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Access to Markets for the Social and Solidarity Economy

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Abstract

Market access is a major problem for organizations in the social and solidarity economy (SSE). This entry examines access to different types of markets, including: business to business (B2B); business to consumer (B2C); and government regulated markets (for government purchases, social goods and public utilities). It explains problems of market access encountered by social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations (SSEOs) and indicates how the SSE sector and allies, along with governments, can facilitate market access through good practices and supportive public policy.

Keywords

business-to-business markets; business-to-consumer markets; regional economic development; popular economy; B2B markets; B2C markets

Introduction

Market access is a major problem for social and solidarity economy organizations and enterprises (SSEOs). This entry examines access to different types of markets, including: business to business (B2B); business to consumer (B2C); and government regulated markets (for government purchases, social goods and public utilities). It explains problems of market access encountered by SSEOs and indicates how the SSE sector and allies, along with governments, can facilitate market access through good practices and supportive public policy.

1. SSEOs and markets

In analyzing market access, it is helpful to distinguish three types of market or market relationships, which may occur across a full range of product and service markets (see Entries SSE and food and agricultural sector; SSE and finance sector; SSE and housing sector; SSE and energy, water and management sectors; SSE and tourism sector; SSE and social service sector; SSE and ICT-based or related sector; SSE and culture, sports and leisure sectors; SSE and education sector; SSE and health and care sectors).

1.1. B2B markets

SSEOs' access to B2B markets occurs at two distinct locations. First, there is the initial entry into formal B2B relationships. While their situations vary, SSEOs typically enter B2B markets at the bottom of value chains selling commodities or intermediary products upstream to much larger firms. The challenges that they regularly face include meeting quality standards, quantity demands, price points, delivery schedules, etc. Agriculture is the major sector in which the majority of SSEOs engage in B2B relationships.

Second, SSEOs that are already participating in B2B relationships may want access to different positions in the value chain to capture more value-added. There are four basic ways in which this may occur: (a) providing new services (for example, transportation, exporting/importing, etc.); (b) providing new intermediary products for sale upstream; (c) creating new inputs in-house, and; (d) adding value to existing intermediate products by increasing their product quality. The challenges that SSEOs face here include accessing the knowledge and resources to develop new products and services, as well as gaining support from buyers upstream.

1.2. B2C markets

Three basic pathways exist for SSEOs to enter B2C markets. First, new SSEOs can sell directly to consumers through retail outlets and/or online platforms. Such SSEOs operate across a range of product markets, and are organized by different actors, including agricultural producers (e.g., fresh produce), artisans (e.g., handicrafts), workers (e.g. food service, IT and design services, construction) and consumers (e.g. food retail, sports equipment, housing). Key challenges include accessing market knowledge, raising start-up capital, managing supply chains, ensuring quality control and developing marketing strategies. The extent of these challenges vary with the nature of the markets in which SSEOs are competing, and their size and organizational capacities.

Second, SSEOs that are already involved in B2B relationships can try to access consumers through these chains. Here SSEOs develop and brand their own final

products, and then work with distributors and/or retailers who mediate sales of their products to consumers. Such relationships enable SSEOEs to reach a wider consumer base, while still being able to market directly to consumers (e.g., through on-line campaigns, live events, etc.). The primary challenge such SSEOEs face is convincing distributors and retailers to promote their branded products, when the latter may have their own brands (and those of large corporate competitors) to promote.

A third pathway into B2C relations entails SSEOEs already working in B2B markets setting up their own distribution and/or retail outlets. Historically, this has been a common practice among agricultural producers such as dairy farmers, typically through second tier co-operatives.

1.3. Government procurement policies, social goods and public utilities

Governments operate in markets in two main ways. Firstly, they purchase goods and services for use by their agencies and programs. This typically involves a procurement policy with a bidding process to ensure competitive prices. Policies may also feature conditions on who can participate in the bidding process and various product specifications reflecting political, social and environmental policy concerns. Public institutions regulated by governments such as universities and hospitals) may adopt similar procurement policies.

Secondly, governments can establish markets for social goods and public utilities through a combination of regulation and incentives. In social goods (health care, housing, education, etc.) the nature of markets vary depending upon who is allowed to provide services (government, non-profits or for-profit providers), funding formulas (full funding, partial funding, etc.), eligibility requirements (universal or income-tested) and standards for service (wait times, staff-client ratios, etc.). In public utilities including water, electricity and communications, governments may establish regulated monopoly providers or allow limited competition depending on the nature of the utility and government goals. SSEOEs' access to procurement programs and to markets in social goods and public utilities depend both on their own capacities and the conditions established by governments (see Entries 47 and 48).

