

UN

Inter-Agency Task Force on  
**Social and Solidarity Economy**

KNOWLEDGE HUB WORKING PAPER

**Achieving the Sustainable  
Development Goals through  
Social and Solidarity Economy:**  
Incremental versus Transformative Change

Peter Utting

APRIL 2018



**SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
GOALS**

The logo consists of the letters 'UN' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue square.

Inter-Agency Task Force on  
**Social and Solidarity Economy**

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## Acronyms

ADC	<i>Asociaciones de Desarrollo Comunal</i> ; Community Development Associations
ALBA	<i>Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América</i> ; Alliance for the Peoples of Our America
BBBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
CONACOOOP	<i>Consejo Nacional de Cooperativas</i> ; National Council of Cooperatives (Costa Rica)
CONAIE	<i>Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador</i> ; Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DINADECO	<i>Dirección Nacional de Desarrollo de la Comunidad</i> ; National Directorate for Community Development
DSBD	Department for Small Business Development
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NBSA	National Basic Livelihood Security Act
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPO	Non-Profit Organization (NPOs)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHG	Self-help groups
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
TNCs	Transnational Corporations
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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## Preface

The efforts of the United Nations to position poverty reduction and sustainable development as strategic priorities, and the lingering consequences of the Global Economic and Financial Crisis, have both intensified the search for innovative approaches to development. In this context an increasing number of governments around the world are heeding the advice of development practitioners, activists and scholars that more attention needs to be paid to the role of ‘social and solidarity economy’ (SSE). The forms of economic activity that make up SSE generally acknowledge and apply a set of principles, norms and practices that seem particularly conducive to meeting peoples’ basic needs and promoting environmental protection, decent work, the equitable distribution of resources and profits, and democratic forms of governance. Such attributes stand in sharp contrast to ‘business as usual’.

Recognizing both the potential of SSE and the limited attention being paid to the concept within the United Nations system, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) initiated, several years ago, programmes that drew attention to SSE and examined ways and means of enabling and scaling-up this approach. In 2013, these initiatives led to the formation of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force for SSE, which was tasked with “raising the visibility of SSE in international knowledge and policy circles as an alternative development pathway that better integrates the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.” Two core aspects of this work consist of organizing policy dialogues involving multiple development actors and creating a knowledge hub that gathers information on SSE and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a view to analyzing linkages, identifying and filling knowledge gaps, synthesizing key lessons and disseminating findings to policy makers and other stakeholders.

In early 2018, the Task Force initiated a research project that aims to assess the contribution of SSE as a means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Supported with an initial grant from the Government of Luxembourg, this project will examine what enabling conditions, including supportive policies, are needed to realize the potential of SSE. And in a context where systematic data on SSE are still scarce, and where definitions and indicators vary, the project also seeks to identify robust methodologies and innovative solutions for measuring SSE and its impacts.

Coordinated by UNRISD, the project will generate a series of research papers and think pieces that aim to facilitate our understanding of these aspects. In addition to commissioning a number of background papers, UNRISD is organizing a Call for Papers on ‘Localizing the SDGs through SSE’. We hope that researchers around the world who are working in this field will share with us their insights and expertise and that policy makers and advocates for SSE will continue to watch this space.



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## Summary

In a context where an increasing number of governments are promoting policies that aim to support organizations and enterprises that make up the social and solidarity economy (SSE), this paper assesses the effectiveness of such support. It does so from the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by considering whether the uptake of the SSE agenda by governments can scale up and enable SSE in ways conducive to realizing the ‘transformational vision’ of the SDGs.

In assessing progress, a distinction is drawn between incremental and transformative change. While government efforts to provide technical and financial resources for SSE, and a more conducive regulatory and governance environment, can enable piecemeal and partial gains associated with incremental change, various constraints arise that dilute or distort the SSE agenda and divert attention from the root causes of exclusionary and unsustainable development, thereby constraining transformative change.

