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# Public Policy and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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## Abstract

In recent decades, there have been signs that governments and political parties are adopting policies that are more supportive of the social and solidarity economy (SSE). This entry describes and assesses what states are doing to promote SSE. It begins by highlighting a number of trends and innovations that characterize the turn towards SSE within public policy. The second section provides an overview of the expanding portfolio of policy measures available to governments and parliaments. While recent policy innovations often support the scaling up and strengthening of SSE, they can occur in political, institutional and macro-economic contexts that constrain their effectiveness. The entry considers the opportunities, risks and challenges involved. It ends by noting institutional and political conditions that could address the ongoing fragility and fragmentation of public policy support for SSE.

## Keywords

public policy; SSE laws; policy innovations; policy challenges; welfare system; co-construction

## Introduction

While the social and solidarity economy (SSE) is often seen as an alternative space in relation to both the public sector and the mainstream market-based economy, it is closely connected to both. With regard to state institutions, public policies are central to this relationship. The way they impact SSE, however, is multifaceted, complex and often contradictory.

During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the marginalization of many workers, producers, traders, consumers and citizens comprising the SSE was partly a consequence of state inaction or public policies that skewed resource allocation and regulation in favour of other actors and sectors. Furthermore, the checkered history of cooperatives and NGOs (see the entries “Cooperatives and Mutual” and “NGOs and foundations”) had much to do with political interference and dependency on state institutions. During the past two decades, there have been signs that these features of inaction, bias and control are ceding ground to a different political and policy agenda – one that recognizes the potential of SSE in relation to social, economic and environmental goals (see the entries “Origins and histories of SSE” and “Contemporary understandings of the SSE”) and is more enabling.

Divided in four sections, this entry describes and assesses what states are doing to promote SSE. It begins by highlighting key trends and innovations that characterize the turn towards SSE within public policy. The second section provides an overview of the expanding portfolio of policy measures available to governments and parliaments. The third section considers the opportunities, risks and challenges that confront the transformational process associated with SSE in contexts where public policy supports it. The entry ends by noting certain institutional and political conditions that could address the ongoing fragility and fragmentation of public policy support for SSE.

### 1. The changing policy agenda

A combination of conditions and contexts emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to alter policy related to SSE. Various drivers of this policy change have been attributed to global phenomena such as the impacts of the global financial crisis, increased attention to the benefits of socially-oriented business models, networked forms of advocacy and the need for green transitions. Sometimes the drivers assumed regional characteristics: in Asia, heightened social pressures and demands linked to democratization in countries such as South Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as the Asian Financial Crisis; in Latin America, ideological shifts associated with the so-called turn to the left and social movements activism; and in Europe, welfare state reform linked to neo-liberalism and austerity policies, as well as growing interest in social enterprise.

Analysis of how public policies are evolving reveals signs of a shift from what has been referred to as ‘first’ to ‘second’ generation policies (Chaves-Avila and Gallego-Bono 2020). The former is characterized by a fragmented, piecemeal and vertical approach – one focused on specific types of SSE organizations and enterprises (SSEOs), particular economic sectors such as agriculture or finance, and a narrow range of policy incentives such as subsidies and training. It also leans towards top-down hierarchical policy making. Second generation policies, in contrast, tend to adopt a broader focus, are better integrated in national policy and are more participatory. Key legal and institutional innovations include the following:

- i) **The promotion of new types of SSEOs.** These include social enterprises and non-traditional forms of cooperatives. The former comprise organizations that blend

entrepreneurial practices and social priorities and/or serve the general public interest rather than that of members. The latter include social cooperatives providing social services to members and/or the wider public, worker cooperatives comprising employees that reconstitute failed or failing companies, and multi-purpose cooperatives which engage in activities associated with various sectors (Borzaga et al. 2020, Defourny et al. 2019).

