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Activism, Social Movements and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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Abstract

The entry explains the interface between SSE, social movements and activism. It presents two perspectives. The first sees *social movements as catalysts of SSE initiatives*. SSE entities and ecosystems are often the results of various forms of social movements' activism in different parts of the world. The second sees *SSE as an emerging global movement within the broader alter-globalization movement*. Significant parts of the overall SSE constellation can be described as a “converging” social movement (or “movement of movements”) with a plurality of views, that are in articulation with other social movements, not only to resist the harmful socio-environmental effects of the current economic model, but also demonstrate concrete alternatives through practice.

Given the right political conditions and motivation of the actors concerned, these local-level experiments can be scaled up, or “mainstreamed” through enabling public policy changes. Advocacy, contestation, policy influence and the co-construction of policy via SSE intermediary organizations and their allies play an important role in this process. The entry introduces diverse examples of the relationship between SSE and activism and social movements at national and international levels

Keywords: activism; social movements; collective SSE identity; neoliberal globalization; alter-globalization; mediated communication

Introduction

Given the diversity of SSE experiences within and between countries and continents, it is not surprising that scholarly studies on SSE and social movements are fraught with divergent views and understandings, especially since they tend to be associated with distinct fields of academic research that so far rarely intersect. Should we think in terms of a relationship, or lack thereof, between SSE and social movements, or is SSE in itself a social movement that is part of broader movements (from local to global levels) aiming to challenge the dominant neoliberal economic model (Laville et al. 2017)? This entry proposes that it is both: SSE entities and ecosystems are often the results of various forms of social movements' activism in different parts of the world, whether they stay connected to social movements thereafter or not. And significant parts of the overall SSE constellation can be described as a "converging" social movement (or "movement of movements") with a plurality of views, that are in articulation with other social movements – not only to resist the harmful socio-environmental effects of the current economic model but also demonstrate, through practice, concrete alternatives. These experiments, at the level of the organization/enterprise and the local territory, given the right political conditions and motivation of the actors concerned, can be scaled up or "mainstreamed" through enabling public policy changes. Advocacy, contestation, policy influence and the co-construction of policy via SSE intermediary organizations and their allies, play an important role in this process (see also entries on Supporting organizations and intermediaries for SSE and local and territorial development plans and SSE).

At this juncture, the question is whether the end result of such developments is the incremental growth of economic activity undertaken through SSE principles at the micro and meso levels, in a context where unsustainable production and consumption patterns remain relatively unchanged. Alternatively, these advances can be seen as stepping-stones to consolidate social movements aiming at more fundamental macro-changes to democratize the overall economy and politics itself (Laville et al. 2017).

1. Defining social movements in the context of SSE

Since the 1970s, social movements have become a subject of multidisciplinary academic studies, presenting slightly varying elements to define what constitutes a social movement. For the purposes of this entry, we will use the definition provided by James and van Seters (2014) in the context of their study of social movements' mobilization against neoliberal globalization, or the "alter-globalization" movement:

"Defining a social movement entails a few minimal conditions of 'coming together': (1.) the formation of some kind of collective identity; (2.) the development of a shared normative orientation; (3.) the sharing of concern for change of the status quo and (4.) the occurrence of moments of practical action that are at least subjectively connected together across time addressing this concern for change. Thus, we define a social movement as a form of political association between persons who have at least a minimal sense of themselves

as connected to others in common purpose and who come together across an extended period of time to effect social change in the name of that purpose.”
(p.xi)

In addition to these generic elements, a distinctive feature of social movements related to SSE (especially compared to primarily protest-based movements) is the combination of political activism with solidarity-based forms of economic activities that can change material conditions in people’s daily lives and demonstrate in concrete terms that alternative economic models (especially at local and territorial levels) are possible (Laville et.al. 2017, Zimmer and Eum 2017). In section 4, we suggest that large parts of the myriad entities throughout the world that recognize themselves as part of SSE are converging, from local to global levels, into a *de facto* social movement (or “movement of movements”) that meets these minimal conditions – albeit with their own tensions and contradictions, as well as their own strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis other social movements with whom they seek to cooperate. First, however, this entry examines social movements as catalysts of SSE.

