges that still exist for such aspirations to be effectively realized.

Additionally, Chaves (2021), Bouchard & Salathé-Beaulieu (2021), and Bouchard & Chaves (2022) have taken further steps in this endeavor. In the first work, which was prepared with the intention of serving as a guide for researchers and, above all, for governments to structure and monitor public policies, the author justifies the importance of producing statistics for SSE sector and presents the main existing statistics for SSE. Chaves (2021) divides the statistics into three groups: i) quantitative or "standard" economic statistics based on conventional macroeconomic aggregates such as employment, income, etc.; ii) statistics quantifying the impacts of SSE; and iii) comparative statistics between SSE and other traditional companies or entities. In this work, the author advocates the idea that, in addition to national statistical institutes, which play a preponderant role, universities and research centers should also be responsible for this topic. Finally, by reiterating that this is an extremely relevant field, the author lists the main obstacles, such as technical skills, lack of funding for statistical work, and lack of political will on this issue.

Regarding the second work, it provides an overview of the conceptual structures related to SSE and its organizations, as well as the standards related to the construction of statistics for SSE, based on Satellite Accounts and the ILO Guidelines for cooperatives. Next, after pointing out the positive and negative aspects of both methodological approaches, the authors make a set of recommendations for further studies. Among the recommendations, it is mentioned that to increase the relevance and acceptance of SSE statistics, coordination between different public agencies, research institutions, universities, etc., should be strengthened, as well as expanding networks of organizations and researchers in the field. Additionally, it is necessary to identify criteria for establishing clear boundaries that separate SSE companies from other organizations, including the impacts of their actions in economic, social, and environmental terms. In this direction, continuous testing in various countries will help validate their concepts and approaches and identify necessary adjustments to adapt to different realities and contexts (Bouchard & Salathé-Beaulieu, 2021).

In the third work, Bouchard & Chaves (2022) reiterate that the statistical scope of SSE varies from country to country, with some countries completely ignoring ESS in their statistical organizations. Given this finding and the conceptual heterogeneity in each location, the authors present a guide in an attempt to harmonize the statistics of different subsets of SSE internationally. However, this guide still faces some general use restrictions, given the specificities of each country regarding the establishment of legal and statistical consensus about SSE.

Specifically for the Latin American case, Álvarez & Menezes (2023) highlight institutional obstacles that limit concrete contributions from SSE to the SDGs. As an example, they mention, in addition to the necessary funding and institutionalization, the difficulties in reporting standardized, verifiable statistical information with the possibility of aggregation. Furthermore, the high level of informality in many of the experiences in the region - sometimes referred to as the "popular economy" - makes it impossible to account for concrete results that can be periodically included in the social balance sheets required by statistical supervisory bodies and controls.

According to the authors, it is necessary to recognize the "mega diversity" and the integral value generated by SSE in the region, encouraging policies and actions that allow improving their role in the environments in which they operate. For Álvarez & Menezes (2023), Latin America, due to its history and essence, in terms of SSE, deserves a particular institutional disposition in order to generate spaces of increasing participation in markets, as well as to ensure the proper accounting of their activities and contributions to territorial development and the implementation of the SDGs.

Despite the need to advance in methodologies for measuring the results and impacts of SSE entities and organizations' actions in their territories, especially focused on implementing the SDGs, real experiences can already be visualized in this regard. At the international level, UNTFSSSE (2022) brings us a systematization of some of these experiences and their contributions to achieving the SDGs.

The purpose of this work, in fact, a Position Document of the United Nations Interagency Task Force on SSE, was to systematically examine the relationship between SSE and the 17 SDGs, including their specific goals, in order to: i) illustrate that SSE constitutes a "key dynamic force" for the paradigm shift demanded by the 2030 Agenda; ii) identify institutional and legal aspects that governments can promote a conducive institutional environment for SSE; iii) draw attention to the need for promotion and policy innovation at multiple levels of governance (local, regional, national, and international).

Supported by data that show us the current global scenario in terms of inequality, hunger, unemployment, difficulty in accessing basic social services such as health, education, housing, and clean water, this work, based on real experiences, defends the idea that SSE organizations and entities can catalyze socioeconomic transformations, strengthening the productive capacities of vulnerable groups, producing accessible goods and services, thus contributing to achieving SDGs 1 and 2. They also show that SSE is expanding in sectors focused on providing health services, assistance to the elderly and children, education, and training (SDGs 3 and 4). In many of its actions, SSE provides an important means for promoting gender equality, addressing the growing gap between rich and poor (SDGs 5 and 10). Furthermore, SSE can play an important role in generating decent work, based on the strengthening of social dialogue practices (SDGs 8 and 9), through the promotion of alliances with unions, political parties, and the establishment of networks.

