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Raising the Visibility of Social and Solidarity Economy in the United Nations System

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Following the recent upsurge in interest in Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) as a distinctive approach to development within international knowledge and policy circles, this article examines the conditions that facilitated the uptake of SSE within the United Nations system. It begins by explaining the broader development and ideational context that was conducive to raising the visibility of SSE. The discussion then turns to the process leading up to the establishment of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force that was established in September 2013. It concludes by briefly reflecting on the implications of mainstreaming SSE for the post-2015 development agenda and the challenges of further institutionalizing SSE.

1. Introduction

In September 2013, 14 United Nations (UN) agencies and programmes came together to form the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (hereafter referred to as the Task Force). Such a development was significant for several reasons. First, it acknowledged the expanding field of development practice by workers, producers, citizens and communities that were engaging in economic activities that had explicit social – and often environmental and emancipatory – objectives, and that emphasized social relations and values associated with cooperation and solidarity.

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This was an approach to inclusive and sustainable development, which hitherto had only been considered in a piecemeal or fragmented way within the UN system.

Second, attention to SSE within the UN system was significant in that it acknowledged the need to hear the voices of groups and their allies in civil society organizations and networks that had long been advocating for a different model of development; one that was not only more people-centred and planet sensitive, but that also addressed the structural causes of poverty, disempowerment, indecent work and unsustainable development that were associated with market-centred growth strategies and highly skewed power relations. Engaging with SSE symbolized the willingness of the UN system to not only talk of “transformative change” and pay lip service to the need to shift from “business-as-usual” (UNTT, 2012), but actually focus on real world alternatives where there were signs that such change was already happening.

This article examines the conditions that facilitated the uptake of SSE within the UN system. Divided into two parts, it begins by explaining the broader development and ideational context that was conducive to raising the visibility of SSE. The discussion then turns to the process leading up to the establishment of the Task Force through which SSE began to be institutionalized in the UN system. It concludes by briefly reflecting on the implications of mainstreaming SSE for the post-2015 development agenda and the challenges of further institutionalizing SSE.

2. Situating SSE in the trajectory of UN thinking

Periodically throughout its history, the UN has played a key role in generating, cultivating and popularizing progressive ideas and facilitating their uptake in policy circles (Jolly et al., 2005). Those who have studied the UN’s intellectual history find that such a progressive role requires institutional environments where agencies can exercise leadership and “defiant bureaucrats” can think and act unfettered by bureaucracy, hierarchy, careerism and path dependence (Emmerij et al., 2006; Toye and Toye, 2006). Throughout much of the “neoliberal” 1980s and 1990s, the UN relinquished its leadership role in thinking about economic development as the World Bank and the IMF dominated this field. This was also a period when social development was put on the back burner. Things began to change after the mid-1990s. The 1995 World Summit on Social Development and the Millennium Declaration of 2000 signalled to the world that the UN was regaining the ascendancy by not only emphasizing issues of poverty and indecent work but also crafting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which set time-bound targets that would be a guide for action by governments and other development actors. This was an important step in reclaiming the international development agenda (Utting, 2006), but it was a somewhat timid first step. It did not fundamentally challenge “business-as-usual” related, in particular, to certain patterns of economic growth and liberalization

associated with rising inequality, jobless growth and environmental destruction, and the macro-economic policy frameworks, state retrenchment and skewed power relations enabling such patterns.

Some other aspects of a progressive normative agenda were on a somewhat different trajectory. The Brundtland Commission's 1987 concept of sustainable development, for example, which had emphasized the need to balance economic, social and environmental dimensions and promote inter-generational equity, gained traction during the neoliberal heyday. As applied in practice, however, it was often co-opted by market logic and encountered major constraints at the level of implementation due to weak state and NGO capacities, while the environmental pillar was often reduced to technical and regulatory fixes associated with eco-efficiency and conservation. Similarly, the notion of rights-based development also gained some traction at the level of international discourse but encountered numerous road blocks when it came to the realization of rights.

It would be nearly another decade before the UN would recognize and start to act upon the need for a more profound transformation in thinking and policy. The trigger was an accumulation of currents and circumstances associated with “the triple crisis” (food, finance and climate) as well as growing recognition of the negative impacts of rising inequalities and the limits of the MDG process in addressing multiple dimensions of poverty and in achieving several of the goals.