2. Problems of market access

SSEOEs' ability to access markets depends upon three primary factors; whether actual markets approach ideal market conditions; whether governments uphold human rights; and whether certain behavioural assumptions about market actors hold. In cases in which governments do not ensure the first two conditions, SSEOEs may face structural impediments to market access. Regarding the third condition, SSEOEs may encounter organization impediments to market access or enjoy competitive advantages depending upon whether behavioural assumptions hold.

2.1. Justifying Markets

Markets can be justified by efficiency and/or ethical arguments. Efficiency claims are laid out most systematically in neo-classical economics. The basic argument is that under ideal market conditions, competition generates static efficiencies (efficient allocation of resources and distribution of goods) and dynamic efficiencies (innovation in production methods and new products and services). This results in consumers having access to a wide range of goods and services at low prices (*consumer sovereignty*),

workers receiving a fair (market) price for their labour, and (economic) profits being generated only through innovation. Ideal market conditions include: a large number of buyers and sellers; no barriers to entry and exit; perfect information; negligible transaction costs; homogeneous markets (substitutability of goods) and; no generation of negative externalities. A behavioural assumption in the model is that actors are (primarily) motivated by individual utility maximization (see Entries 5-8).

In neo-classical economics, ethical arguments focus on fairness. Two primary types of claims are made. The first, a claim of distributive justice, basically assumes market outcomes (prices) under competitive conditions as the standard for fairness. The second type of claim focuses on fairness as individual liberty. Here, markets are deemed to be fair because individuals are not forced into exchanges and because all actors have a fair or equal opportunity (liberty) to compete in markets. A key assumption of this last claim is that actors have (relatively) equal starting positions (Buchanan 1985).

2.2. Structural impediments to market access

Three assumptions, or claims, in the neo-classical argument reveal sources of structural impediments to market access. The first, the assumption that actual markets tend to approach ideal markets, raises two issues. One, the fact that markets do not automatically self-correct, means that governments have to enforce *market preserving rules* (e.g., anti-trust regulations, insider-trading rules) to limit anti-competitive practices and the emergence of oligopolies and oligopsonies. Secondly, naturally-occurring market imperfections – with respect to public goods (e.g., defense), natural monopolies (e.g. utilities) and, arguably, social goods (e.g., health care) – require government action for efficient solutions. This may include government provision of services or the use of *market emulating rules* (Buchanan 1985).

The second structural impediment relates to the normative claim that labour is treated fairly because workers receive fair wages and freely enter into labour contracts. Underlying these claims is a view of labour as equivalent to other factors of production, rather than as citizens with a range of human rights (civil, political, social, labour, etc.). If governments do not enforce these rights, then firms which do not respect them can gain a competitive advantage over SSEOEs which do.

A third impediment relates to the assumption of equal starting positions. It is important to note that this clearly counter-factual assumption relates not only to individuals but also to social groups and even nations, due to historic processes of colonization, enslavement and other forms of oppression. These roots of unequal starting points create structural impediments to market access, requiring government action in a range of areas including social policy and trade agreements, for example (see the entry “Heterodox economics and SSE”).

2.3. Organizational impediments to market access

SSEOEs may also face impediments to market access due to features inherent in their organizations. Three concerns are most commonly raised. The first relates to limited access to capital due to restrictions on outside investors. This may inhibit potential start-ups from forming, restrict them from entering capital intensive industries, and may affect their competitiveness, as they are subject to being undercapitalized.

A second concern relates to democratic control of SSEOEs. The argument here is that democratic procedures can be time-consuming and/or ineffective, for example due to being overly risk adverse, resulting in a failure to take advantage of opportunities to move into new product and geographic markets.

A third issue involves the collective ownership of SSEOEs and rules restricting salary ranges and the distribution of the surplus. The concern here is that entrepreneurs are unlikely to adopt this form of organization, as it significantly limits their potential earnings by eliminating the potential of taking the company public and by limiting executive salaries (Spear 2000).

2.4. SSEOEs' competitive advantages and market access

SSEOEs also have competitive advantages that may facilitate market access. First, their constitution as self-help groups enables them to mobilize large groups of people in the face of oligopolistic and oligopsonistic markets by appealing to a very tangible self-interest. Historically, this ability has demonstrated itself in the formation of consumer and producer co-operatives in many regions of the world.