2.Social movements as catalysts of SSE

SSE initiatives are typically the result of the activism of social movements and alliances that have common affinities, whether thematic (e.g., environmental protection, agro-ecology, food sovereignty, health, social and economic justice, anti-extractivism, the commons) or identity-based (e.g., small and landless farmers, consumers, workers unions, informal workers’ associations, feminist movements, indigenous peoples, religious groups). The forms of action are in part determined by the political context in which they operate. They may include relatively soft forms of mobilization, such as bypassing agro-industrial production and distribution through short local organic food supply networks, or the creation of SSE initiatives to combat unemployment and (re)generate sources of livelihoods. Another option may involve more radical operations such as the illegal or semi-legal occupation of land/territories, wherein SSE “microcosms” can develop with some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis capitalistic relations – such as the *Zapatista* movement in Chiapas, Mexico, the landless peasants’ movement (MST) in Brazil, or the more recent *Zones à Défendre* (“*zadiste*”) movements in France (Laville et. al. 2017). SSE social movements, like other social movements, are best understood through a “multi-organizational field” approach, namely the need to understand them in relation to the confluence of different currents of thought and pre-existing movements (Curtis and Zurcher 1973, Laville et al. 2017). Using this approach, this entry illustrates the role of social movements in catalyzing and accompanying SSE agroecological consumer-producer networks in South Korea and France (Box 13.1), and in generating jobs and livelihoods in Colombia and Brazil (Box 13.2).

Many initiatives are the result of a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices from across countries and continents. The success of initiatives has in many cases, brought political momentum toward the adoption of public policies in favour of SSE, notably through political parties with affinities to the leading social movements. In some cases, the

actors of SSE initiatives, once well-established, distance themselves from activism, prioritizing the daily economic operations of their enterprise or organization (“routinization”), marking a partial or complete break from the social movement that created them. In other cases, the ties with the social movement remain active or evolve into new movements (Zimmer and Eum 2017).

Box 13.1: SSE agroecological consumer-producer movements

The Republic of Korea

The Republic of Korea (or South Korea) today is one of the countries with the most vibrant SSE ecosystem in the world, backed by many local authorities, as described in the entry “Local and territorial development plans and SSE”. The beginnings of SSE can be traced to the creation of credit unions by the ecclesiastical movement in the 1970s, inspired by the Antigonish movement in Canada (blending adult education, co-operatives, microfinance and rural community development). From the mid-1980s onward, building on earlier rural agricultural cooperatives experiments, a new form of consumer cooperatives called *Han-sal-Lim* brought together consumers and producers with the aim of developing solidarity-based relations between urban consumers and rural organic food producers. A coalition of environmental, feminist and neighbourhood movements and citizen mobilization helped organize the daily provisioning of healthy organic products. It has been observed that these movements are a continuum from earlier pro-democracy movements from the 1970s against military dictatorship (notably students, intellectuals, church groups) that are still active today, notably through the mass demonstrations in 2016-17 calling for the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye over a corruption scandal. The “social movement” dimension of consumer cooperatives also remains alive through their participation in the organization of public demonstrations in favour of environmental protection and food sovereignty (Zimmer and Eum 2017).

France

Similarly in France, the *Associations pour le maintien de l'agriculture paysanne – Amap* (Associations for the preservation of small-holder agriculture), which also promotes solidarity partnerships between small-holder farmers and consumers, began operation in 2001 through the combined efforts of an alliance of small farmer, environmental and consumer movements, *Alliance Paysans-Écologistes-Consommateurs (Alliance PEC)* created in 1991. Among them, is the *Confédération Paysanne*, the national union of small-holder farmers and agricultural workers which defends a “realistic alternative” to industrial agriculture, based on social, solidarity and ecological principles, and is one of the founders of the global small farmers' movement, *Via Campesina*, campaigning for the principles of food sovereignty and solidarity worldwide (<http://confederationpaysanne.fr>). According to the latest surveys in France, there are well over 2,000 Amaps and over 250,000 people involved in the movement, both in producer-consumer networks and awareness-raising campaigns (Zimmer and Eum 2017, <http://miramap.org/>). The national network (*Mouvement inter-régional des Amap*) is part of URGENCI which is an international network of grassroots organizations that is present in 32 countries. It follows similar principles and types of action through different names, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and is generally referred to as Local

Solidarity-based Partnerships for Agroecology (LSPAs). The Amap are part of the wider ecologist movement in France, which formed a political party (*Les Verts*, now called *Les Écologistes*) that played an important role in supporting the elaboration and adoption of the 2014 framework law on SSE proposed by the Socialist Party then in power. (Laville et al. 2017, Zimmer and Eum 2017)