The Rio+20 process that prepared the ground for United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 emphasized the need for a more integrated approach to development. The Conference called for urgent action to “mainstream sustainable development at all levels, integrating economic, social, and environmental aspects and recognizing their inter-linkages” (UN Secretariat 2012). The emphasis on integration opened up a space to highlight the integrative potential of SSE. Indeed, ignoring SSE in this context would have been a major oversight: this was the terrain of economic activity, par excellence, where organizations, enterprises, networks and movements explicitly and simultaneously addressed economic, social, environmental, rights-based and participatory dimensions of development, i.e. precisely the objectives highlighted in the Rio+20 process.

Furthermore, the Rio process emphasized the importance of bringing human rights and participation more firmly into the development agenda and policy process. The intense global discussions and debates around a post-2015 development agenda and the process of drafting of a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to succeed the MDGs have opened up spaces for rethinking mainstream approaches to development and governance – spaces that have clearly been conducive for the uptake of SSE.

The participatory nature of these discussions and consultative processes facilitated the flow of ideas about SSE. At Rio+20 itself, civil society and critical scholarship as well as some government leaders were active in trying to influence governmental, professional and public opinion about the merits of development practices and values associated with SSE. This was apparent at the parallel People's Summit, conferences organized by academics and scientists, and various side-events at the official venue.

Such perspectives also fed into the deliberative process associated with the SDGs. Issues associated with SSE featured prominently, for example, in the extensive consultation of 120 regional civil society networks and movements conducted by the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) in 2013 to elicit feedback on several of the major documents that had been submitted to the UN Secretary-General as part of the SDG process (UN-NGLS, 2013).

Beyond the SDG process, there are other signs of a progressive turn in UN thinking on social and sustainable development. This is apparent, for example, in the work of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on universal approaches to social policy that go far beyond the notion of safety nets (Cichon, 2013); the efforts of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to reposition the role of the state and domestic-led growth paths in development strategy and to call attention to radically different agro-food regimes centred on agro-ecology and more localized trade (UNCTAD, 2013a; UNCTAD 2013b); the work of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on food security and land governance; and UNDP's new strategic theme of promoting local development (UNDP, 2013).

Much of the emphasis in UN thinking now suggests that we should not be tinkering with institutional, governance and policy reforms that simply tweak business-as-usual or bolt residual social policies such as safety nets onto conventional market-centred growth strategies. It also cautions against an excessive emphasis on market-led green economy transitions. Rather, such transitions need to be both green and fair, both to guard against negative distributional consequences of change for vulnerable groups and to ensure that existing local level knowledge, production and natural resource management systems and institutions which are environmentally- and socially-friendly are enabled rather than marginalized or disabled (Cook et al., 2012).

Other developments were also conducive to bringing in SSE. The global financial crisis of 2008, and its coinciding, indeed linkages, with other crises linked to food and energy unsettled conventional wisdom about effective development pathways and focused minds within the mainstream development community on the need for "transformative" change (Utting et al., 2010). In a context of crisis, so-called radical alternatives have become legitimate options for consideration. Furthermore, we see growing interest in the ability of SSE organizations and enterprises to withstand shocks and build resilience.

With the MDGs reaching their target date of 2015, a rethinking of sorts was, of course, already on the horizon, but the confluence of crises fundamentally widened the space for both critiquing past approaches and considering alternatives. The post global financial crisis period has also coincided with heightened awareness of the impacts of climate change, rising inequalities and the multi-dimensional and persistent nature of poverty, with or without the MDGs. Certain features of SSE speak directly to these challenges.

At a time when the international development community was on the lookout for alternatives, two important developments, conducive to the uptake of SSE, were occurring within the field of SSE itself. First, there was growing recognition of the scale of revival and expansion of various forms of SSE and their role as coping strategies, mechanisms for local or community development and management of common pool resources, for transitioning from informal economy, and as alternative modes of producing, consuming and living. Cooperatives, for example, had expanded in various regions, certified Fair Trade retail sales exceeded 6 billion dollars, and some 30 million women in India alone were organized in women's self-help groups. Social enterprise was growing significantly in regions such as Europe and parts of Asia, village-level mutual health organizations and savings and credit schemes were prominent in several African countries, and governments in several Latin American countries were proactively supporting, if not prioritizing, SSE (ILO, 2011; Utting et al., 2014). In such a context, SSE could no longer be merely dismissed as a fringe activity.

