

Social Solidarity Economy

I Introduction to the SSE concept and practise

The concept of Social Solidarity Economy has evolved over the last century into an international movement pioneered by the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy (*Red Intercontinental de Promoción de la Economía Social Solidaria*, or RIPESS¹). However, it is important to note that the movement is fluid and there are a myriad of organisations and proponents of SSE who diverge in their perceptions and understanding of the concept. With this in mind, this introduction to the concept of Social Solidarity Economy endeavours to provide an explanation of the common principles, values and beliefs which SSE is founded upon and how this movement differs from other economic frameworks.

Social Solidarity Economy is an ethical and values-based approach to economic development which cultivates the principles of democracy, pluralism, equality, justice, mutualism, sustainability, inclusivity and creativity. This movement is not aligned to any single political ideology and does not advocate a new and revolutionary economic model as many socialist movements insist upon. Rather, SSE adopts a process orientated approach which, driven by communities and networks, is malleable to different circumstances and contexts. In this sense SSE is not an economic model, however, can be understood as an approach to economics which challenges the current global economic order through prioritising core values, many of which have become forsaken as a neoliberal competitive framework has become the predominant economic system.

The SSE paradigm above all prioritises the wellbeing of people, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, age, nationality or class, and evidently the planet and its resources necessary for the survival of humankind. Through emphasising a non-destructive relationship between the human population and nature, SSE delivers a sustainable alternative and applies this to all aspects of economic enterprise.

In the interests of people and the planet a shift towards solidarity economics is necessary as the concept of solidarity is the very antithesis of competition. Solidarity values and develops cooperation, support, mutuality and trust. In essence, rather than isolating individuals in a competitive “each person for themselves” mentality, people are united to realise their common goals and how their individual skills and resources can benefit the collective. Economic organising based on competition only allows for one, or at best a select few,

¹ <http://www.ripest.org/?lang=en>

ultimate victors. The founding principle of SSE, however, proposes that intensified and increased levels of solidarity in economic processes generates benefits which contribute to development for the whole of society.

This approach to economic organisation emphasises the ability of the people to collectively and creatively develop solutions to economic problems which may or may not be endemic to their context. Thus the notion of collective ownership is also central to SSE, as economic power is retained by the collective rather than being appropriated by a single, and often far removed authority. This method of organising also ensures the benefits of collective economic enterprise are preserved and protected for future generations within the community or society. Collective ownership is dependent upon trust and solidarity as individuals share not only access and control over resources, but a responsibility to maintain and develop their collective economic enterprise.

Collective ownership fosters self-management for stakeholders as they are charged with making decisions which affect their individual and community's wellbeing. In challenging neo-liberal power dynamics, collective ownership also promotes participatory democratic principles, as the shared responsibility of decision making institutionalises accountability of individuals within the collective. Strengthening the pillars of democratic processes is one of the most highly regarded benefits of SSE in furthering the development of entire societies.

Examples of SSE can be found globally, as individuals, communities, and networks turn to innovative and lucrative methods of organising and processing economic matters. As SSE is as much a mind-set or approach to economics as it is a practice, the paradigm can be applied to any economic venture. The fair trade movement is a global example of an alternative economic model where the locus of power and resources are being restructured so access no longer resides exclusively in the hands of the elite. At a far more local level initiatives such as community gardens and resource centres are also mechanisms for change which challenge the current structure of the dominant economic model. Many of these enterprises can be understood from an SSE perspective as they prioritise the wellbeing of the people over profit, and are founded on solidarity.

While these examples differ from each other they share a common facet in that they empower communities by giving them access and control over resources and therefore enhance their economic power. By empowering communities rather than individuals, the collective interest is preserved. The Social Solidarity approach to economics is essentially about establishing new and strengthening existing alternative economic processes which do not compromise the ethical values which have been forsaken in the predominant neo-liberal economic model. At an individual and community level, the aim is to identify these

alternatives and to establish networks nationally, regionally and internationally so the movement for a just and equitable approach to economics is one of solidarity across the world.