Box 13.2. Movements for employment and livelihoods

Colombia

In Colombia, SSE initiatives emerged in the 1960s, although solidarity-based economic principles date back to pre-Hispanic times through indigenous practices of mutual help and reciprocity (named *minga*, *manos vueltas*, *convite*). Since the 1960s, the movements developing concrete SSE projects in the field had already been promoting the idea of incorporating solidarity economy principles into law. These movements were significantly driven by catholic activists adhering to the Theology of Liberation through the diocesan social pastoral secretariat (Sepas). They also drew on the experiences of cooperativism in Europe and Canada. Caught between a repressive oligarchic regime and armed rebel guerrillas, activists found in SSE a non-threatening manner to implicitly express their ideological position against capitalistic development, while providing alternative livelihood opportunities to those proposed by the armed revolutionaries. In the southern region of the Department of Santander, activities included support to the creation and development of cooperatives principally in rural development, but also finance, transport, education and health. A third of the population (450,000 persons) work in 200 created cooperatives. In addition, an intermediary organization, *El Commun*, was established to enable dialogue with the state and to promote SSE territorial development, as well as networks bringing together academics, NGOs and community organizations to plan and implement local SSE development initiatives.

Elements of the concept of solidarity economy were first introduced in the Constitution of 1991. The legal framework for SSE entities regrouped in two categories (solidarity enterprises and economic organizations for solidarity-based development) was later spelt out in law 545 of 1998 on “the solidarity economy and entities of a cooperative nature”. It is noteworthy that solidarity economy was also recognized in the peace agreement between the Colombian Government and Revolutionary Armed Forces – Peoples’ Army (FARC–EP) in 2016 (Hataya 2017).

Brazil

In neighbouring Brazil, the ecclesiastical movement also played a leading role in generating SSE initiatives throughout the country together with other social movements, especially the workers’ movement and its extension into a major political party. The draconian neoliberal policies of austerity, privatization and trade liberalization undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s, generated mass long term unemployment, poverty and social exclusion throughout the country. From the 1990s onward, SSE initiatives developed initially as a survival strategy for a growing number of unemployed workers through Alternative Community Projects (PACs).

These were established by the catholic NGO Caritas and SSE incubators called *Incubadora Tecnológica de Cooperativas Populares* (ITCP) and hosted by public universities and NGOs and resulted from the mobilization of university professors, students, workers and grassroots activists. SSE initiatives began spreading with the involvement of a wider number of movements and groups, including landless rural workers, waste collectors, artisans, indigenous peoples and Afro Brazilian groups, women's movements, and neighbourhood assemblies.

One of the two major national trade union confederations, the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) embraced the solidarity economy as a creative response to severe economic crises and the devastating impact on the labour market. In 1999, it set up an Agency for Solidarity Development with other NGOs and SSE organizations in order to support the creation and consolidation of solidarity cooperatives and enterprises as means to generate employment and income. In parallel, solidarity economy was increasingly being supported at municipal and state levels by elected officials from the political party emanating from the workers' movement, the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT). After it gained power at the federal level in 2002, the PT government developed, between 2003 and 2016 a wide range of public policies and programmes to support SSE through the newly-created National Secretariat for Solidarity Economy (SENAES) – as described in the entry “Local and territorial development plans and SSE”. Upon creation of the Secretariat, a plenary meeting with representatives of the entire SSE movement in the country was held to create two major national entities: the *Fórum Brasileiro de Economia Solidária* (FBES) regrouping all solidarity economy-based initiatives and civil society organizations supporting SSE; and a network of officials from municipal and state governments promoting SSE in their territories. According to some estimates, over 30,000 SSEOs and supporting organizations were created nationwide, involving around 3 million individuals. (Singer and Schiochet 2017, Addor and Rolim Laricchia 2018, CUT 1999).

Some of the main actors propelling the SSE movement in Brazil were also instrumental in the process leading to the World Social Forum discussed in subsection 4.2.

3.The SSE: an emerging global movement within the alter-globalization movement

The spread of SSE through social movements is not the fruit of a fully-fledged theory or blueprint imposed through a top-down approach. Rather, it reflects a bottom-up process representing very diverse experiences, where actors respond to challenges within their own context – some *de facto*, undertaking activities involving SSE principles without recognizing themselves as part of a collective identity called “social and solidarity economy”. As noted in Boxes 13.1 and 13.2, some movements have

studied the experience of cooperativism from other countries and applied its principles to their own realities. However, cooperatives are only a part of the broader set of SSE organizations and enterprises (SSEOs) described in other entries of this Encyclopedia. This section examines: (1) the conditions of “coming together” of significant parts of the overall SSE community as a global social movement as defined by James and van Seters (2014) cited above; and (2) the relationship and articulation between the SSE movement and other social movements mobilizing against the neoliberal agenda, increasingly referred to as the alter-globalization movement.