A second development within the field of SSE related to the fact that different strands of SSE were cohering as a movement. Not only were SSE networks and regional and international associations expanding and consolidating but different tendencies, organizations and personalities, hitherto often at odds, were finding more common ground as a result of discursive shifts, dialogue, networking and the role of intermediaries. Different strands were coming together under the umbrella of Social AND Solidarity Economy, the term that was rapidly gaining currency internationally. "Social economy" was more typically associated with forms of social enterprise, community associations and "the third sector" organizations, including NGOs, many of which were already regarded as legitimate "partners" within mainstream development. The other – solidarity economy – emphasized the importance of alternatives to the conventional profit maximizing firm, production and consumption patterns, market-led growth strategies and power relations. This coming together of a diverse range of organizations, interests, ideologies and approaches constituted, in effect, a powerful coalition of normative framings, institutions and actors that gave SSE greater legitimacy and credibility. The SSE movement was becoming more encompassing or "counter-hegemonic" in the Gramscian sense of the term.

SSE, then, had repositioned itself ideologically and could no longer simply be associated with the radical fringe, anti-globalization or Marxian theory. SSE theorizing drew heavily on the Polanyian notion of the need to correct for market forces by “re-embedding liberalism” and reasserting principles of reciprocity (via society) and social protection or redistribution (via the state) (Hillenkamp and Laville, 2013). Such principles resonated with the progressive mainstream.

3. Mobilizing interest and creating the Task Force

The above discussion shows how shifts in UN thinking and the development condition fostered an ideational terrain that was conducive to the uptake of SSE. But how was interest in SSE mobilized within the UN system? This is the question to which the present article now turns, focusing first on early initiatives that were precursors of a more systematic approach to addressing SSE, and second, on the process that led to the formation of the UN Task Force.

3.1 A brief history of SSE in the UN System

Certain strands of SSE, notably the role of cooperatives in development, had long been the focus of attention within some UN agencies. Indeed, the ILO had promoted cooperative development since 1920. In 1966 it passed the Co-operatives (Developing Countries) Recommendation, 1966 (No. 127) urging governments to proactively support the establishment and growth of cooperatives in developing countries. In 1968 the UN General Assembly called on the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to look into the role of cooperatives. ECOSOC in turn called on the UN Secretary-General, ILO, FAO, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and peak cooperative, farmers and workers organizations to prepare a programme of action. This led to the establishment in 1971 of what eventually became known as the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC). This process also sparked an intense debate within the UN on the merits of cooperatives. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) undertook extensive research on the performance of cooperatives in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This work highlighted a number of key concerns, not least the weak performance of many cooperatives in effectively benefiting the poor and the scope for elite capture of cooperative development at the local level (UNRISD, 1975).

Citing concerns regarding methodology, interpretations of empirical results and exaggerated assumptions regarding the goals of cooperative, the findings were contested by other UN-system agencies such as the ILO and FAO, as well as COPAC and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). UNRISD published the findings in a volume that included not only its own conclusions but also commentaries by others. Whatever the accuracy of the different agency perspectives, of note here was the space that then existed within the UN for debate, critical inquiry and “reflexivity”, i.e. the

ability to question one's own assumptions and examine possible contradictions and unintended consequences of proposed courses of action (Utting, 2006). There are concerns that such spaces have declined significantly within mainstream international development circles in recent decades (Ocampo, 2006).

The ILO went on to reinforce the role of what is now known as the Cooperative Unit and in 2002 passed the Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193), which recognized that: *"A balanced society necessitates the existence of strong public and private sectors, as well as a strong cooperative, mutual and the other social and non-governmental sector"*.² The Recommendation called on governments to adopt policies, laws and regulations conducive to cooperative development.