How might we guard against such risks? Our contention is that a policy agenda that is cognizant of these risks and adopts effective measures to address them is one that leans towards transformative change. Divided in two parts, the paper first examines the opportunities and tensions associated with mainstreaming SSE in the policy arena. It provides a conceptual analysis of how mainstreaming can redefine the contours of SSE through two processes. The first is ‘instrumentalization’. This refers to the ways in which powerful state or market institutions employ SSE to advance specific goals. The second is ‘isomorphism’, namely, the ways in which SSE organizations and enterprises assume behavioural features of the mainstream institutions with which they interact. These two processes are key for understanding both the opportunities and limits associated with incrementalism.

Part 2 examines the effectiveness of public policy that promotes SSE in relation to specific SDGs. These include food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), social service provisioning (SDGs 3 and 4), gender equality and women’s economic empowerment (SDG 5) and employment and decent work (SDG 8). This section identifies the tensions and challenges involved in promoting policy change and identifies the differences between policy approaches that foster incrementalism versus those that push the envelope of transformative change.

A concluding section sums up the main findings related to the opportunities, risks and dilemmas that arise when SSE becomes the object of public policy. It reflects on the implications for positioning SSE as a key means of implementation for the SDGs and for realizing the ‘transformational vision’ that Agenda 2030 purports to uphold.

# Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through Social and Solidarity Economy: Incremental versus Transformative Change

Peter Utting<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

*“In these Goals and targets, we are setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision.” (para 7, 2030 Agenda)*

In today’s discourse on development it is common to hear references to the need for ‘transformational’ or ‘transformative’ change and development agendas. This has been prompted by the ambitious aspirational language of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), coupled with recognition that development policy in the wake of the global financial crisis can no longer conform to business-as-usual. It also recognises the fact that the precursor to the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), represented too cautious an approach to addressing pressing social and environmental issues.

The growing interest among development practitioners, academics, activists and policy makers in forms of economy that are ‘people-centred and planet-sensitive’ (UN 2013) has positioned Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) as a significant element in transformative change and achieving the SDGs.

SSE refers to forms of economic activities undertaken by non-state organizations and enterprises that prioritize social objectives, and are guided by principles and practices of cooperation, self-help, solidarity, and democratic self-management. Such entities typically include cooperatives, mutual associations, community organizations providing local services, savings and loan groups, women’s self-help groups, and social enterprises, including NGOs that are transitioning from donor dependency to income generating activities. Compared to for-profit enterprises, the normative hierarchy of the economic, social and environmental objectives inherent in the concept of sustainable development is very different (UNRISD 2016).

An extensive UNRISD inquiry into the potential and limits of SSE led this author to emphasize the political economy dimension of SSE:

*“SSE is fundamentally about reasserting social control ... over the economy by giving primacy to social and often environmental objectives above profits, emphasizing the place of ethics in economic activity and rethinking economic practice in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> The author is Senior Research Associate with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and International Co-ordinator, Center for Social Economy (*Centro para la Economía Social* – CES), based in Managua, Nicaragua.

<sup>2</sup> The author co-ordinated the UNRISD study. See Utting 2015a:2. This definition draws on Wright 2010, Gibson-Graham 2006, Dacheux and Goujon 2011, Grasseni et al. 2015, Laville 2015 and Vail 2010.

In academic parlance, the essence of SSE has been associated with the shift towards ‘decommodified’ economic activities and circuits where ‘the social organization and practices of the circuit constitute an alternative logic to prevalent market processes’ (Vail 2010),<sup>3</sup> and where ‘a bias to greater equality and inclusion’ defines the organised logic of the economic system and technological innovation.<sup>4</sup>

How SSE relates to both the MDGs and SDGs has been examined by the United Nations Task Force on SSE and others.<sup>5</sup> Whether in relation to poverty reduction, food security, healthcare, women’s economic empowerment, decent work, forest protection or other goals, SSE is well positioned as a means of implementation of the SDGs.