3.1 The SSE: an emerging global social movement

The gradual construction of collective identity and shared normative orientation among SSE actors around the world has been a slow process of dialogue and mutual learning. To simplify what is in fact a much larger nomenclature, it has been the convergence of two major currents: the “social economy” tradition originating notably from Europe and Canada; and the “solidarity economy” predominant notably in the Latin American experience, but also increasingly used in other continents. The exchange of experiences and visions from actors across different continents has greatly contributed to this convergence. The main differences and elements in common among scholars and activists are presented in a stylized fashion in the entry “Contemporary understandings of the SSE” whereby the social economy places the emphasis on SSEOs as part of a “third sector” complementing the capitalist economy and the public sector; while solidarity economy aims at more systemic change, social transformation and political engagement at multiple levels of governance.

The Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS) is one international SSE coalition that has been instrumental in forging a common identity among strands of social versus solidarity economy. The first in a series of international meetings on the “Globalization of Solidarity” was held in Lima in 1997, where activists from a wide range of social movements, NGOs, researchers and practitioners from around the world gathered to begin developing the elements of a more concrete global SSE movement. This set the stage for the formal establishment in 2002 of RIPESS, as “a global network of continental networks committed to the promotion of Social Solidarity Economy” in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania. Each continental network is composed of national and sectorial networks which provide strong territorial and substantive anchoring to promote intercontinental cooperation and advocacy at different levels.

In the words of former RIPESS Board Member, Emily Kawano, the “Social Solidarity Economy is actually a marriage of the solidarity economy and the more radical end of the social economy.” Namely, this refers to social economy actors that see its value in addressing problems such as poverty, unemployment and social exclusion caused by neoliberal capitalism in the short term but also understand it as a “stepping stone” toward a more fundamental transformation of the economic system. “It is this end of the social economy spectrum that converges with the concept of the solidarity economy” (Kawano 2013). This reflects the view of many solidarity economy scholars and activists who argue that the SSE agenda must extend beyond the promotion of SSE principles within an organization or enterprise (limited profit, collective ownership and

democratic governance). It should not satisfy itself with solely obtaining legal frameworks that guarantee SSEOs distinct statutory identity without also engaging in the systemic transformation of the prevailing economic system, starting with the promotion of broader solidarity economy ties in the local community and beyond (Laville et al. 2017).

The inter-continental nature of SSE social movements coordinated by established international organizations, such as RIPESS, is an acceptance of nuances in the meaning of terminologies that forges a common identity within a diversity of historical practices and cultural heritage. In Europe, the social economy is quite strongly rooted and pre-dates the framework of the solidarity economy, which has been gaining more support. The RIPESS-Europe network, therefore, works with both social economy and solidarity economy organizations and includes sectoral as well as territorial organizations/networks. Quebec builds on the concept of the social economy and seeks to create a movement for transformation that is very practical and grounded at the local and territorial levels. In the rest of Canada, the emphasis is on the territorial framework of local economic development. RIPESS-Latin America and the Caribbean use the solidarity economy framework. Despite some differences in definition, there is broad agreement about its systemic and transformative agenda and is built around a core of ethical principles. The U.S. Solidarity Economy Network deliberately chose, from the outset, to work within the solidarity economy framework as an unambiguously transformative movement. The Asia Solidarity Economy Council (ASEC) takes the social enterprise as a starting point along with the need to build solidarity economy supply chains. RIPESS networks in Africa work with both the social economy and solidarity economy frameworks (RIPESS 2013). One of the achievements of RIPESS was to bring under the SSE tent organizations and enterprises that were practising social and solidarity economy for decades without knowing it.

3.2 The SSE movement and other social movements

From the mid to late 1990s, SSE movements began to converge as a global movement around the same time that other social movements were coalescing against neoliberal globalization. The mass protests at the 3rd Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 (the so-called “Battle of Seattle”) made this global “anti-globalization” movement visible to the mass media and the general public. In the previous years, however, a variety of historical events had already revealed distinctive critiques of neoliberal globalization with global interconnections. The Zapatista uprising in Mexico in 1994 was connected to the resistance to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the worldwide protests against the corporate-driven Multilateral Investment Agreement that had been initiated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1995, the mobilization against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the wake of the 1997-98 East Asian financial crises, and the massive demonstration of the Jubilee 2000 debt cancellation campaign at the G8 meeting in Birmingham in 1998. All were indicative of a deepening popular discontent against globalization (James and van Seters 2014).