UN interest in the role of cooperatives spiked significantly following the global financial crisis, given the growing realization that, in many countries, cooperatives had proven to be relatively resilient and participation in cooperatives had mitigated the negative social impacts of such crises (Roelants and Sanchez Bajo, 2011; Wanyama, 2014). It was also evident that a new generation of cooperatives had emerged in contexts of market liberalization that were more autonomous of states and political parties. The UN declared 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives. With responsibility for relevant activities, COPAC promoted publications and events that reignited interest in cooperatives.

Interest in other strands of SSE, such as social entrepreneurship and micro-credit, was also apparent in organizations like UNIDO, UNDP, FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP). The role of community organizations in the stewardship of common pool resources and natural resource management systems had long been of interest to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNRISD and others in the context of thinking and policy about sustainable development. But rarely was SSE treated as a whole or promoted as a distinctive approach to development.

One clear exception was the work of the ILO SSE Academy.³ Established in 2010, the SSE Academy fosters knowledge generation, inter-regional dialogue and training about SSE. A capacity building programme on social and solidarity economy had been proposed by more than 200 practitioners on the occasion of the ILO Regional Conference on "The social economy: Africa's response to the global crisis", held in Johannesburg in October 2009. This conference adopted a Plan of Action for the promotion of social economy enterprises and organizations in Africa. The ILO had also established an intra-agency social economy task force. In 2010, the task force agreed to support the Social and Solidarity Economy Academy, as an interregional training and learning forum that would gather practitioners and policy makers from around the world to exchange experiences and interact with SSE specialists. The first Academy

² See: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R193

³ <http://socialeconomy.itcilo.org>

was organized in October 2010 by the International Training Centre of the ILO (ITC-ILO) in Turin. Academy events were subsequently held in Quebec, Canada (2011), Morocco (2013) and planned for Brazil (2014). To accompany each of these events, the ILO published a reader on SSE. The ITC also manages a website known as “the collective brain”⁴ which is a virtual interactive space for exchanging and expanding knowledge on SSE and for Academy participants to remain connected and engaged.

Another initiative to mobilize UN interest in SSE as an alternative approach to development took place at the Rio+20 conference in 2012. But this time the driving force was civil society. The Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS) was active at the parallel People’s Summit and issued the Declaration of the Social and Solidarity Economy movement, “The Economy we need”⁵, which was signed by more than 370 organizations and networks. Many other events at the People’s Summit also highlighted the actual and potential value of SSE, as did the report, “Another future is possible”⁶ that synthesized the findings of over 20 working groups associated with the Thematic Social Forum held in January 2012 to prepare for the People’s Summit. The report sought to counter many of the assumptions, blind spots and proposals contained in the official negotiating document “The future we want” submitted to the Summit, and present a coherent civil society position on alternatives for dealing with environmental, social and financial crises and for crafting another model “built on social and environmental justice”. Multiple aspects of SSE featured prominently in this report.

Meanwhile, in another part of town, hundreds of academics and researchers were participating in the biennial conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) where significant attention was focused on aspects of SSE as a way of addressing the contemporary challenge of sustainable development. Indeed, the keynote address by the ISEE president, Bina Agarwal, focused on the importance of collective action for rural women’s economic and political empowerment.

At the official summit venue itself, another civil society network, the Association of the Mont-Blanc Meetings (MBM), was proactively engaged in trying to get greater recognition for SSE. The declaration of its 2011 conference had identified five pathways and 20 proposals that were directed to the leaders of 193 UN member countries that were preparing for Rio+20. A key demand was that social economy be recognized as one of the Major Groups in the Rio process, along with the other nine⁷ that had been identified in Agenda 21 at the first Earth Summit in 1992.⁸

⁴ See: http://www.ripesseu.net/uploads/media/2012_declaration_ripest_rio_20_en.pdf or the resolution: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/288&Lang=E

⁵ See: http://rio20.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Another-Future-is-Possible_english_web.pdf

⁶ See: www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/727The%20Future%20We%20Want%2019%20June%201230pm.pdf

⁷ The nine major groups comprise: women, children and youth; farmers; indigenous peoples; NGOs; trade unions; local authorities; science and technology; and business and industry.