ii) **Focusing on SSE as a sector.** Governments and policy makers are recognizing the potential of SSE as a sector in itself; one comprising organizations and enterprises that have in common an institutional logic or set of economic, social and democratic principles and practices that differ from conventional business and public sector activities. From Brazil to the European Union (EU), governments are attempting to map and quantify the scale and impact of this sector in terms of geographical spread, employment and gross domestic product (GDP). Excluding decrees or laws targeting particular types of SSEOs, national parliaments in 16 countries of Europe, Latin America and Africa had passed frameworks or similar broad-based laws promoting SSE by mid-2021. Examples include Mexico (2012), France (2014), Uruguay (2019) and Senegal (2021). Passing such laws, however, is often a protracted process that can be stalled or blocked by party politics and changing priorities. In lieu of laws, or in certain cases, additionally, some governments have drafted comprehensive national development plans for SSE. Such plans include the National Strategy for Social and Solidarity Economy 2010-2020 in Morocco, the 2018 Master Plan for Human Resource Development for the Social Economy in the Republic of Korea, and the Public Policy for SSE 2021-2025 in Costa Rica.

iii) **Integrating SSE in the welfare system.** While many SSEOs have traditionally provided services relating to health, care and work integration, several governments have scaled up and formalized their participation in national welfare systems and employment generation strategies. Examples include the role of community health or mutual health organizations in West Africa; the promotion of social enterprises generating employment for those with disabilities in Japan, the Republic of Korea and Poland; and the provision of childcare services in Quebec and Uruguay.

iv) **Institutionalizing SSE in public policy.** Measures are being taken to ensure that public sector support for SSE is not dependent on particular political parties or transitory circumstances but is a consistent feature of state policy (Coraggio 2015). Increasing bi-partisan or multi-party support for SSE is apparent, as governments and parties of quite different ideological persuasions are recognizing SSE in their policy discourse and agendas. Beyond laws, national development plans or policies targeting SSE, governments are establishing entities with direct responsibility for supporting this sector. Such institutions include ministries (Luxembourg, Nicaragua, Senegal) or vice ministries (Costa Rica), as well as departments (France, Morocco), secretariats (Brazil), specialized and technical agencies (Republic of Korea, Ecuador) and decentralized institutes (Argentina, Mexico) within a ministry or similar entity.

v) **Co-construction of policy:** A key component of this institutionalization process is the establishment of consultative processes comprising SSE actors and intermediary organizations that speak and advocate on their behalf (Mendell and Alain 2015). Such processes may involve formal structures, such as within the Consultative Council for SSE in Uruguay, or institutionalized informal interactions, as has occurred in Quebec and the Republic of Korea, where large SSE umbrella organizations are recognized as key interlocutors. In several countries and jurisdictions, co-construction has played an

important role in overcoming the limitations of top-down policy design and implementation, and ensuring that policy making, evaluation and review are aligned with the diversity, needs and preferences of SSE actors. Important in this regard are decentralized consultative structures at the territorial level, as seen in the case of Brazil, – or multi-stakeholder working groups organized on a sectoral or thematic basis, as in Costa Rica.

vi) **Towards an ecosystemic approach.** Early efforts to promote SSE often centred on inter-agency coordination and ad hoc initiatives related to training or access to finance and markets. Increasingly, governments are recognizing the importance of a broader ‘ecosystemic’ approach which has several components (Borzaga et al. 2020, Jenkins et al. 2021, Chaves-Avila and Gallego-Bono 2020). It recognizes that an effective enabling environment for SSE involves actors, institutions, partnerships and other interactions associated with multiple sectors (public, private, NGOs and civil society). It also acknowledges the nested nature of governance at multiple scales and the need to mobilize resources and co-ordinate support and regulation at municipal, provincial/state, federal/national, and supra-national or international levels. Furthermore, central to an ecosystemic approach is the notion that promoting SSE requires efforts to strengthen its asset base in relation to multiple forms of ‘capital’ – financial, human, social, knowledge and physical, among others. This approach is being actively promoted at the supranational level by the EU and the OECD; nationally in countries such as the South Korea and Uruguay; and regionally in areas such as Quebec in Canada, and Emilia Romagna in Italy, where SSE has a strong presence.