II Examples of Social Solidarity Economy initiatives in Asia

Home-based workers' experiences in Thailand and Cambodia

<http://www.homenetseasia.org/>

In Thailand, where Homenet has been in existence for more than 20 years, community-based enterprises have been set up in several locations, with those in Khon Kaen providing illustrative examples. One such enterprise is composed of silk weavers who produce/access silk yarn, make organic dyes, develop a variety of high-quality silk products (with technical assistance from academics and some NGOs). Their products can command a good price in their shop and in other marketing outlets, including the export market. They finance their enterprise themselves, and in this sense they can be credited with having control of the entire supply chain (from inputs to processing to marketing) while also ensuring environmental conservation, which is crucial to ensure the sustainability of a solidarity economy initiative. In addition, because they are members of Homenet Thailand, whose work focuses on social protection, they are able to access social security, improve occupational safety and health and enjoy universal health care—in itself a victory for informal workers' lobbying efforts. They will also be covered by the relatively new Homeworkers' Law which promises to ensure their labour rights when finally implemented.

In Cambodia, where most working people live in poverty, the most vulnerable groups (home-based women producers, urban and rural poor, the differently abled, survivors of AIDS and trafficking) can be assisted and empowered economically by providing access to markets and at the same time promoting fair trade. The emphasis of fair trade advocacy on matters like fair wages, gender equity, occupational safety and health and environmental protection fits solidarity economy advocacy like a glove. This allows home-based worker products to reach high quality as well as ethical standards through social marketing and consequently command better prices from discerning and sympathetic buyers.

It is noteworthy that fair trade advocacy and practice has been able to make headway in Cambodia. It is common knowledge that in a country where elections have always resulted in the dominance of one party, civil society initiatives are bound by what government allows and/or supports. In Cambodia, the government aims to raise employment and export income in the interest of economic growth and poverty reduction. In this sense, there is convergence between what fair trade groups like the Artisans Association of Cambodia, or AAC (the focal point for organising Homenet Cambodia), are actually doing and what the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce wants to achieve. One example of this convergence is the presence of the Ministry's Secretary of State at the Fair Trade Subregional Workshop and Fair for Home-based Worker Products held recently in Siem Reap, spearheaded by AAC and Homenet Southeast Asia. It may be assumed that the presence of

such a high-level national official at a home-based worker event reflects positive government perception of organising and providing marketing assistance to producer groups.

Self-employed Women's Association (India)

http://www.sewa.org/about_us.asp

SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972. It is an organisation of poor, self-employed women workers. These are women who earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits like workers in the organised sector. They are the unprotected labour force of our country. Constituting 93% of the labour force, these are workers of the unorganised sector. Of the female labour force in India, more than 94% are in the unorganised sector. However their work is not counted and hence remains invisible. In fact, women workers themselves remain uncoun ted, undercounted and invisible.

SEWA organises workers to achieve their goals of full employment and self-reliance through the strategy of struggle and development. The struggle is against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, while development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. Practically, the strategy is carried out through the joint action of union and cooperatives. Gandhian thinking is the guiding force for SEWA's poor, self-employed members in organising for social change. They follow the principles of *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *sarvadharm a* (integrating all faiths, all people) and *khadi* (propagation of local employment and self-reliance).

SEWA is both an organisation and a movement. The SEWA movement is enhanced by its being a *sangam* or confluence of three movements: the labour movement, the cooperative movement and the women's movement. But it is also a movement of self-employed workers: their own, home-grown movement with women as the leaders. Through their own movement women become strong and visible. Their tremendous economic and social contributions become recognised, and with globalisation, liberalisation and other economic changes, there are both new opportunities as well as threats to some traditional areas of employment.

Their members are ready to face the winds of change, knowing that they must organise to build their own strength and to meet challenges. There are still millions of women who remain in poverty and are exploited, despite their long hours of hard labour. They bear the brunt of the changes in our country and must be brought into the mainstream, so as to avail of the new opportunities that are developing with regard to employment.

Also there is much to be done in terms of strengthening women's leadership, their confidence, their bargaining power within and outside their homes and their representation in policy-making and decision-making fora. It is their issues, their priorities and needs which should guide and mould the development process in our country. Toward this end, SEWA has been supporting its members in capacity-building and in developing their own economic organisations.

Work Together Foundation (South Korea)

<http://eng.hamkke.org/>

Work Together Foundation (WT), formerly the National Movement Committee to Overcome Unemployment, was established in 1997 in response to the financial crisis in 1997, as the largest NGO, to address the unemployment issues that arose from this crisis. The Committee provided funds to over 5,380,000 unemployed workers and their families to cover living costs, representing 10 percent of the population of South Korea.