From an initial position primarily focused on being “against” (“anti-globalization”), prominent actors within the movement took steps to enable this unprecedented global

mobilization to move to a new stage of resistance: over and beyond the demonstrations and mass protests, it seemed possible to offer specific proposals “for” (“alter-globalization”) to seek concrete responses to the challenges of building “another world”, one where the economy would serve people and not the other way around. The World Social Forum (WSF) became the vehicle for this effort, spearheaded by a group of Brazilian organizations affiliated to the SSE movement, including CUT (mentioned in Box 13.2), the Landless Movement of Brazil (MST), the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (ABONG) and the French Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC). The organizers received the logistical support of the Governor of the Brazilian state of *Rio Grande do Sul* and the Mayor of Porto Alegre (elected on the pro-SSE workers’ party (PT) platform) where the Forum would be held. A form of global “validation” of this initiative took place in June 2000, during an “alternative” summit of social movements opposed to globalization organized in coordination with the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) in parallel to the Copenhagen+5 World Summit on Social Development. On that occasion, an International Committee was set up in support of the organization of the first WSF, which was held in late January 2001 and timed to coincide with the World Economic Forum of corporate leaders held annually in Davos (Whitaker 2005).

From the outset, the SSE movement was active in World Social Forum processes to contribute to the contents of alternatives to the neoliberal agenda at local, national and global levels. This was within the framework of the Forum’s slogan “Another World is Possible” and the motto “Resist and Build” which then framed the content of the 2nd “Globalization of Solidarity” meeting in Quebec City in October 2001. There were difficulties in making SSE “visible” within the multitude of issues and agendas brought by thousands of organizations and movements that gathered in the series of WSF editions that took place since. Some also saw as a handicap the fact that article 1 of the WSF Charter prohibited WSF spokespersons or resolutions representing the Forum as a whole. The dilution of coherent substantive messaging contributed, among other shortcomings, to a gradual loss of media interest and without any clear normative demands that governments and international institutions could concretely respond to (Savio 2019).

However, a major breakthrough was an agreement to hold a “Thematic World Social Forum” in Porto Alegre in preparation for the “People’s Summit” which was held in parallel to the 2012 United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). This occasion brought together diverse social movements from around the world, but this time organized around clearly defined cross-cutting thematic clusters, including SSE, in which RIPESS played a major role, most notably through the *Fórum Brasileiro de Economia Solidária* (FBES). Among the normative demands emanating from the dialogue between the Peoples’ Summit spokespersons and UN officials was the need for the United Nations to take up SSE as an alternative to neoliberal globalization capable of addressing the major sustainable development challenges discussed at the official Summit. These demands were heeded, starting with the International Conference on “Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy”, organized by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN-NGLS in May 2013 in Geneva. At that meeting, it was decided to create the United Nations UN Inter-

Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE) which was established in September 2013. Its mission, in collaboration with international SSE networks acting as observers, is to raise the visibility of SSE within the UN system and beyond, notably by showcasing SSE as a strategic means of implementation of globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals that originated from the follow-up to the Rio+20 Summit (www.unsse.org).

4.Looking forward

This entry has demonstrated the considerable achievements of the SSE movement, especially over the last two decades. Looking forward, compared to some other social movements that are able to garner global media attention through mass mobilization (such as the climate justice movement or Black Lives Matter), the SSE movement is less visible – in part because SSE is a more complex concept to convey and it does not lend itself easily to mass mobilization around a catchy slogan. On the other hand, its strength lies in its rootedness at the local level and the fact that it offers concrete benefits to people that are more tangible and immediate than say the possible benefits of a hypothetical global Tobin Tax, or systemic reforms of the international financial architecture – however much needed these may also remain.

The future of the SSE movement should also be seen in the light of the advent of new social media. While this communication revolution has provided formidable means for rapid mobilization of social movements, it has led to what James and van Seters (2014) have described as a shift from group-based solidaristic movements and place-making to “mediated networked politics”, which has engendered limitations to the depth of individual engagement in a transformative politics. When accompanied by a subjectivity that emphasizes autonomy and freedom over other values such as mutuality and reciprocity, networked politics tends to be reduced to “symbolic action”. Most contemporary activism, rather than producing a transitional practice that might set up alternative ways of living, tends to be reduced to acts of protest and “mediated communication”. Mass mobilizations in the age of new social media, such as the “Arab Spring” of December 2010 and the “Occupy Wall Street” movement that followed in September 2011, tend to remain limited to “communicative protest politics” with all its strengths and weaknesses. In response, James and van Seters (2014), propose what they call a “grounded globalization approach”, suggesting that:

“[A]nother world only becomes possible when globalizing social movements are grounded in the local and address the human condition in its fullness: production, exchange, enquiry and organization as well as communication. Prefiguring the claim that ‘another world is possible’, the slogan of the Porto Alegre World Social Forum, requires that exemplary practices are initiated across the full range of human life.” (p.xxvi)

Therein lies the inherent strength of the global SSE movement in the years to come.

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