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Youth and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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Abstract

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) is a sector that has become highly relevant for the youth as a social group, mainly because of the rising challenges that youth face in contemporary society. These challenges are related to the vulnerability of transition from childhood to adulthood that occurs in a complex, fast-changing society, and include unemployment, inadequate training and education, lack of trust and (political) participation, at-risk behaviour and delinquency.

The entry offers some insights into how SSE organisations and enterprises (SSEOs) offer various tools and models that may strengthen young people's skills and capacities to participate and co-create solutions in their own communities in a meaningful way. Several examples of good practices of youth-led or youth-oriented SSEOs serve as an illustration of how SSE could be used to address and overcome contemporary youth challenges.

Keywords: youth; transition; education; social innovation; social entrepreneurship; participation

Introduction

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) is a sector that has become highly relevant for the youth as a social group, mainly because of the rising challenges that youth face in contemporary society. This entry intends to highlight the role of SSE in addressing problems faced by youth in their transition to adult roles, economic independence, and civic and political participation.

The entry will shortly describe the main challenges young people face today across the world. It will offer some insights into how SSE organisations and enterprises (SSEOs) offer various tools and models that may strengthen young people's capacities to participate and co-create solutions in their communities in a meaningful way. Several examples of good practices of youth-led or youth-oriented SSE organisations and enterprises may serve as an illustration of how SSE could be used to address and overcome contemporary youth challenges.

1. Youth and contemporary challenges

Youth is commonly understood as a large social group in the transition between childhood and adulthood. However, there is no common definition of the age frame - some define youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (e.g. United Nations) (UN 2013), others as individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 (e.g. Eurostat) or even between the ages of 15 and 34 (e.g. African countries) (UN 2013).

The main challenge of contemporary youth is the same as those of many youth generations, and that is integration within a broader society by taking on permanent (adult) social roles in the family, the economy, and the political community - namely starting their own family, becoming economically independent and becoming engaged in civil or political life. The focus on the transition between childhood and adulthood has been one of the dominant approaches in the research on youth over the last 70 years. It specifically focuses on different aspects and barriers that are relevant for successful transition (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš 2017, 12). However, the dynamics and speed of changes in contemporary society make those challenges more numerous and complex than ever before.

In literature, youth is seen as either a resource or a social problem. For the former, young people are understood as bearers of a desirable future and the source of innovation. The latter considers youth the source of social problems and deviant behaviour (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš 2017, 14). In both cases, youth is recognized as one of the most vulnerable segments of society, being most intensively exposed to the changes in contemporary society. Dominant neoliberal economy and hyper-globalization increased the risks of living in today's society. Technological changes, the transformation of the labour market, migrations, climate changes, and overall commodification creates insecurities that make it difficult for young people to take on adult roles. Let alone a smooth transition, they face a higher risk of unemployment, poverty, greater inequalities, and exclusion, increased deviant and at-risk behaviour, such as juvenile delinquency and drug abuse than those of other social groups

Among many issues, unemployment is seen as one of the key problems of youth today. However, youth is not a homogeneous social group - young people differ in their socio-economic status, ethnic background, education, values, and identities. Certain youth groups, such as young persons with disabilities, rural youth, women, and indigenous youth, just to name a few, are groups that are facing multiple challenges and deprivations (UN, 2020), and are among the most vulnerable social groups. The share of global youth aged 15-24 not in employment, education, or training (NEET), the category that is most at risk of poverty and exclusion, was 22.2 per cent in 2019. The proportion of young female NEETs (31.1 per cent) is more than double that of young male NEETs (13.9 per cent) (ILO 2000).

At the same time, education systems are outdated and do not transform fast enough to meet the changing and diverse needs of today's labour market (UN 2016). In other words, training and skills that young people obtain through formal and/or informal education are overly inadequate. In addition, a high percentage of youth across the globe, mainly in less developed and more deprived areas, ends up as early leavers from education and training, which weakens their job prospects.

One of the key problems of today's youth is their weak participation in political processes, mainly the institutional politics and traditional political arena (UN 2020) and in comparison with both the older population and previous youth generations (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš 2017). One of the main reasons is constantly low levels of trust in political institutions. As a consequence of youth remaining marginal in decision-making processes, they have less influence on the development of institutions, practices, and policies that reflect the needs of youth and vulnerable youth groups. Besides political engagement, there is a perceived decline in the level of civic engagement among young people worldwide (UN 2016).

However, being marginalized from the mainstream political and social institutions, youth tends to both oppose the status quo and the traditional development path, and creates the alternative arena for engagement and participation, mostly through advocacy, lobbying, volunteering, or activities in communities and/or civil society organisations (UN 2016, 2020).