For its local performance, as well as its participatory and democratic governance practices, the actions of SSE constitute key instruments for the construction of sustainable cities and settlements (SDGs 6 and 11), boosting income in the local economy. Examples of this can be seen in the construction of social housing, in the collection and recycling of waste, in community development banks, in cultural, digital and creative activities, in family-based agriculture, among others. Moreover, by combining socially inclusive practices with climate action and the green economy, SSE is essential for the "just transition" (SDGs 7, 12, and 13). This is because many of its organizations focus their activities on sustainable agriculture (such as agroecology), community forestry, renewable energy, and the protection of common goods.

It is also evident that SSE can play a key role in the protection of terrestrial and marine life (SDGs 14 and 15), as their local values and knowledge tend to better protect and respect nature. This is evidenced by their connections with indigenous communities, agroecological practices, sustainable fishing and tourism, among others. Finally, the Document shows us that in a context of threats to human, civil and political rights in various countries, SSE organizations and entities are promoting spaces to improve governance and policy formulation at local, regional, national, and international levels,

fostering the creation of networks and associations that support people-centered economies.

However, in order to harness the full potential of SSE, the Document advocates for political innovations to promote SSE at multiple levels of governance. In this sense, governments should play a more constructive role in promoting institutional environments favorable to SSE, creating and institutionalizing spaces for the joint construction of policies and actions (UNTFSSSE, 2022).

In order to advance this challenge of quantification, the CIRIECS (International Center of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy) of Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain and Mexico have conceived the initiative of holding seminars on satellite accounts in SSE in their countries, involving the participation of researchers, government institutions and sector participants. The idea of these seminars is to discuss the creation of methodologies for the adoption of satellite accounts that can be used in each country and compared between them. This construction is not viable without properly analyzing the existing statistical data in each country. Countries such as Colombia and Mexico have made some progress in terms of SSE's participation in GDP, employment, etc. But the final realization is that there is still a long way to go in order to ensure that the values inherent in SSE, such as local development, women's emancipation, more sustainable productions, etc., can be incorporated, which undoubtedly constitutes a great challenge.

It is worth mentioning that the idea of quantifying SSE from the perspective of Satellite Accounts was inspired by the European case. Over the past two decades, both academic institutions and national institutes of statistics and governments have made efforts in this field. In 2006, CIRIEC elaborated a methodology, at the request of the European Commission, to present the recent evolution of the social economy in the European Union, in parallel with the United Nations Manual for Satellite Accounts for Non-profit institutions. Some countries have made a lot of effort in recent years to provide reliable data on various groups in the SSE. The statistical institutes of France and the Ministry of Labor of Spain provide series on employment in cooperatives and the SSE. Italy, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Czech Republic and Hungary greatly improved statistics published by their national statistical institutes, using, in some cases, the methodology satellite accounts for non-profit organizations. Portugal, Poland and Romania deserve special mention. These three EU countries have recently been developing regular and systematic statistics for the SSE as a whole. In Portugal, this effort stems from the Social Economy Act (2013) and in Poland is the result of an agreement with the European Social Fund. However, there is still much to be done to systematize the relative statistics to the various groups in the SSE in the coming years (EESC, 2017).

Following this methodology, the European SSE ensures more than 13.6 million paid jobs in Europe; around 6.3% of the active population of the EU-28; the employment of 19.1 million workers, paid and unpaid; more than 82.8 million volunteers, equivalent to 5.5 million full-time workers whole; more than 232 million members of cooperatives, mutuals and similar entities similar; more than 2.8 million entities and companies. The “picture” varies across Member States. While employment in the SSE represents between 9% and 10% of the active population in countries such as Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, France and the Netherlands, in the new EU Member States such as Slovenia, Romania, Malta, Lithuania, Croatia, Cyprus and Slovakia, the SSE remains a small sector emerging market, which employs less than 2% of the active population (EESC, 2017).

The opportunity to discuss this issue at this EGM will be very valuable in terms of prospecting potential advances in this journey.

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