⁸ See: https://www.rencontres-montblanc.coop/sites/default/files/rmb_-_lettre_aux_chefs_detat.pdf

In collaboration with the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and the International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM), MBM organized a side-event at the official venue where the Executive Coordinator for Rio+20, Brice Lalonde, went out of his way to support SSE in general and this initiative in particular. This event featured speeches by the French minister for SSE, Benoît Hamon, the Brazilian national secretary for SSE, Paul Singer, and a representative of the Ecuadorian government. Despite these efforts, the official Summit outcome document, “The future we want” could only manage timid statements that “we acknowledge the role of cooperatives and microenterprises in contributing to social inclusion and poverty reduction, in particular in developing countries” and “we encourage the private sector to contribute to decent work for all ... through partnerships with small and medium-sized enterprises and cooperatives.” But this encounter laid the foundations for an inter-governmental initiative, discussed below, that was formally announced at the biennial conference of the MBM in Chamonix, France in November 2013.

3.2 Setting the stage

The MBM side-event was also attended by Hamish Jenkins from the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) and this author from UNRISD. UN-NGLS, which serves as a knowledge sharing conduit between the UN system and civil society, was keenly aware of the level of interest in SSE within civil society circles and its relative lack of visibility in the UN system.

At Rio+20, UNRISD had been active at various forums, including the official venue, the People’s Summit and the ISEE conference, organizing panels to present the findings from its research on the social dimensions of green economy. This inquiry, which had been prompted by growing concerns about market-centred approaches to green economy, had identified SSE institutions and practices as a key element for crafting green economy transitions that were not only environmentally friendly but also fair in terms of the distribution of costs and benefits and social justice (Cook et al., 2012).

Convinced that far more needed to be done to raise the visibility of SSE within the UN system, UNRISD and UN-NGLS began to explore ways to make this happen. A key challenge was how these small, cash-strapped UN entities could leverage their position to maximum effect.

UN-NGLS had a particular interest in alternatives in the field of finance, where the global financial crisis had dramatically exposed the perverse consequences of financialization. Through its extensive links with civil society organizations and networks, UN-NGLS was tuned into grassroots initiatives associated with solidarity finance and complementary currencies. UN-NGLS took the lead in organizing an event, co-hosted with UNRISD, on “Solidarity Economy and Alternative Finance: A Different Development Model?”, held in October 2012 on the occasion of the 2012 UN

Human Rights Council's Social Forum. The ILO also participated, with Frédéric Lapeyre presenting recent work on SSE as a means of transitioning from informal economy. This side-event not only generated interest in the topic but also laid the foundations for a much larger event on alternative finance that was to be held in May 2013.

UNRISD for its part had long focused on particular aspects of SSE through various research projects and programmes. Following its work on cooperatives in the 1970s, UNRISD undertook extensive research on what it regarded as one of the key instruments and goals of inclusive development, namely “participation”. Interestingly, the UNRISD definition of participation resonated with what some might regard as the essence of SSE, namely, “the organized efforts of the disadvantaged to gain control over resources and regulatory institutions that affect their lives” (UNRISD, 2004). Later work on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) focused on ways in which business organizations were addressing social and environmental issues. The immediate precursor, however, to UNRISD work on SSE was that carried out in the build up to Rio+20. UNRISD undertook an extensive inquiry into “the social dimensions of green economy” which, *inter alia*, highlighted the need to critique and go beyond market-centred approaches to green economy. Findings from this research suggested that SSE-type organizations and movements could go a long way to crafting transition pathways that were both green and fair (Cook et al., 2012).

Given these past areas of interest, it was a short step to developing a research project that would examine more systematically the potential and performance of SSE. Also, as noted above, UNRISD was part of a long tradition of “critical thinking” which questioned orthodoxy, whether associated with the left, centre or right. From this perspective, it was concerned about the tendency within civil society and some academic arenas to romanticize SSE and gloss over various constraints and contradictions. Clearly, much more needed to be done to accurately assess the performance of SSE. It was also important to create a stronger and more credible evidence base if policy makers were to engage seriously with SSE.

