



This is a draft of the entry for *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy* (forthcoming 2023) published by Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE). This work has been funded by the Government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

# Migrants, Refugees and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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Bibliographic information

Giulia Galera and Leila Giannetto. Forthcoming 2023. *Migrants, Refugees and the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Edited by Ilcheong Yi, Peter Utting, Jean-Louis Laville, Barbara Sak, Caroline Hossein, Sifa Chiyoge, Cecilia Navarra, Denison Jayasooria, Fernanda Wanderley, Jacques Defourny, and Rocio Nogales-Muriel. *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE).

Or

Giulia Galera and Leila Giannetto. Forthcoming 2023. *Migrants, Refugees and the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Edited by Ilcheong Yi et al. *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE).

June 2022

**UNTFSSSE Knowledge Hub Draft Paper Series**

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### *Abstract*

The entry explains the role of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) in addressing the problems faced by migrants and refugees, particularly in contexts of austerity and welfare retrenchment, xenophobia and populist politics. It also pays attention to enabling policy and creating an institutional environment for SSE in addressing the problems faced by refugees and migrants, and initiatives developed by refugees and migrants themselves to arrange SSE organizations and enterprises (SSEOs) in host societies. The entry particularly pays attention to the comparative advantages that SSE has in providing services to migrants and refugees, and introduces three empirical cases.

*Keywords:* refugees; asylum seekers; migrants; integration; local development; holistic approach

## 1. Why is the link between migrants, refugees and SSE relevant?

The arrival, reception and inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in receiving localities have yet to be carefully investigated through the lens of the social and solidarity economy (SSE). Here, the SSE is defined as a wide set of organizations, including cooperatives, mutual associations, foundations, voluntary and community organizations, registered charities and NGOs, as well as informal entities, all sharing a number of peculiar features. These features of SSE organizations include the following: they prioritize meeting the needs of people over making a profit; they are guided by values such as equity, solidarity, sustainability, participation and inclusion; they are concerned about the communities wherein they operate; and they are democratic and transformative in nature (also see the entry “Contemporary understandings of the SSE”).

So far, little attention has been paid to the impact of welcome initiatives aiming to host asylum seekers and refugees which are promoted by the SSE in receiving communities. Neither have the peculiar organizational characteristics that allow SSE organizations to ensure the provision of high-quality welcome services, and to facilitate the effective integration of recipients in receiving communities, been adequately investigated. Additionally, the initiatives of migrants who have made recourse to the SSE through self-organization, instead of setting up traditional enterprises, have been overlooked by research.

Investigating the role of the SSE in addressing the multiple problems faced by migrants and refugees is nevertheless particularly relevant for at least two main reasons. By providing the institutional architecture to manage complex phenomena from a bottom-up approach, while taking the peculiarities of local territories into account, the SSE provides targeted solutions to the global challenge of international migrations. International migrations are structural in nature and are expected to grow in relevance, given, among other factors, the increase in the number of environmental migrants who will flee their countries as a result of climate change over the coming decades. The topics of migration and asylum have turned into a battlefield for electoral purposes worldwide. However, the SSE, which has proved itself to be effective in creatively managing conflicts, encapsulates efforts to design and implement innovative solutions in hosting territories (Patuzzi, Benthon, and Embiricos 2019). Indeed, when faced with the migration crisis, local communities have, in many instances, proven to be unprepared and significantly divided internally. This has resulted in complex situations in which traces of extraordinary spontaneous solidarity exist together with manifestations of deep hostility (European Committee of the Regions 2020). Against this backdrop, the local responses of the SSE appear as extremely valuable not only in light of xenophobia and populist politics but also due to welfare state retrenchment, which has resulted in the inability of public agencies to detect and address new emerging needs arising in society, amongst which those connected to migration are one of the most challenging.

Previous research shows that SSE initiatives are the most resourceful measures to respond to the asylum and migration challenge because they have proven to be able to both develop concrete solutions and heal profound divisions in local communities (Perlink et al. 2019). This has proven possible thanks to the unique position of SSE

organizations and enterprises (SSEOs) which have operated often in response to emergency situations, especially during the last decade. The SSEOs had leeway to experiment with the design and provision of new services, tailored to meet the needs not only of asylum seekers and refugees but also of the local communities, using bottom-up approaches (Galera, Giannetto, and Noya 2018). This entry presents the main patterns of evolution and the main challenges faced by SSEOs active in the field of migrants and refugees' integration. It explains the added value of SSEOs when dealing with the issues associated with migrants and asylum seekers. In particular, the entry underlines the attention SSEOs pay to relational aspects and their knowledge of, and anchorage to, local communities, together with their "holistic" approach to integration, encompassing concerns not only for labour market inclusion but also for socio-cultural and housing dimensions.