## 2. The public policy toolkit

Public sector engagement with SSE in recent decades has resulted in a broad portfolio of regulatory and support measures. The types of measures related directly to SSE include the following (Borzaga et al. 2020, Jenkins et al. 2020, Serrano et al. 2019, Utting 2017):

- Recognizing and integrating SSE in law and policy:
  - Locking in state oversight and support via constitutional clauses, laws and regulations which govern and promote SSE or specific types of SSEOs;
  - Incorporating SSE into sectoral, territorial or national development policies and plans; and
  - Promoting SSE within regional and international policy forums and networks.
- Financing:
  - Direct financial support for SSEOs via grants, subsidies and concessionary or flexible financing, as well as co-financing arrangements with private banks and matching grants;
  - Indirect support via loan guarantees, capitalization of loan intermediaries, social and green bonds; and
  - Regulations that facilitate access to banking and micro-finance institutions along with the use of other mechanisms including crowd-funding, complementary currencies, social impact investing and Islamic finance.
- Fiscal incentives:
  - Tax exemptions for SSEOs,
  - Reduction in social insurance costs,

- Tax relief for investors in SSEOEs, and
- Tax share donations which allow taxpayers a degree of tax relief if they donate to a cause or organization
- Market access:
  - Public procurement, including preferential procurement;
  - Regulatory measures requiring private companies such as supermarkets, to purchase a share of their produce from SSE producers;
  - Vouchers to encourage consumers to buy SSEOE products and services, promotion of market fairs, and fair trade for SSE producers and retailers; and
  - Premium (above market) prices.
- Governance:
  - Facilitation of participatory forms of governance or ‘co-construction’;
  - Promotion of multi-scalar governance to ensure that public policy support for SSE involves authorities and public sector institutions at local/municipal, provincial/state and national levels;
  - Effective coordination of the responsibilities and initiatives of multiple public sector entities;
  - Rationalization of bureaucratic procedures that impede the emergence and expansion of SSEOEs; and
  - Certification to validate social enterprises.
- Training and education:
  - Capacity building via skills development, basic education, financial literacy and values-oriented learning, which involves SSE practitioners, managers and civil servants; and
  - University incubators to assist new SSEOEs.
- Advocacy and knowledge building:
  - Awareness raising and dissemination about the concept, benefits and potential of SSE;
  - Mapping SSE and measuring its scope, scale and impact via research and data collection;
  - Developing SSE satellite accounts;
  - Participating in ‘observatories’ that monitor conditions and trends; and
  - Participating in advocacy networks promoting SSE.
- Public-SSE partnerships:
  - Participation in multi-stakeholder policy and planning forums;
  - Preferential procurement;
  - Matching grants in joint fundraising initiatives;
  - Subcontracting the provision of social welfare services to SSEOEs;
  - Direct investment by municipal authorities in SSEOEs;
  - Participation of SSEOEs in government work integration programmes via training services;
  - SSE education and training via public universities and government agencies; and
  - Waste recycling and provision of water services, rural electrification and wind power in collaboration with municipal authorities.

This type of overview of public policy focuses on measures that relate directly to SSEOs. Also key, however, are other aspects related to rights-based, public investment and macro-economic policies. These include building physical and social infrastructure such as roads, rural electrification, water services and clinics in communities and territories where SSE is present. Many factors fundamentally determine the life chances and possibilities for emancipation and empowerment of disadvantaged groups as well as the ability for SSE to expand and operate on a level playing field. These include land rights, civil, political and cultural rights, universal social protection, as well as macro-economic and fiscal policy.

### 3. Challenges and trade-offs

While recent policy innovations often support the scaling up and strengthening of SSE, they can occur in political, institutional and macro-economic contexts that constrain their effectiveness (UNRISD 2016). How SSE is impacted as it interacts more closely with the state and the market has long been an issue of concern. A key question is whether the transformative potential of SSE is realized or, in fact, undermined by public policy, and what trade-offs are involved. Such potential extends beyond specific benefits related to basic needs provisioning, decent work and environmental protection; it also involves democratic practices and the political empowerment of disadvantaged groups. And at a systemic level, the potential of SSE extends to its role as an alternative to market-led development and in reconfiguring the hierarchy of economic, social and environmental objectives within development strategy (also see the entry “Contemporary understandings of the SSE”).

The analysis of both state-SSE and market-SSE relations and their impacts has identified two major issues, often referred to as ‘instrumentalization’ and ‘isomorphism’ (see the entry “SSE and co-optation, isomorphism and instrumentalization”). Under the former, SSE is employed as a policy tool to achieve specific government objectives. During this process, core features and attributes of SSE can be marginalized or diluted. Concerning isomorphism, SSEOs assume practices and norms that characterize, or are promoted by the organizations they are interacting with, including for-profit orientation, managerial culture and hierarchy. While both of these dynamics present opportunities for scaling-up or strengthening aspects of SSE, they also generate risks.