2.SSE in addressing youth-specific problems

SSE covers organisations and enterprises that have explicit economic and social (and often environmental) goals but prioritize social mission over private economic interest. It is based on participative, democratic, and inclusive processes and thus provides valuable and alternative tools for young people to get engaged in social and political processes. Below are some areas where SSE significantly contributes to strengthening young people in their complex transition to adult roles.

Innovation and change

As being based on different values than the conventional market economy, SSE is seen as an alternative, inclusive type of economy that prioritizes the benefits of the least privileged, marginalized, and the most vulnerable groups over a profit. Doing things

opposite to the mainstream economic model requires an innovative approach, flexibility, and experimentation. Research on youth shows that young people have characteristics that make them suitable for acting as agents of social justice, meaning agents “finding solutions to social problems and accelerating social change” (see UN 2000, 57).

More than any other segment of society, youth has a tendency for change, to oppose the current system and status quo. Often, young people are a nest for those more progressive thoughts and visions and a place where avant-garde ideas have been born. In other words, youth is oriented toward alternative development paths, innovation, and usage of technology.

Many studies on youth emphasize that “today’s young people are highly motivated to generate positive social change” (UN 2020, 65) or “to have a positive impact on society” (Soler-i-Martí, et al. 2021, 5). Practices of SSE offer great tools and frames that will engage young people in achieving social and environmental goals, and in addressing social issues, such as unemployment, poverty, deprivation – discrimination of any kind. Engagement in SSE organisations helps them depart from the marginal position to the position of an active agent of change. In other words, they are not just active, productive members of society, but also co-creators of a better society. In other words, through engagement in SSE, young people are oriented to the creation of social values in a sustainable way. Young people will often create new, innovative solutions to problems and needs they recognize in their local surroundings.

EnerGea Tecnología Sostenible is an example of a youth-led social enterprise started in Bolivia in 2017 by two young professionals in the field of engineering, energy and sustainable technologies. This social enterprise addresses issues of energy usage and is particularly focused on achieving greater awareness around the more environmentally friendly LED technology. Their business model relies on assembling, selling and installing LED lighting products for local businesses and industries that make their energy use more efficient and cheaper. Additionally, they have developed the system of fluorescent lights waste management and recycling. Finally, the third stream of their activities includes STEAM education programs for kids and young people in Latin America (EnerGea 2021).

Participation

Considering the lack of youth’s political participation in traditional institutions, SSEOs provide them with alternative ways to engage, participate, collaborate and regain their power. SSE organisations and enterprises are most often collective efforts that gather different individuals around a joint social objective. Democratic governance is at the core of SSE, meaning that members, users, and beneficiaries participate in the decision-making process.

As such, these organisations are places where young people through their own experience can learn about democracy, collaboration, and mutual support. By being a place that brings together people from different ethnic, religious, or social backgrounds, but also with different values and ideological, political, or other preferences, SSEOs become platforms for learning about acceptance, tolerance, trust, and humanity.

Particularly important aspects of SSE refer to its collective and value-driven nature which produces commitment and empowerment of young people. Even though sometimes working conditions might not be much different from conventional economy, what makes young people committed to SSE organisations are shared principles, horizontal governance, and co-responsibility, a “sensation that workers are not alone and that difficulties and responsibilities are shared” and feeling that “they are swimming together against the current” (Soler-i-Marti et al. 2021, 15) (see the entry “Working conditions and wages in SSE”).

SSEOs are based on the democratic governance model and the management principles that are more participative and inclusive. This enables young people to be heard, to create, and to make a difference. More than that, SSE is a way to “affect social change in their own way and on their own terms” (UN 2020, 58).

Good examples of the SSE model suitable for youth and its empowerment to participate are student or school cooperatives (See the entry “Education sector and SSE”). This is an organisational model that imitates "real" cooperatives, thus providing students with a practical experience of the functioning of such local organisations. Student or school cooperatives have a long tradition in many countries, mostly related to the expansion of the cooperative movement back in the 19th century and with the new school movement and reformed pedagogy in the late 19th to early 20th century. Since the beginning of the 2000s, interest in school cooperatives has begun to grow again, especially within various (new) concepts and policy frameworks, such as entrepreneurship education, the social economy or sustainable development (Vidović 2020). School cooperatives are governed by students and teachers, but other stakeholders from the local community are often included as well.