## **2.SSE: patterns of evolution**

Observing the evolution of the SSE, especially in the global North, shows that many organizations have expanded their activities with a view to welcoming asylum seekers and refugees (also see the entry "Origins and histories of SSE"). Drawing on the active engagement of stakeholders sharing common concerns, who have self-organized so as to provide, for instance, first aid to newcomers, new models of services have been designed by the SSE using bottom-up approaches. While experimenting with new methodologies to assess and take stock of unexploited skills of recipients, they have provided dispersed accommodation, organized innovative language courses, and delivered job orientation and integration services. These initiatives, led by the most innovative SSEOs, have emerged by taking stock of the collective engagement of volunteers, social workers, and the community at large (Galera, Giannetto and Noya 2018).

Numerous associations and social enterprises have activated innovative social inclusion paths (Patuzzi, Benthon, and Embiricos 2019), often in cooperation with local communities, which have, in some instances, facilitated the matching of labour market needs with the supply of labour at the local level. In other cases, inclusion paths have resulted in new economic activities based on taking stock of the formal, survival, and practice-oriented skills of recipients in a variety of economic fields of activity, which range from recycling to community tourism and social farming, all of which generate a beneficial impact in terms of welfare, employment, and economic development at the local level. Commonly, new SSEOs have been set up by groups of volunteers who have self-organized spontaneously to provide support to asylum seekers, and then formalized the creation of new organizations specifically designed to deliver innovative welcome and integration services, sometimes in cooperation with public administrations and mainstream enterprises.

Thousands of individuals engage daily in both voluntary and professional activities aimed at improving the welfare of people who have been forced to flee their countries for different reasons. Interestingly, the form of volunteering that emerged out of this new wave of civic commitment, notably within the last decade, is very different from that of the past. It is cross-cutting across social classes and age groups, and rather than reflecting the willingness to donate time and energy for the benefit of other people in

a community, it is strongly linked to the commitment to help migrants specifically, and change society for the better (Galera, Giannetto, and Noya 2018).

Given its peculiar features, the SSE is able to channel these new forms of civic activism so as to meet the needs of newcomers and host communities alike, through organized and sustainable solutions which are able to support a progressive transformation of the social and economic system, including a change in mind-set of those who tend to be hostile due to an irrational fear towards strangers. In this way, the SSE contributes to the designing of innovative solutions to problems that public authorities would have been unable to cope with (also see the entries “Public Policy and SSE” and “Social Policy and SSE”). In the context of the recent increase in the number of asylum seekers, which peaked in 2015 in Europe, without SSEOEs, shelter and food, housing, legal assistance, and language training would not have been ensured, and innovative social and integration paths would not have been experimented with (Simsa 2017, Galera, Giannetto, and Noya 2018).

At the same time, many migrants have chosen the SSE to institutionalize their collective efforts in diverse fields of economic activity, in order to meet the specific needs of their members, rather than to respond to the rationale of profit maximization (see Box 23.1). This is the case of many migrants' worker cooperatives, which have enabled the creation and preservation of decent jobs in domains (such as agriculture, cleaning, etc.) where migrants are often exploited (also see the entry “Work integration and SSE”).

**Box 23.1: Up & Go (USA): SSE and migrants' self-organization in the gig economy**

Up & Go ([www.upandgo.coop](http://www.upandgo.coop)) is a platform cooperative, which offers an online booking service for domestic and commercial professional cleaning. It was launched in New York in 2017 and was spearheaded by three immigrant-led, local, and eco-friendly cleaning cooperatives. Up & Go is owned by, and employs, women with migrant backgrounds, who have started to collaborate thanks to the support of, and the networking opportunities created by, the non-profit community job centre “La Colmena”, the “Centre for Family Life”, the tech support of the “CoLab Cooperative”, and partial funding by the “Robin Hood Foundation”. The sustainability of this platform is ensured thanks to investment in customer service and towards advancing the technology of the app. While 95% of the profits made by Up & Go are allocated to support the cooperatively-owned business, 5% are reinvested in the further development of the platform itself.

While the app supports workers with migrant backgrounds by overcoming the language barrier during the search for job opportunities, the main strength of Up & Go is the innovative use of the platform economy to benefit its workers and their community. The ownership of the app by the self-organized migrant workers ensures that they receive a fair income, have reasonable and flexible working hours which are more compatible with life and family time, and have a better understanding of their rights and potential not only as workers but also as entrepreneurs. Tapping into the potential of technology and making use of data, Up & Go can provide a different model of the gig economy, fighting precarious labour (Hayes 2019) but also stereotypes and prejudices, by empowering women with migrant backgrounds to provide high-

quality services to clients residing in New York. Finally, this cooperative model unearths the talents and skills of the workers/entrepreneurs and motivates them to train further.