Key concerns include the following: (Borzaga et al. 2020, Coraggio 2015, Cotero 2019, Fonteneau and Pollet (eds.) 2019, ILO 2020, Serrano et al. 2019, Utting 2017).

- i. **Targeting versus diversity:** The diversity of SSE practices and organizations and the transformational potential of SSE can be undermined when state incentives are tied to a narrow range of social policy objectives, activities and enterprise forms. The focus on promoting certain forms of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship, or stretching the definition of SSE to include corporate social responsibility, runs the risk of diverting attention from community, indigenous and collective forms of organization. Similarly, core aspects of SSE related to democratic governance, active citizenship and collective action can be sidelined as attention focuses on service provisioning, social inclusion, enterprise development and social entrepreneurship. Government policies and legislation often emphasize the role of SSE in relation to social purpose and economic empowerment rather than its emancipatory potential and the political empowerment of disadvantaged groups (see the entry “Contemporary understandings of the SSE”). A six



country study of SSE in East and Southeast Asia found that state sector framing of SSE and policy tools and innovations often ignore the democratic dimension (ILO 2021).

- ii. **Minimalist resource allocation:** Despite changes in government discourse that promote SSE, resource allocation often remains highly constrained. Furthermore, incentives and regulations, including procedures for legally establishing an enterprise, continue to be skewed in favour of conventional forms of for-profit business. Both policy discourse and existing literature on SSE often highlight positive institutional developments with limited, if any, reference to actual resource allocation. For example, under the preferential public procurement system in South Korea, only 2.5 percent of purchases in 2019 actually involved SSEOs. Similarly in Brazil, the highly regarded National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy (SENAES) and other SSE-related government institutions experienced major fluctuations in budgetary support, even under the two administrations that formally promoted the SSE between 2003 and 2016 (Morais and Bacic 2020).
- iii. **Unsustainable organizations:** The sudden availability of financial support and other incentives for particular types of SSEOs and activities can encourage the emergence of unsustainable entities that lack key assets and capabilities associated with human capital (such as managerial skills and technical know-how) and social capital (such as support networks and relations of trust), let alone access to affordable sources of finance. This often results in significant failure rates of cooperatives and social enterprises after policy support declines, as demonstrated in examples such as wind energy cooperatives in Denmark and agricultural cooperatives in Indonesia during different periods. Financial incentives, when coupled with limited oversight, can also give rise to free-riders, that is, entrepreneurs or enterprises that fictitiously assume the form of an SSEO to access benefits. Certification schemes, such as that introduced for social enterprises in South Korea, can provide a means to address this issue, but run the risk of introducing burdensome administrative requirements.
- iv. **Political tensions:** Political support for SSE can be a double-edged sword. It can mobilize much needed resources to grow and consolidate SSEOs but it can also undermine their autonomy via political influence, as is the case for many agricultural cooperatives, particularly under authoritarian regimes. Revision of cooperative law within several East and Southeast Asian countries in recent decades has been partly aimed at reasserting cooperative principles, including autonomy. Furthermore, state support and the scope for co-construction at different levels of governance can change significantly with the rotation of parties and leaders in power. This can affect not only budgetary support and outreach, but also progress in institutionalizing SSE. For example, it can result in blocking or delaying the enactment of laws supporting SSE and down-sizing or eliminating state institutions set up to support SSE, as occurred in Brazil when SENAES was dissolved.
- v. **Policy (in)coherence.** Contradictory policies and weak implementation often undermine the effectiveness of public policy in promoting SSE (Utting 2017). Policies can simultaneously support and constrain SSE. Some such inconsistencies have already been noted, for example, when policy discourse

supporting SSE contrasts with a highly constrained fiscal reality of tight or declining budgetary support. Furthermore, policies often foster an uneven playing field for SSE, for example: when laws and regulations make it far easier to establish conventional for-profit private companies than SSEOs; when public procurement is skewed towards private enterprise; or when corporate welfare dwarfs support for SSE, as experienced in the United States and Europe. Additionally, policy incoherence occurs when the life chances and capabilities of SSE actors are undermined by a host of other policies that affect well-being, the environment and active citizenship. These include: i) labour market regulations and social policy that exclude workers in the informal economy; ii) the failure to effectively: allow indigenous peoples to realize their cultural rights, empower women through women's rights; grant land rights to landless farmers; or respect civil and political rights that facilitate self-organization, collective action and advocacy; and iii) regressive tax policy, de-regulation or privatization that favours corporate and elite interests; macro-economic policy that promotes austerity measures; and investment policy that is skewed towards corporate-led and extractivist models of development.