Nowadays, WT envisages a sustainable society, resolving social polarisation and is leading efforts to support social enterprises and growth in job creation in Korea.

WT is currently working to address unemployment across a diverse constituency through its incubation centre, promotion of social enterprises, raising and expanding social capital, supporting capacity building of the civil sector and building a community network for employment welfare.

We now believe that social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurship are as important as social enterprises. Therefore, we have been operating the Social Entrepreneur Academy since 2006, the first academy of its kind in Korea, and we have conducted research about the unemployment situation, suggesting policies for overcoming unemployment. We also carry out many different projects, including campaigns and fundraising, at the same time.

PARCIC (Regional organisation)

<http://www.parc-jp.org>

The Pacific Asia Resource Center, also known as PARC, was established as a non-government organisation in 1973. Even before its establishment, PARC made a name for itself with its English language publication, AMPO, which carried well-researched articles on Free Trade Zones, banana plantation in the Philippines, shrimp farming and peoples' movements in Japan and Asia.

Over the years PARC dedicated itself to several important causes and projects. It carried out campaigns on debt, trade and other related issues. A long-running project has been to extend emergency support to the people of Timor-Leste fleeing from massacre, mass plundering and other senseless violence following its decision to become free from Indonesian rule in September 1999. Another important project for PARC has been its commitment to the people of Sri Lanka who have suffered from continuing ethnic conflict for over two decades, and the Tsunami of December 2004.

PARC has decided to divide its tasks into two divisions from April 1, 2008: the first, PARC, will focus on advocacy-oriented research and education in Japan. The second, PARCIC (PARC Interpeoples' Cooperation), will focus on interpeoples' cooperation and fair-trade.

Both PARCIC and PARC share the same goal, namely to achieve a global society where people can live in equality, peace and harmony. However, as the divisions have distinct missions it is expected that they will work more efficiently and effectively after the re-organisation.

The mission of PARCIC is to extend direct support to people afflicted by violence or natural disasters and to help them achieve self-reliance. We promote direct exchange and trade based on trust among people as a mean toward self-reliant, peaceful and human development.

Since 2002, we have extended our support to coffee producers in Timor-Leste and we import their product under fair price terms. These high quality coffee beans are sold under the brand name Cafe Timor in the Japanese fair trade market.

Another sustainable project is our work with the fishing communities of Jaffna where ethnic war waged between Sri Lankan government and LTTE, forcing the people living on the peninsula to suffer from chronic food shortage, due to their isolation from the rest of the country. Our office in Jaffna implements a chicken poultry project that has been invaluable in helping the people there achieve economic sustainability.

PATAMABA (Philippines)

<http://wiego.org/wiego/patamaba>

PATAMABA's microfinance system evolved from the ground up. PATAMABA is a people's organisation run and managed by women home-based and other informal worker leaders. Its presence in Region VI (Western Visayas) began in 1992 with a small chapter in Sta. Barbara, Iloilo. Its membership has spread to 41 village chapters in 12 municipalities and four provinces in the region with its strong networking with local government units, various government and international development agencies, private foundations, academe, informal workers', women's and other civil society organisations.

Over the years, regional leaders have evolved a lending and collection scheme system based on regular monthly visits to every chapter. After learning from past mistakes, PATAMABA client borrowers have shown exemplary credit discipline and can now absorb higher loans. The programs and services of PATAMABA Region 6, which concretely manifest an integrated approach to microfinance, now include livelihood loans, savings mobilisation/capital build-up, skills training, awareness-raising (on gender issues and reproductive health), community organising, entrepreneurship development, marketing assistance and emergency assistance (through DAMAYAN—helping one another in times of crisis).

The regional leadership of Iloilo has built on the tradition of mutual aid in case of death. The campaign for DAMAYAN membership is continuing among micro-finance groups (particularly in Antique) who are entering new lending cycles where social protection through burial assistance would already be integrated. Aside from the indigenous DAMAYAN scheme to assist the bereaved, PATAMABA Region 6 also embarked on a serious campaign to enrol members in formal social protection schemes under the Social Security System (SSS), Philhealth and Red Cross.