Source: (Up&Go 2022).

### **3. What makes the SSE so special in supporting migrants' integration?**

One of the reasons for the success of the SSE in tackling the migration and asylum challenges is that SSEOs are not motivated to maximize the rate of profit for investors, but rather to address the needs of recipients and communities (Utting 2014, Borzaga, Salvatori, and Bodini 2017). As such, they can be regarded as collective problem solvers.

The capacity to design innovative and effective solutions results from the close connection of SSEOs with the communities wherein they operate. SSEOs have distinctive ownership structures and governance models, enabling them to actively engage diverse stakeholders with different relations to the organizations, namely: workers, volunteers, recipients, donors, and local authorities. The involvement of diverse stakeholders allows the identification of key needs arising in local communities, which would, in many instances, remain unheard, and attract unexploited resources which would otherwise not be allocated for welfare or development goals such as community assets, building, spaces, and land.

A peculiar trait of many SSEOs assisting asylum seekers, refugees and migrants is the attention they pay to relational aspects, which has proven to be crucial in both ensuring their social inclusion and autonomy, as well as in the building of bridges between the hosting community and recipients.

The "holistic approach" promoted by many SSEOs does not limit itself to linking integration exclusively to supporting labour-market inclusion. It also pays attention to a number of crucial structural, social, and cultural dimensions influencing the path toward social inclusion (see Box 23.2). Especially relevant is the capacity to empower recipients by both encouraging their active participation in SSEOs to help them gain control over their own projects, and by taking stock of their skills and previous work experiences. Many SSE organizations have specialized in designing individualized integration pathways that often draw on the unexploited skills of fragile workers. Skills assessment practices, experimented by SSE organizations by taking stock of their holistic and inclusive approaches, have proven to be particularly effective; the more sensitive they are to recipients' implicit, practice-oriented skills - appreciated via extended and tailored interaction with them (see Box 23.3) - the more effective they are. Cases in point are SSE organizations, which build on recipients' manual-informal skills, and on their "survival" skills, as a basis for fostering their entrepreneurial skills (Galera, Giannetto, and Noya 2018, Galera 2010).

### **Box 23.2: Jobel (Italy): SSE transforming refugees' needs and talents into local development opportunities**

Jobel ([www.jobel.it](http://www.jobel.it)) is a locally-rooted social cooperative, founded in 2005, which aims to provide social and educational services at the local level. With the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees in small towns and rural areas in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe (European Committee of the Regions 2020), social cooperatives like Jobel started providing reception and integration services for asylum seekers and refugees. Jobel's experience is particularly interesting because the cooperative's activities of reception and integration are all located in small towns and rural areas with declining populations, even though these localities still retain some tourist vocation. The intuition of the cooperative's members was to develop several entrepreneurial projects not only to support the training and labour market inclusion of people hosted in their reception centres but also to foster the local development of these remote areas. The businesses developed include: a restaurant, a tailoring workshop, and a woodworking shop, among others.

The main strength of Jobel is to have a "holistic" approach to the inclusion of not only the hosted asylum seekers and refugees but also of other vulnerable persons, such as victims of sex trafficking and people with mental health issues, living in the areas of activity of the cooperative. Moreover, Jobel's knowledge of the local context and of the local key actors is a crucial asset to tailor entrepreneurial projects that can benefit not only the workers and trainees, but also the hosting territory, and boost local development in economically depressed areas (Martini and Bartolini 2020). The main challenge that SSEOs like Jobel, which host asylum seekers and refugees, face, is the closure of reception projects or the end of the reception period for refugees in small towns and rural areas. These could push refugees to leave the welcoming but remote and depopulated territories to move to larger urban areas, thus leading to the closure of the businesses themselves.

## **4.Challenges ahead**

SSEOs active in this field often strive for scale in order to activate new services and/or serve additional recipients (Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano 2015). Scaling, however, poses numerous challenges as well as opportunities. New opportunities include the possibility to serve a larger number of asylum seekers or other target groups (see Box 23.2) and design new models of services that may address new needs. Threats are connected to the consequences of growth, which often pushes SSEOs to behave like mainstream enterprises (e.g., by adopting strategies and tools consistent with the for-profit nature), which may, in turn, put the local anchorage that distinguishes SSEOs at risk (Borzaga, Fazzi, and Galera 2016) (see the entry "SSE and co-optation, isomorphism and instrumentalization").