It is important to note that SSE can play an important role in addressing various limitations of the MDGs that the SDGs seek to correct. These include:

- i. the focus within the MDGs on global and national averages. This methodology masked deficits in achievement at the sub-national level and ran the risk of diverting policy attention and resources from marginalized groups (UNGA-OWG 2014). A focus on SSE necessarily addresses the SDG aim to ‘leave no one behind’ by redirecting attention to local territories and vulnerable groups;
- ii. ignoring key structural determinants of exclusionary and unsustainable development and inequality, including dominant patterns of production, consumption and asset distribution; and
- iii. limited attention to the politics of change, including the failure to emphasize active citizenship and participatory democracy which are essential for claims making by marginalized groups and others concerned with social, distributive and environmental justice, as well as for accountability and monitoring.<sup>6</sup>

The potential of SSE in relation to inclusive and sustainable development is being increasingly recognised by policy makers. In recent years, numerous governments and legislatures have introduced laws to regulate and promote SSE, designed policies and programmes that specifically target SSE, integrated SSE into national development plans and created or strengthened government agencies to assume responsibility for SSE development (Fonteneau et al. 2011, Mendell 2014, Utting 2015a 2017).<sup>7</sup>

While some core sectors of SSE, notably cooperatives and mutual associations, have long been the object of state policy and law, others, such as social enterprises, organizations of informal economy workers, fair trade networks, certain types of community savings and loans societies and new entrepreneurial value-driven organizations and networks enabled by digital technology have often received less attention. This is changing as states and inter-governmental organizations look

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<sup>3</sup> Such processes relate, inter alia, to profit maximization and cost reduction or competitive advantage based on negative externalities (Millstone 2015). SSE enterprises and organizations contrast with private sector firms as they have a non-profit or ‘less-for-profit’ orientation or are engaged in ‘profit mutualization’, involving the equitable distribution of profits among members (UNTFSSSE 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Unger 2006, cited in Vail 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See UNTFSSSE 2014, 2015, Wanyama 2014, Said and Yi 2017.

<sup>6</sup> For a useful discussion on participatory monitoring of the SDGs see Husch et al. 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See also the website [www.reliess.org](http://www.reliess.org)

increasingly to self-help groups, small enterprises and NGOs as partners in poverty reduction, social and environmental protection agendas and begin to expand their interest in entrepreneurship and innovation to ‘social entrepreneurship’ and ‘social innovation’. Similarly the rise of social enterprises<sup>8</sup> has captured the attention of governments given their potential role in resolving specific development problems such as unemployment, work integration and access to affordable social services. Addressing such problems has become ever more pressing in contexts of recession or ‘jobless growth’, austerity policies and the down-sizing of states. Cooperatives, too, are the object of renewed policy interest, given the emergence of new forms (e.g. social cooperatives and recovered enterprises) and recognition that cooperatives have proven to be relatively resilient in contexts of financial crisis (Sanchez-Bajo and Roelants 2013).

In short, SSE is entering the mainstream as its relations with both states and markets intensify. To the extent that mainstreaming involves supportive policies and access to markets on a more level playing field, it can help SSE scale up from a fringe, unregulated sector of the broader mixed economy. But it also runs the risk of diluting or distorting the agenda of economic, social, cultural, political and environmental change that the above definition of SSE implies.

Understanding both the opportunities and risks of mainstreaming SSE is important for assessing and ensuring that its potential can be harnessed and for realizing the transformative vision associated with the SDGs.

What ‘transformative’ actually means has been analysed in depth by UNRISD (2016). Beyond addressing simultaneously the multiple dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental, as well as cultural and ‘good governance’ – it involves addressing not only the symptoms of contemporary development problems but also their root causes, namely the structural conditions that reproduce inequality, vulnerability and social and environmental injustice:

“Policy makers may have agreed on what needs to be done, but interests, ideology, institutional resistance and structural impediments get in the way when it comes to designing and implementing policies that work for sustainable development.”  
(UNRISD 2016:214)

A process of **transformative change** can be contrasted with one involving **incremental change**. The latter may involve gains in relations to specific MDGs or SDGs, for example, fewer people living below the 1.25 dollar a day poverty line, reduced rates of unemployment, increased percentage of the population that can access health services, closing gender gaps in education, a decline in the rate of increase in CO2 emissions, and so forth. But it often downplays the need for changes in the patterns of distribution of assets and income that reproduce or intensify inequality; in consumer lifestyles that fuel the carbon economy; or in institutions of patriarchy within the home, workplace and community that inhibit girls and women from educational achievement or converting educational gains into