Other SSEOE advantages derive from their commitment to the value of solidarity, which is expressed through a variety of principles and practices. The emphasis on participation and democratic decision making, for example, facilitates the empowerment of members. This leads to productive efficiencies, as organizations are able to make better use of their members, as members make better use of their time and available resources. The principles of co-operation among co-operatives and concern for the community enable SSEOEs to draw upon and create new social capital. This provides access to knowledge and resources from other SSEOEs and allies (e.g., NGOs, foundations, etc.) and facilitates SSEOE business partnerships. Concern for the community also generates other advantages. It can make customers more likely to patronize SSEOEs, either out of shared values, or by generating trust that reduces the cost/need of monitoring. In addition, it tends to result in practices and policies that generate positive externalities, which reinforce the growth of available social capital (Spear 2000).

3. Good practices

SSEOEs, along with other supporting actors, can facilitate market access by engaging in good practices, that is, practices that align with the values of the SSE.

3.1 Education and start-ups

For new SSEOEs to form, educational outreach is often not enough, especially in vulnerable communities. For this reason it is good practice to integrate educational efforts into programs that engage individuals within the actual organizing of new SSEOEs. This practice can be led by individual SSEOEs, SSE apex bodies, NGOs and government agencies. An impactful example of the latter example comes from the Indian state of Kerala which has facilitated the organization of millions of women below the poverty line into a state-wide network of self-help groups (*Kudumbashree*) dedicated to eliminating poverty through collective wealth building strategies and enterprises. The strategic partnership between the Peruvian producer co-operative *Cepicafe* (now *Noradino*) and the NGO *Pidecafe* (now *Progreso*) is another exemplary case. For more than twenty-five years the latter has facilitated the organization of new producer organizations (starting with *Cepicafe*), and has supported technical and organizational capacity building, while

the former has increased market access by mentoring new start-ups, opening up and sharing new product markets, and developing new partnerships to develop value-added activities.

3.2. Capacity building

Access to markets requires capacity building. SSEOEs can support each other by supplying three key resources. The first is knowledge and information, which are required across a full range of functional areas, such as knowledge about markets (for strategy and marketing), products (for quality control), production processes (for competitiveness), organizational dynamics (for good governance and management practices) and finance and accounting (for access to capital and to fulfill fiduciary responsibilities). Knowledge sharing can involve a full range of SSE actors (individual SSEOEs, national and sectoral apex bodies, etc.) and can occur through various media and programs including, but not limited to, B2B interactions, mentoring programs by other SSEOEs and training programs sponsored by federations.

Secondly, SSE actors can provide other SSEOEs with financial support. Key institutions here include credit unions and co-operative banks (which can provide long term, low interest loans for capital projects and working capital), co-operative development foundations (which can provide funds for training programs and development projects), and SSEOE business partners (which can provide advance payments, loans for capital projects, etc. - see the entry “Finance sector and SSE”).

A third resource that SSEOEs can provide is access to their networks. These may include business partners, NGOs, industry organizations, government agencies, intergovernmental organizations, foundations, research centers and universities. Connecting SSEOEs to such networks can multiply their access to knowledge and finance, and thereby connect them to a range of other resources. For example, SSE apex bodies and SSEOEs collaborate with development agencies and private foundations to fund projects to support SSEOEs in the South (e.g., *Equal Exchange*, a US based coffee roaster which has collaborated with USAID on a capacity building project in Peru) (see Entries 27, 36 and 52).

3.3 Supporting B2B relations

Establishing B2B relationships with other SSEOEs is another good practice. Along value chains, several practices are important, especially for fledgling organizations. The first is the use of pilot purchases, which include detailed information about quality expectations, feedback on the purchase and prospects for a second order. This mentoring provides smaller SSEOEs the opportunity to develop capacities such as for production and quality control in order to compete in conventional B2B markets. Long term contracts are another good practice as they make suppliers less susceptible to exogenous shocks. Such practices are common among Northern fair trade distributors and retailers, many of which are organized as worker co-ops (e.g., *JustUs!*, *Planet Bean* and *La Siembra* in Canada). SSEOEs can also co-operate horizontally to gain access to B2B markets, both contractually (with small suppliers joining together to bid on large contracts) and organizationally (through forming second tier organizations).

3.4. Supporting value-added strategies

Another good practice is to facilitate the capturing of more value-added along supply chains by SSEOs. While not something most investor-owned firms will consider, among co-operatives this practice exemplifies the principle of co-operation. Again, the fair trade movement provides concrete examples. One practice is horizontal co-operation among Southern producer groups (often through second tier co-operatives) to establish their own packaging and exporting facilities for their commodities (e.g., cocoa beans). A second practice includes vertical collaboration between producers and SSEOE distributors and retailers (and financiers) to help producers establish processing and testing/tasting facilities for intermediate products (e.g., cocoa butter) and final goods (e.g., chocolate-based products). Another good practice is for SSEOE distributors and retailers to support efforts by producers to increase the quality of their products, so that they can sell into niche quality markets such as fine and flavour cacao, and ethical markets including organic and fair trade markets. The French worker co-operative *Ethiquable* is an excellent example of a retailer providing such support.