In an effort to mobilize research from different regions and disciplines on a common set of issues and tap into research already underway, UNRISD launched a global Call for Papers on “The Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity”.⁹ Some 400 proposals for papers from nearly 500 researchers from 70 countries were submitted. UNRISD then set about organizing and structuring a research conference where papers would be presented. In all, about 75 of the proposals were selected as conference papers or think pieces to be published online (www.unrisd.org/sse). With UN-NGLS it was decided that both organizations would also co-host an event on “Alternative Finance and Complementary Currencies” back-to-back with the UNRISD conference.

⁹ To organize the call, UNRISD enlisted the support of an enthusiastic group of interns already specialized in SSE analysis. Once initial funding was secured, two of them – Nadine van Dijkand and Marie-Adélaïde Mathei – stayed on to organize the conference and other project activities.

Given their own work on cooperatives and SSE more generally, several ILO staff members took a keen interest in the UNRISD inquiry and conference plans. They included Jürgen Schwettmann, head of the Partnerships and Field Support department; Simel Esim, who led the Cooperative Unit; Roberto di Meglio, who co-ordinated the ILO SSE Academy; and Frédéric Lapeyre, who worked on transitioning from informal economy, a theme that was prioritized as an “Area of Critical Importance” (ACI) by Guy Ryder, appointed ILO Director-General in October 2012.

These officials recognized the synergies that would flow from partnering with UNRISD. They offered to co-host the SSE conference and provide the venue. They mobilized financial support, primarily via the ILO’s South-South cooperation programme, which would facilitate the participation of southern participants. The ILO Cooperative Unit, the Bureau for Workers’ Activities (ACTRAV) and the International Journal of Labour Research also set about organizing a day-long seminar on “Trade Unions and Cooperatives: Challenges and Perspectives”, to be held back-to-back with the conference.

During this period, UNRISD, ILO and NGLS developed close ties with two of the leading international SSE practitioners networks, RIPESS and the MBM. Both organizations participated actively in the UNRISD-ILO conference and subsequently consolidated relations with a number of UN agencies. As efforts proceeded to engage UN agencies in the UNRISD-ILO conference, it was clear that while most agencies had no official mandate work on SSE, they often housed officials who were either already working on related aspects or recognized that this was an area that merited closer attention. Several attended the conference, chairing sessions or, as in the case of the ILO Director-General, actually opening the event.¹⁰

Held over four days in May 2013, the conference and various side-events brought together some 300 participants from academia, civil society and policy-making circles. Over 50 speakers presented research papers at the conference and side-events (www.unrisd.org/sseconference). SSE practitioners and doctoral candidates also presented their work at two side-events: the Practitioners’ Forum and the PhD Poster Session. Back-to-back with the conference, NGLS and ILO organized complementary events on Alternative Finance and Trade-Union-Cooperative relations, respectively.

The presentations, discussions and debates at the conference yielded a rich body of evidence and opinion as to why the post-2015 development agenda needs to engage far more with SSE.¹¹ Discussions about the provision of social services, Fair Trade, community finance schemes, agricultural and food marketing cooperatives, alternative

¹⁰ Representatives from FAO, ILO, UNDP, UN Women and UNCTAD chaired conference sessions. The ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder, joined the UNRISD director, Sarah Cook, and the Brazilian National Secretary for Social Economy, Paul Singer, in opening the event. Other agencies and programmes, including UNAIDS, the inter-agency Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) and the UNDP-ART programme, also attended.

¹¹ For a summary of the conference discussions and debates see: UNRISD Event Brief #1 at www.unrisd.org/eb1



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First meeting of the Task Force - 31 September 2013, Geneva.

food networks, women's self-help groups, community forestry initiatives and the organization of street vendors and indigenous peoples, pointed to experiences that often yield important benefits in terms of basic needs, participation, empowerment and identity. But often the potential of SSE is not realized due to the weak asset base of SSE organizations, market pressures, limited access to credit, inadequate government policies and regulations, the challenges of organizing and mobilizing beyond the local level, and difficulties of maintaining bonds of trust and solidarity as initiatives grow in scale.

3.3 Establishing the Task Force

The idea of creating a UN SSE Task Force had been discussed informally by colleagues from UNRISD, UN-NGLS, the ILO and UNDP prior to the UNRISD-ILO conference and proposed by Simel Esim during the closing session. The experience of the ILO SSE intra-agency task team had provided a number of pointers. If different offices and departments within a large organization could come together regularly to discuss SSE and co-ordinate activities, why not different UN agencies?