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<sup>8</sup> Social enterprises differ from both cooperatives that cater to their members’ interests and non-profit organizations that have a charitable orientation and are donor-dependent. Social enterprises include NGOs transitioning from a reliance on grants to earned-income, social cooperatives catering more to the general interest of consumers and citizens than the mutual interest of members, and enterprises that are part and parcel of the restructuring of welfare states and social policy delivery (Defourny and Nyssens 2016).

economic and political opportunities. The political economy definition or essence of SSE, noted above, addresses such concerns.

With incremental change progress tends to be piecemeal and fragmented. Gains achieved in meeting MDG 1 related to poverty reduction, for example, were not only modest in much of the developing world but they also co-existed with worsening trends associated with income and wealth inequality. In the field of environmental sustainability (MDG 7), gains related to drinking water, sanitation and elimination of ozone depleting substances co-existed with a 50 per cent increase in CO2 emissions over 1990 levels. (UN 2015b)

These examples refer to the quality of developmental outcomes. But the distinction between transformative and incremental change can also be applied to policy inputs or effort, which are the primary focus of this paper. The pragmatism of governments and their bureaucracies, which must engage in problem solving, crisis management and compromise, in contexts where there are entrenched institutional cultures and dominant interests and worldviews that influence policy and strategy, almost inevitably cause them to moderate their approach to social and institutional change. The upshot is that when positive change happens, it is often incremental rather than transformative.

This is not to suggest, however, that all that is transformative is necessarily positive, or that significant gains cannot be achieved through incrementalism. As pointed out elsewhere, and discussed further below, transformative change, as pursued by populist and socialist regimes, has been prone to certain pitfalls and contradictions (Utting 2013).

Indeed, in some concrete national setting there is no clear cut distinction between transformative and incremental change. Not only are both prone to tensions from the perspective of sustainable development but elements of both processes can coexist, as illustrated, for example, by cases examined below related to Ecuador, Republic of Korea, Nicaragua and Kerala.

But as the SSE agenda enters the policy arena, it is not so much the scenario of deep structural change that tends to prevail. SSE policies tend to be accommodated within pre-existing policy frameworks and institutional cultures that are more conducive to incrementalism. As this occurs, the SSE agenda tends to be diluted or distorted, policy rhetoric is not matched in terms of resource allocation, and attention is diverted from the root causes of exclusionary and unsustainable development.

How might we guard against such risks? It is this question that is at the forefront of the analysis that follows. Our contention is that a policy agenda that is cognizant of these risks and adopts effective measures to address them is one that leans towards the type of change needed to realize the transformational vision of the SDGs.

Divided in two parts, the paper first examines the opportunities and tensions associated with the mainstreaming of SSE in the policy process. It provides a conceptual analysis of how mainstreaming can redefine SSE through two processes. The first is 'instrumentalization'. This refers to the ways in which powerful state or market institutions engage with SSE to advance specific goals.

The second is 'isomorphism', namely the ways in which SSE organizations and enterprises assume behavioural features of the mainstream institutions with which they interact. These two processes are key for understanding incrementalism. This section highlights both the opportunities and risks involved when relations between SSE and both states and market institutions intensify, and outlines the implications for transformative change.

Part 2 examines the effectiveness of public policy that promotes SSE in relation to four SDGs or sets thereof. These include food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), social service provisioning (SDGs 3 and 4), gender equality and women's economic empowerment (SDG 5) and employment and decent work (SDG 8). This section illustrates the differences between policy approaches fostering incrementalism and transformative change, and identifies the tensions and challenges involved in promoting policy change.

A concluding section sums up the main findings related to the opportunities, risks and dilemmas that arise when SSE becomes an object of public policy. It reflects on the implications for positioning SSE as a key means of implementation for the SDGs.