3.5. Supporting B2C relations

While all new SSEOs need support, in B2C markets there is particular demand for marketing support. Within the SSE, there is a huge potential for marketing co-operatives and larger co-operatives with marketing departments to supply knowledge and resources, and actively mentor new start-ups.

SSE distributors and retailers also have a strategic role in supporting B2C relationships, as they are in a position to assist more vulnerable SSEOs further down their chains, through (co-)branding their products, and distributing and selling these (co-)branded products. These relationships may have extra value for Southern producer SSEOs as this support can lay the basis for them establishing their own distribution and retail channels in domestic and regional markets (including through South2South trade relations).

Apex bodies and other actors can also facilitate B2C relations by branding SSE enterprises themselves. In the UK for example, the “clover leaf” logo is used by a wide range of consumer co-operatives. In fair trade markets, civil society led certification schemes provide a form of branding for cooperatively made products, insofar as they require production by SSEOs (e.g., the *Small Producers Symbol* exclusively, and *Fairtrade International* in a limited range of products).

SSE actors can also support B2C relationships as consumers. Procurement policies favouring SSEOs are a good practice. Another good practice is to facilitate the search for SSE goods and services. *Cooperatives and Mutuals Canada* has recently launched an online map of all the registered co-operatives in the country. In Argentina, *GCOOP*, an open source software company, has developed a free SSE app which provides an interactive map with advanced search functions and the facility for SSEOs to update their own profiles and information (see the entry “Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and SSE”).

3.6. Innovation and strategic planning

Strategic planning and innovation are core good practices. The Mondragon Cooperative Corporation provides an example of how SSEOs organized in a group can

generate market access through strategic planning processes and systems designed to support innovation in member enterprises, to incubate new enterprises, and to establish strategic partnerships. RaboBank provides an example of how an SSEE can use its strategic planning process to access sustainable markets and provide similar market access to other SSEOs. It has done this by incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals into its plan and advising its clients on how they can do the same (see the entry “Sustainable Development Goals and SSE”).

However, given the limited resources of most SSEOs, there may be important roles for apex bodies in these areas. First, apex bodies can promote incubation and innovation centers and programs, either by themselves or in collaboration with universities and colleges. Working with institutions of higher education has the advantage of exposing a broad base of students and recent graduates to *social entrepreneurship* through SSEO forms. Such collaboration can extend to SSE case study competitions, hack-a-thons and innovation competitions (see Entries 16 and 47). Second, apex bodies potentially have a role in supporting research and development centers which can facilitate the adoption of new technology and a more competitive presence for SSEOs in emerging markets (e.g., delivery services, transportation, etc.). Third, apex bodies can promote new forms of SSEO structures (with financial support, facilitating discussions, etc.), such as co-operative “franchising” (e.g., Arizmendi Co-operatives in San Francisco), co-operative conversion programs (e.g., Co-operatives UK, the Co-op Convert Project in Canada) and the development of platform co-operatives (see the entry “Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and SSE”).

4. Public policy

Government policy has a huge impact on if and how SSEOs can access markets. Five key policy areas and practices are identified here.

4.1. Public recognition of the SSE

Public recognition of the importance of the SSE and SSEOs provides a foundation for policies that can facilitate market access. Most fundamental is acknowledging the importance of the SSE and SSEOs in constitutions. The post-WWII constitution of Italy, for example, recognizes the “social role” of cooperatives and the state’s responsibility to establish a framework favourable to cooperative development. An even more powerful example is the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador (Art. 283) which declares the economic system to be a “social and solidarity economy.” A logical second step is the establishment of dedicated bodies to lead and coordinate initiatives with other ministries and agencies. Ecuador, for example, developed a series of new bodies (the Ministry for Social and Economic Inclusion, the Institute for the Popular and Solidarity Economy, and the National Popular Finance Corporation) to promote the SSE (UN Secretary General 2021).

4.2 Business law

Business law has several roles to play. First, laws should ensure that SSEOs can incorporate and operate in line with their values and identities. To wit, laws should allow for organisations including multi-stakeholder co-operatives, non-profit co-operatives, social/solidarity co-operatives and second tier co-operatives. Legal provisions should also facilitate the easy formation of SSEOs, especially by vulnerable groups, as well as the

conversion to SSEOE forms by non-profits or family-owned businesses for example (UN Secretary General 2021).