To follow-up on the idea, representatives of these agencies met during the summer of 2013 to consider next steps. They convened the first meeting which was held at the ILO on 30 September 2013. Some 14 agencies attended the inaugural meeting, where the following objectives were agreed:

The TFSSE is a partnership to assist countries, mobilize political will and momentum towards mainstreaming the issue of SSE in international and national policy frameworks. Key elements of this strategy consist of:

- (i) Enhancing the recognition of Social and Solidarity Economy enterprises and organizations;
- (ii) Promoting knowledge on Social and Solidarity Economy and consolidating SSE networks;
- (iii) Supporting the establishment of an enabling institutional and policy environment for SSE;
- (iv) Ensuring coordination of international efforts, and strengthening and establishing partnerships.

By the time of the third meeting of the Task Force, held in February 2014, some 17 UN agencies and the OECD had joined as members, while three leading international civil society associations – RIPESS, RMB and ICA – participated as observers. This founding phase of the Task Force had concentrated on four main activities: i) gaining adherents and expanding the membership base within the inter-governmental system, ii) engaging key international civil society networks as observers, iii) preparing a number of foundational documents related to a basic set of rules and objectives, definitions of SSE and a position paper on SSE and sustainable development, and iv) designing a website.



Second meeting of the Task Force – 02 December 2013, Geneva.

Early collaborative inter-agency efforts consisted of undertaking an initial mapping of agency work related to SSE and the preparation of a position paper on SSE and the Challenge of Sustainable Development. This paper sought to highlight the relevance of SSE for addressing several of the major development challenges of the early twenty-first century. These included:

- i. the massive and growing scale of the informal economy and precarious or vulnerable employment with which it is associated, coupled with the fact that the formal sector and economic growth no longer have the capacity to absorb so-called surplus labour;
- ii. gender inequality and women's empowerment, including the need to reduce the "double burden" women face as they engage in remunerated employment while simultaneously assuming the primary responsibility for unpaid care work;
- iii. the hollowing out of local communities and economies through out-migration, rolled back government services and public investment, and patterns of surplus distribution that siphon resources and profits out of the areas where goods and services are produced towards cities, corporations or the global North and tax havens;
- iv. food insecurity and smallholder empowerment;
- v. climate change, environmental degradation and crafting economic transitions that were not only green but also fair;
- vi. universal access to healthcare and equitable distribution of resources for health; and
- vii. recurring financial crises and the need for a financial system more geared to the needs of people and the planet.



Third meeting of the Task Force – 10 February 2014, Geneva.

The early Task Force discussions and debates emphasized a number of issues that point to some of the key challenges confronting SSE and tensions that can arise through mainstreaming. They included the need to i) acknowledge the heterogeneity of SSE organizations, enterprises and movements within the movement and its different regional manifestations; ii) and to examine critically state-SSE relations, safeguard SSE autonomy and ensure effective co-construction of policies and laws that aim to support SSE.

These meetings were also an opportunity to explore ways of enhancing dialogue and collaboration with civil society organizations and governments engaged in promoting SSE. Of particular interest to the Task Force were two specific proposals or recommendations that had emerged from the major conferences of RIPESS and MBM, held in October and November 2013, respectively. In its conference declaration, RIPESS had welcomed the creation of the Task Force and recommended that the Task Force organize annually an UN-civil society/practitioners dialogue. At the MBM conference, the MBM president, Thierry Jeantet, had announced that the French President, François Hollande, had agreed to set up an inter-governmental “Leading Group” on SSE, modelled after the leading group on innovative finance. The declaration of the MBM conference called on the Task Force to facilitate the formation and work of this leading group. At the conference it was also agreed that UNRISD, NGLS and MBM would organize a side-event at the February 2014 session of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals in New York to present both the Task Force and the idea of the Leading Group.