By participating in activities of school cooperatives, student members get the experience of real production of goods, but also collective democratic governance, decision-making, participation, social entrepreneurship, local needs and resources, and social and environmental issues. Because of democratic governance, as a core principle of cooperatives, school cooperatives are seen as training grounds for democracy. For example, school cooperatives often create their activities around agriculture (related to school gardens), handicrafts, ecological and sustainable production, and revitalizing old crafts, but also around new media and ICT technologies.

Especially in smaller local communities, student cooperatives often play an important part in the dynamics of cooperation between the school and its environment - parents, other schools, businesses, civil society organisations, other cooperatives, and local authorities. In some countries, such as Germany, all student cooperatives are firmly connected from the beginning with a real cooperative from the local environment, which is their permanent partner and mentor. According to available sources, different forms of student or school cooperatives exist in Norway, Finland, Germany, Poland, Croatia (and other ex-Yugoslavia countries), the USA, Turkey, and some Asian countries.

Different entrepreneurial mindset

SSE is often seen as an alternative sector over the traditional economy that has enormous potential for preparing young people to make a transition to the labour market. At the same time, SSE offers many opportunities. By far, research on young

people's transition into the labour market has paid little attention to the alternative sectors like SSE, and the potential they have over the traditional economy.

Social entrepreneurship as an SSE model is particularly suitable for the economic empowerment of young people; either they are social entrepreneurs themselves or they are employees or partners in youth-led social enterprises. Often, social entrepreneurship is recognised and promoted by policymakers as a model that may generate jobs for vulnerable groups, including youth. In addition, social entrepreneurship also strengthens, encourages, and pushes young people in generating economic, social, and environmental values. The entrepreneurial mindset which is the core of social entrepreneurship is the driving force that encourages the transition of young people to taking over adult roles, learning to accept the risks, and achieving economic independence. It also enables them to be creators of change and different developmental paths, not the ones based on pure profit motives.

For example, Mondragon Team Academy (MTA World), a global network of social innovation ecosystem labs, with headquarters in Irun (Basque country) uses Finnish Educational methods based on the 'learning by creating' methodology. This innovative educational model was established in 2008 by the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Unit of Mondragon University Business School in cooperation with TiimiAkademia in Finland.

Their educational model is focused on 'team-entrepreneurship' which is seen as the adoption of the new way society is organized. This model is based on teamwork and experimentation. They use the 'learning by creating' methodology instead of teaching about entrepreneurship, giving the main tools to students to encourage them to set up their ventures. Today, MTA World has more than 2000 'team-entrepreneurs', with more than 80 team companies created and 15 MTA Labs founded in cities across Europe, Asia, and South America.

Bottom-up & locally embedded

SSEOs enable young people to get involved with the development of their local communities. SSE is all about caring about others, taking care of the benefits of the community, and above all, taking care of vulnerable individuals and groups. It is based on a bottom-up approach, which means that SSE initiatives are based on social needs identified in the local community.

Through their engagement in SSE, youth can develop profound awareness of local social needs and environmental problems. Further, they can become knowledgeable about local resources and the ways those can be utilised to serve the common good in a sustainable way. Through SSE, local communities may reduce environmental hazards by keeping the local economy on a smaller-scale level that benefits social justice in communities. The local embeddedness of SSE initiatives tends to perceive youth as a resource, not as a (social) problem, which in the end contributes to better integration of young people within the community and society in general.

For example, Alashanek ya balady Association for Sustainable Development (AYB) is a youth-led organisation established in 2002 in Cairo (Egypt) to promote voluntarism in the local community. But it has grown to an association that provides several programs to facilitate vulnerable populations, primarily youth and women. Their programs include

training, employment programs, microcredit, health, and social services. For example, they train youth in simple vocational skills, such as carpentry, sewing, and iron welding, and on the other side, they map their job opportunities in the labour market. Today, they operate through twelve franchises across Egypt and provide services aimed at all family members of underprivileged communities, thus highly contributing to their socio-economic empowerment.

Challenges that young people face in today's world are often pushing them to the margins of society by making them lack the vital resources to make their transition to adulthood successful and smooth. In that context, the SSE appears as a valuable model for empowering youth, in making them more informed, engaged, sensible to needs in their communities, and more active and collaborative. The examples given above illustrate how SSE initiatives across the globe could both provide services and support for young people to make their easier access to socially valuable resources (such as education, employment, and financing), but also engage youth in active, participative and collaborative ways of addressing social and environmental issues within local communities. More comprehensive studies on the role of SSE on youth are missing and they are much needed, as those may enlighten the area where policy support measures would highly contribute to creating more opportunities for young people in this sector.

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