## **Part 1: The Opportunities and Risks of Mainstreaming SSE<sup>9</sup>**

Whether through linkages with the state or through the intensification of market relations, SSE is interacting increasingly with mainstream public and private sector institutions. This is indicated in Figure 1 which depicts how SSE is positioned in the broader mixed economy (Coraggio 2015). While SSE has attributes that clearly distinguish it from the public and private/business sectors, as well as in relation to what in Latin America is commonly referred to as the popular economy, there are significant areas of overlap. This is evident, for example, where SSE is enabled by social policy, where cooperatives have a for-profit orientation, where private foundations support SSE and where collective action and associative economic activities provide a conduit for transitioning out of the informal economy.

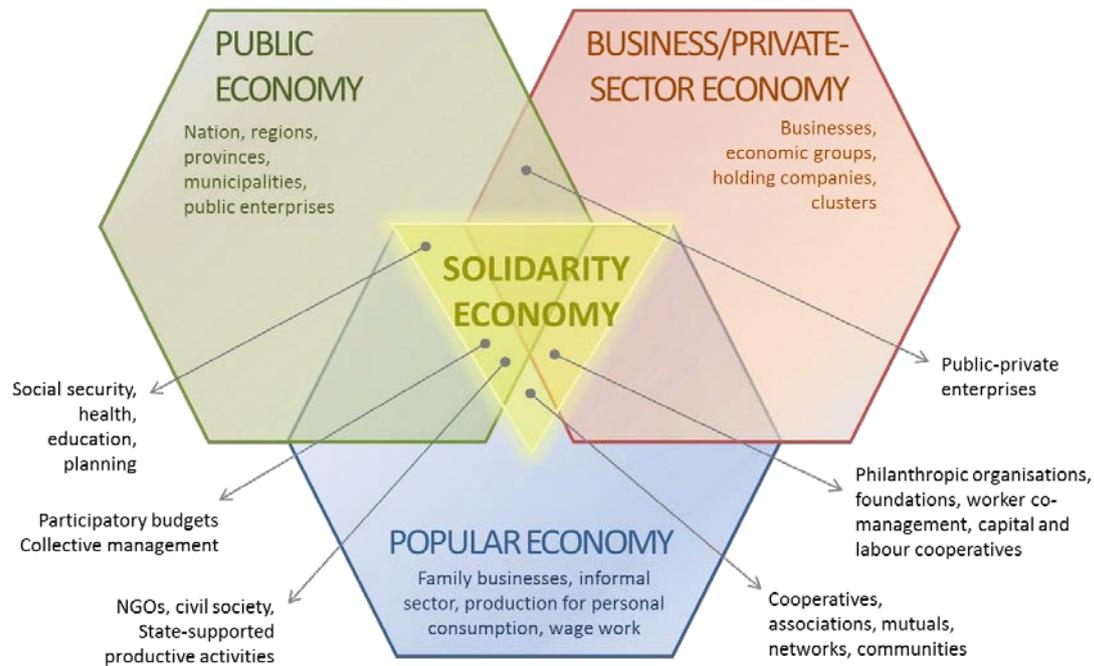
Such interactions have varied effects. Some may be enabling, most obviously when states pass laws that level the playing field for SSE vis-à-vis conventional business; when government programmes support SSE with financial resources, subsidized credit, social programmes, preferential procurement, training and other technical support; or when government agencies are created to attend specifically to the needs of SSE actors. But mainstreaming also implies multiple risks.

To understand the opportunities and risks associated with mainstreaming SSE in the policy arena, it is useful to refer to two institutional contexts or processes that shape policy design, implementation and outcomes. The first concerns 'instrumentalization', namely the way in which policy and social innovations are accommodated within the dominant policy regime or development pathway and how powerful institutions and actors tailor policy to particular ends. The second relates to 'institutional isomorphism', that is, the way in which organizations assume certain characteristics or practices that are a feature of the institutions and organizations with which they are interacting.

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<sup>9</sup> This part draws substantially on Utting 2016a.

Figure 1: Situating SSE in the Broader Economy



Source: UNRISD 2016, based on Coraggio 2015.