Therefore, effective scaling strategies that are able to safeguard the local embeddedness of SSEOs are needed. The observation of successful SSE initiatives suggests that effective scaling should be understood not only as organizational growth, but also as "scaling deep" (Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano 2015). This implies tackling, for instance, a larger set of needs of a given target group – such as helping recipients



find a suitable job and supporting their social inclusion in addition to offering housing and food – rather than increasing the overall number of persons served.

Developing strategic partnerships with other organizations presents an opportunity to increase the number of recipients served. Strategic partnerships could, for instance, allow for the replication of given models of service that have proven to be effective, such as microforms of accommodation, or strategies to boost constant interaction with civil society. Moreover, networking could support the diffusion of skills assessment tools, which have proven to be more successful in matching the needs of local populations and labour markets with the skills, competencies and qualifications of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants.

Crucial in the case of SSEOs supporting the work integration of migrants are partnerships with conventional enterprises that are facing labour shortages but are not equipped to select workers with migration backgrounds but who, for example, lack language skills, or to facilitate their work integration (see Box 23.3).

**Box 23.3: Action Emploi Réfugiés (France): SSE for refugees’ labour market integration**

Action Emploi Réfugiés (AERé - [www.actionemploirefugies.com](http://www.actionemploirefugies.com)) is a social enterprise that emerged in 2016 in Paris as a digital platform created to unearth and match refugees’ skills with French businesses’ demand for work. AERé’s main objective is to “level the playing field” for refugees in accessing the labour market of the country of destination. On the one hand, it offers refugees the social capital that they lack when settling in a new country, which is crucial to finding a job (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017) and the necessary information about the country of destination (in this case, France) regarding how the labour market works and how to access it. On the other hand, AERé recognises the need for traditional enterprises, as well as other SSEOs, to learn how to deal with diversity and the specific challenges that refugees face when accessing the new labour market (e.g., trauma, language barrier, difficulties in the recognition of their qualifications, among others) (Federico and Baglioni 2021).

AERé’s main strength is its founders and members’ ability to create a solid network with traditional enterprises and with other social enterprises (e.g., through the TENT Partnership for Refugees), as well as with public services working for the labour market inclusion. A strong network and partnership with traditional enterprises is key to learning about the issues of traditional enterprises in relation to the inclusion of refugees and migrants, and thus to addressing business concerns through tailored support. This, in turn, provides AERé with the opportunity to scale up its activities in terms of the number of available job postings for refugees, to replicate AERé’s model in other territories (such as the Bordeaux area, where AERé is also present) and, possibly, collaborate with other traditional enterprises in a wide variety of sectors.

Additional challenges result from the contracting out of reception services (i.e., accommodation, food, legal support, etc.) to private providers by public authorities, which include, in most countries, both for-profit enterprises and SSEOs. Challenges arise particularly from competitive tenders evaluating offers on value-for-money grounds, which tend to crowd out grass-rooted SSEOs and favour for-profit

enterprises with the economy of scale generated by the large number of recipients hosted, and low cost (and low quality) welcome services delivered (Del Biaggio 2020). The possibility to provide housing to asylum seekers and refugees has indeed attracted a growing number of self-interested actors, including mainstream enterprises and even non-profit organizations, that enter this business to make a profit.

Effective enabling environments or institutions for SSEOs include procurement procedures through competitive bids that value the contribution of SSEOs to meeting specific conditions (locally-based, engagement of the community, empowerment of recipients), as well as collaborative interactions between SSEOs and public authorities inspired by cooperation rather than competition.

SSEOs tackling asylum and migration issues also face key management challenges as they pursue economic performance while seeking to remain faithful to their values and founding principles. These challenges are particularly prevalent when SSEOs develop out of voluntary initiatives. They are normally pushed to adopt management and governance methods as similar as possible to those of conventional for-profit enterprises in order to both attract the private capital that they need to develop and increase their efficiency. Nevertheless, in doing so, SSEOs tend to sacrifice their competitive advantages vis-à-vis public and for-profit providers, in particular, those resulting from their connections with the community and territory wherein they operate. The available empirical evidence suggests that the emergence, consolidation, and success of SSEOs are explained by their distinctive characteristics: in particular, the pursuit of not-for-profit goals; their grounding on processes of bottom-up mobilization; and their maintenance of a collective and participatory nature (Borzaga, Fazzi, and Galera 2016). Therefore, SSEOs should not mimic conventional for-profit enterprises. They should struggle to adopt management practices that reflect their ethics.

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