Second, collaboration of national governments would harmonize laws and enable the formation of truly international, multinational and transnational co-operatives that allow for (individual and corporate) members from different countries to cooperate in the same legal entities (and not just through contractual agreements).

Third, it is imperative that SSEOEs are guaranteed equal treatment to other types of enterprises, especially investor owned firms. This includes the right to engage in the same business activities in the same product markets, equal access to the same geographical markets and equal access to programs for business support (See the entry “Legal frameworks and laws for SSE”).

4.3. Public procurement policies

Governments can facilitate market access through procurement policies in three basic ways. Firstly, they can participate in existing, non-state led procurement policies that promote products made by SSEOEs (e.g., the Fairtrade Towns initiative). Secondly, they can include provisions that require the procurement of goods and services from SSEOEs (e.g., a minimum percentage of contracts that must go to SSEOEs), favour SSEOEs getting contracts (e.g., as preferred suppliers), and/or facilitate SSEOEs’ ability to compete (e.g., provisions for locally or sustainably produced goods). A third good practice is to require and/or encourage government contractors and public institutions (universities, hospitals, etc.) to adopt similar procurement policies.

4.4. Social and economic development policy

Social and economic policies can facilitate market access in four main policy areas. First, in *social services delivery* policy, governments can utilise several methods to enable this (see Entries 44). One method includes restrictions on the provision of services (e.g., day care services, special education programs, etc.) to SSEOEs and non-profits. A second option is to provide SSEOEs and non-profits with extra support in offering services (e.g., grants, subsidies for some clients). A third option is to provide subsidized costs to the entire population and have non-profits, SSEOEs, and for-profits compete on the basis of service.

Second, governments can support and/or favour SSEOEs in providing public utilities (see the entry “Energy, water and waste management sectors and SSE”). In the United States, government support for electrification dating back to the New Deal has spurred the development of over 900 electricity co-operatives in rural regions. Subsequent impacts have included the provision of high-speed internet access to underserved rural areas by such cooperatives, as well as support for electrical co-operatives in more than two dozen developing countries by their apex body, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

A third area of opportunity concerns efforts to *integrate vulnerable and marginalized communities* into labour markets. Work integration programs, targeting the *otherly-abled* and the long-term unemployed, have emerged as an important tool in many Northern countries since legislation introducing (*Type-B*) *Social co-operatives* in Italy in 1991 (Defourny and Nyssens 2021). Commonly known as *work integration social*

enterprises (WISEs) in some countries, such programs are frequently supported by government grants and/or contracts (see the entry “Work integration and SSE”).

In the global South, where much larger segments of the population operate outside the formal economy, more extensive economic development policy is required to deal with problems of labour market exclusion. There is potential for this to be facilitated through what Coraggio has called a transition of the informal economy into a *popular* (solidarity) economy. While various governments in Latin America have introduced SSE policy initiatives, Ecuador’s *Buen Vivir* strategy stands out as the most comprehensive (Coraggio 2013). Grounded in a new Law for the Popular and Solidarity Economy and implemented through a series of strategic plans, the strategy included support for: the incubation and financing of new SSEOs (especially in the popular economy); capacity building in export sectors (especially for small producers); extensive government procurement programs; the establishment of outdoor markets and fairs to support fledgling SSEOs; and support for (fair trade) supply chain linkages.

Over the last four decades, Northern governments have changed the focus of their regional economic development policies, especially in relation to rural regions. Within a larger neo-liberal policy region, efforts to attract outside capital have given way to supporting local business development, often through some form of community economic development corporation. From an SSE perspective, good policy practices have included funding incubation and innovation programs which favour SSEOs (especially among vulnerable and marginalized groups), establishing and linking other supportive programs (e.g., employment training), introducing legal reforms to address historic injustices (e.g., recognition of land claims) and supporting the formation of networks to facilitate the development of local circular economies (see Entries 50 and 54).

4.5. Decentralized planning and co-construction of public policy

A final measure that will facilitate SSEOs access to markets is to increase the opportunities for participation in policy making. A variety of related initiatives over the last two decades or so provide good examples. These include: the state-wide *decentralized planning* program in the Indian state of Kerala; *participatory budgeting* practices, which first emerged in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre; and *co-construction of public policy* practices such as those in Quebec (see Entries 27 and 55). Decentralized planning not only helps to eliminate information deficits and bureaucratic corruption, but it also aligns with Coraggio’s insistence that systemic change needs to build upon and support the solidarity-based initiatives of vulnerable and marginalized communities.

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