### *Instrumentalization*

SSE tends to be used – or ‘instrumentalized’ – by governments to achieve specific policy objectives. In some respects this can be viewed as a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, one that recognizes the importance of engaging multiple (private, civil society and public sector) actors in addressing complex problems and seeking solutions to counter the limitations or failures associated with market- and state-led development processes. It can also be a constructive manifestation of the growing trend towards public-private partnerships.

In some instances, the policy objectives governments are seeking to achieve may be broad. In the cases of Brazil, the Philippines and Costa Rica, for example, SSE has been incorporated into multi-faceted national poverty reduction agendas. In other instances, governments have enlisted the support of SSE for more specific objectives related to work integration and/or the provision of social services, as in the case of Republic of Korea, Uruguay and several European countries.<sup>10</sup> But beyond pragmatism, is the issue of the nature of the development pathway or policy regime that is assimilating SSE, the nature of the state and how powerful actors interpret SSE and tailor it to their ends.

Policies that aim to support SSE must be bolted onto or otherwise accommodated within existing policy regimes and development strategies. The nature of these broader frameworks has important implications for what can be expected of SSE policy in terms of change. This can be seen by referring to three ideal-type development pathways, namely ‘market liberalism’, ‘embedded liberalism’ and ‘alter-globalization’. Significant differences in approach can be expected where

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of variations in public policy in specific countries see Utting 2017.

public policy supporting SSE gains currency in contexts associated with these different pathways.<sup>11</sup>

Under the 'market liberal' pathway, SSE policy may become part and parcel of a neoliberal development strategy that aims to downsize or privatize the state, promote free trade regimes and de-regulate foreign direct investment (FDI). Features of such an approach are particularly evident in certain Eastern European countries (Galera and Salvatori 2015, Mendell 2014). In such contexts, public policy is likely to position SSE as a privatized alternative to state institutions in providing social services. Rather than promoting cooperatives and emphasizing the associative or collective dimension of SSE, policy is likely to promote social enterprises and social entrepreneurship. The option of strengthening domestic food production and food security through support for SSE producers may be side-lined due to policy preferences for food imports, agribusiness and efforts to facilitate the integration of farmers into global value chains dominated by transnational corporations.

The more socially progressive 'embedded liberal' pathway seeks to craft a new 21<sup>st</sup> century social contract via regulation, rights and redistribution whilst respecting the basic institutions of modernity and capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Various governments are leaning in this direction. In Brazil, Costa Rica, Italy, Republic of Korea and Uruguay, for example, governments have promoted multiple forms of SSE organizations as part of a comprehensive poverty reduction agenda, to expand access to affordable social services and to promote green economy.

But while this approach suggests considerable scope for policies that enable SSE, it also tends to be characterized by varying degrees of 'policy incoherence' i.e. policies aimed at facilitating the achievement of particular goals are contradicted by others. There may, for example, be a mismatch between state capacity and resources on the one hand, which are often constrained by economic stabilization or austerity policies, or even regressive taxation, and ambitious social policy objectives, on the other hand. The commitment to social and environmental justice confronts limits associated with vested interests and institutional constraints associated with market liberalism and institutional path dependence. Efforts to expand social programmes may occur in contexts of growing labour market de-regulation. Policy commitments for SSE, while significant, may pale in comparison with resources and incentives provided for corporate or state-controlled extractive industries. Sizable programmes may provide support for agricultural cooperatives but do so in a context where free trade agreements facilitate cheap food imports with which domestic producers cannot compete. Many examples of policy incoherence are noted in Part 2 of this paper.

A third scenario of change – 'alter-globalization' – can also be envisaged. This pathway calls for deeper systemic and structural changes which can have major implications for patterns of growth, investment, asset distribution, trade and consumption, as well as power relations. Where governments position SSE as a central actor in relation to a more radical agenda of change in North-South and

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller discussion of the implications of these different scenarios for sustainable development and change see Utting 2013.