4. Concluding remarks

The above analysis has attempted to explain why a space has opened up within the UN system for a more serious and systematic consideration of SSE. Key elements underpinning this process relate to i) the trajectory of progressive thinking within the UN over nearly two decades, ii) the search for alternatives in the context of recent multiple crises and growing awareness of climate change and inequality, iii) the more immediate imperative to craft a post-2015 development agenda, and iv) concrete developments associated with the proliferation and expansion of SSE and the structuring of a more encompassing SSE movement.

The fact that so many representatives of UN agencies and other organizations quickly committed to working together on SSE says as much about the times we live in as the motivations of the individuals and agencies concerned. SSE is fundamentally about crafting an alternative to the business-as-usual approach to development centred on economic liberalization and narrowly targeted social protection policies. In the wake of multiple global crises and in the context of growing concerns about climate change, equality and rights, the space has opened up for a more radical rethink

of development. The creation of the Task Force pointed to a growing consensus within the UN system and beyond on the need for alternative ways of organizing production, exchange and consumption, and the fact that they should be factored into contemporary development debates and strategy far more centrally than had previously been the case.

The uptake of SSE within the UN system potentially bodes well for correcting certain limitations and biases in development policy. These include not only those typically associated with neoliberal approaches and processes of commodification, informalization and privatization, but also those that characterize attempts to “re-embed” liberalism. Too often the uptake of seemingly progressive terms such as green economy, food security, participation and empowerment results in their dilution (Cornwall and Brock, 2006). The upshot, for example, is often market- and corporate-led green economy and agrarian transitions, a focus on participation as consultation rather than collective action, and economic as opposed to political empowerment. A focus on SSE recognizes diversity within “plural economy”, the importance of collective action in processes of transformative change both at the level of production and advocacy, and the empowerment of not only individuals or entrepreneurs but also groups. At a time when the international development community had committed to rethinking development pathways in the context of multiple global crises and the post-2015 agenda, a focus on SSE could yield important insights for development policy.

In the context of current efforts to design a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is clear that the potential of SSE speaks directly to the five transformative shifts identified by the High Level Panel on the SDGs, namely “leaving no one behind”, “putting sustainable development at the core”, employment-centred economic transformation, participation and good governance, and a global partnership that upholds principles of “universality, equity, sustainability, solidarity, human rights, the right to development and responsibilities shared in accordance with capabilities.”¹²

But while the international development community can agree fairly easily on the desirability of such objectives, it is far more divided on the question of how to get there. The focus on SSE suggests that the orientation of development strategy needs to be broadened in several respects: beyond a focus on the capabilities of the individual towards that of groups, communities and collectivities; beyond private sector development centred on the profit-maximizing firm that tends to externalize social and environmental costs, towards “less-for-profit” organizations and enterprises that balance economic, social and environmental objectives; and beyond a focus on social protection via safety nets and economic empowerment towards active citizenship and the realization of rights.

¹² See: http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf




In addition to (re)framing the development agenda, another challenge for the Task Force is that of convincing governments that far more can be done to create an enabling environment for SSE through law, policies, programmes, institutional reforms and building state capacities. And it must also remind governments that the dynamism and innovation associated with SSE derives in large part from its autonomy from both states and market forces. An enabling policy environment must also reinforce conditions for safeguarding this autonomy.














The Task Force has clearly gotten off to a good start, quickly mobilizing interest both within and outside the UN system. There is a sense that SSE is not only an idea whose consideration is long overdue, but that the current ideational and political juncture is propitious for considering such an approach to development, which is more holistic.



Much work still remains to be done, however, to lock SSE into UN knowledge and policy circuits. Whether the momentum can be sustained beyond the SDG process is an open question. This will depend not only on the motivation and willingness of agencies to collaborate but also on financial resources, which have become a scarce commodity in fields associated with critical research, advocacy and policy dialogue associated with progressive cutting-edge issues.

Furthermore, institutionalization can be a double-edged sword. SSE practitioners and advocates have generally looked favourably upon the fact that the UN has turned its sights on SSE, seeing this alliance as potentially important in creating a more enabling policy environment for SSE. But they are also aware that not only are progressive ideas often diluted when they enter the mainstream but also that initial bursts of interest and enthusiasm can be short-lived as institutional drivers, priorities and contexts change. Key in both regards will be the role of the civil society observers within the Task Force in keeping members active and attuned to their perspectives, concerns and demands.

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