States can adopt very different approaches when promoting SSE. A review of state-SSE relations in several Latin American countries identifies three different models, which can also be found in other countries (Coraggio 2015). They include an **assistentialist social policy model** where SSE constitutes an important welfare policy tool; a **co-constructed approach** that sees SSE actors influencing policy in ways that foster both the economic and political empowerment of SSE actors; and a **systemic approach** which includes not only comprehensive legal and policy reforms and innovations, but also a focus on structural change regarding the relationship between the economy and nature, as well as controls on aspects of market-led development such as privatization. Such approaches have very different implications for how SSE can realize its potential and impact development.

The challenges facing SSEOs and SSE more generally tend to be quite context- and country-specific. A study of social enterprises in 35 EU and neighbouring countries revealed multiple scenarios that had different development and governance implications (Borzaga et al. 2020). In countries with traditionally weak welfare provisioning and strong civil commitment (such as Greece and Portugal, for example), social enterprises have served to fill important gaps and, subsequently, diversified their activities to address community needs and demands. Countries such as Denmark and the United Kingdom, with more developed welfare states, have turned to social enterprises as a substitute for direct public provisioning, contracting out services. Countries such as Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Hungary, with relatively weak public sector and associative traditions, have turned to social enterprises as a form of targeting disadvantaged groups. Finally, countries such as Belgium and France, with a well-developed associative sector with strong relations with the public sector, have witnessed NGOs transitioning from non-profits to social enterprises.

On balance, despite the upsurge in public policy discourse and initiatives promoting SSE over the past decade, state support remains inchoate and fragile. It is also somewhat fragmented in the sense that economic and social dimensions of sustainable development tend to be emphasized within public policy while other core attributes of SSE may be given short-shrift. Beyond the democratic aspect, as noted above, these include the

environmental dimension. Notwithstanding important developments in particular countries – for example, enshrining the rights of nature in constitutional law in Ecuador and Bolivia; promoting sustainable agriculture in Cuba and Kerala, India; community-based forest management in Nepal; waste recycling in Brazil; and renewable energy in Germany – public policy has focused more attention on aspects of SSE related to social welfare, targeting vulnerable groups and socially-oriented enterprise forms.

Research on how SSE can contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) suggests that the transformative potential of SSE will only be realized if governments also recognize the environmental potential of SSE. This potential derives from the fact that SSE has a relatively light environmental footprint, has few incentives to externalize environmental costs and, in certain sectors, involves practices that protect the environment and manage natural resources sustainably (also see the entries “Ecological economics and SSE”, “Indigenous economies and SSE”, “Sustainable investment, production, consumption and SSE” and “Energy, water and waste management sectors and SSE”). Public policy can play a far more proactive role in positioning SSE to meet the increasing demand for environmental goods and services and enabling a process of green transition that is also fair and inclusive (UNTFSSSE 2014).

Certain strands of scholarship and advocacy, not least within Latin America, also question other ways in which the welfare/social enterprise approach dilutes the transformative potential of SSE (Coraggio 2021, Laville and Eynaud 2019). It not only reduces the role of SSE to fairly specific policy goals and stakeholders but also tends to see SSE as a niche sector that complements the dominant mode of capitalist production, rather than a fundamentally different option.

A growing body of research suggests that what is key for addressing these challenges are measures to lock in public policy support legally and fiscally, strong multi-stakeholder governance institutions, and intermediary organizations and networks that can advocate for SSE at different levels of governance (Jenkins et al. 2020). But if SSE is to be more than palliative, also key are broad-based alliances of social and political forces that recognize that an enabling policy environment for SSE ultimately requires deeper changes in macro-economic and fiscal policy, a shift from fragmented to universal social protection systems, and structural changes related to investment, production, exchange and consumption patterns.

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