<sup>12</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> century social contract, which emerged in western Europe, in particular, in the wake of the Great Depression and two world wars, involved a compromise between capital and labour which ensured a degree of labour peace and productivity gains in return for improved conditions associated with 'decent work', as well as a welfare state.

domestic power relations, support for SSE is consistent with the alter-globalization agenda. Aspects of this approach have been apparent in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

In the real world, of course, hybrids rather than ideal types exist. In all four of the countries just mentioned, it is clear that governments that adopt ambitious policies to enable SSE do so within institutional and political economy constraints that impose major limits on 'radical' policy change and the possibility of sustaining support over the long term.

From the above it is clear that while the concept of SSE is gaining currency in development discourse, the nature of policies supporting SSE is influenced by actually existing policy regimes and development strategies. It is also important to note that different development actors, with different interests and worldviews, pull terms and concepts in different directions. Within the field of development it has long been noted that a discursive struggle over the meaning of terms and concepts takes place (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Cornwall and Brock 2006, Utting 2006).

This is very apparent in the case of SSE. The upshot is that more holistic interpretations of SSE are often diluted by emphasizing particular types of enterprises, sectors and roles, and by narrowing the remit of SSE. Furthermore, certain interpretations of SSE may start to look and feel more like reformist perspectives related to the mainstream private sector or capitalist economy, for example, to small- and medium-sized enterprise development, the promotion of entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

It is crucial, then, to assess how SSE is being defined and interpreted by policy makers and the within the institutions that design and implement policy. Instrumentalization can have the effect of narrowing the focus of attention towards particular types of SSE organizations and particular sectors of economic activity. As Marguerite Mendell points out in a study of public policy related to social economy in four OECD countries or regions thereof: "a common tendency in these countries is to limit these measures to target populations and labour market policy. While this is salutary, as social inclusion does require targeted policies, too often this limited approach reduces the potential macro-social impact of the social economy to a sectoral objective and confines its policy formation and implementation within a single ministry or department" (Mendell 2014: 5).

Traditionally, cooperatives have been singled out for policy attention. More recently, policy interest in SSE has focused on social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. A less cumbersome term than SSE, 'social enterprise' resonates with mainstream actors and their efforts to reform 'business-as-usual', in part by promoting small- and medium-sized enterprises and women's economic empowerment. But directing attention to particular forms of enterprise can detract attention from other organizational forms associated with SSE, such as various types of collective action and associative activity involving small producers, citizens and community residents that make up much of SSE worldwide. Social enterprise is also a term that sits uncomfortably within some hispanophone or lusophone knowledge circles where *empresa social* is associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR), often involving transnational corporations (TNCs).

To the extent that much of the global discourse on social enterprise emanates from Europe, concerns about so-called eurocentrism also arise. This approach runs the risk of ignoring key features of SSE inherent in the SSE concept itself and in concrete manifestations of SSE in various parts of the world. Referring to the debate on SSE in Latin America, Coraggio identifies the following gaps or biases in eurocentric interpretations of SSE:<sup>13</sup>

- i. the 'colonial' tendency to assume that what comes from Europe is the superior form to be replicated elsewhere, thereby marginalizing both age-old community-based forms of social and economic organization practised by indigenous peoples as well as contemporary practices found within the popular economy (see figure 1); and
- ii. the assumption that multiplying the number of micro-level SSE organizations and enterprises and strengthening their complementary role in the economy will somehow build a new system. This disregards the fact that such an approach to scaling up SSE renders it part of a system dominated by capitalist and patriarchal relations that reproduce vulnerability and inequality.

It is important, however, not to lose sight of various potential advantages associated with instrumentalization. Beyond the sectoral gains and the scope for mobilizing resources through pragmatic approaches are potential political advantages. Using terms such as social enterprise whose meaning can be grasped more readily by policy makers and others can help in raising the visibility of SSE within policy circles. Where public policy support for SSE is often associated with particular governments or political parties, demonstrating that it can help in achieving basic development objectives can facilitate buy-in from other political actors or 'concertation', i.e. situations where parties reach agreement on issues on which they previously disagreed. Governments or particular agencies therein, and political parties of other ideological persuasions are more likely to take an interest in SSE when they see that it can help them achieve basic development objectives. As seen in Quebec, Canada and Italy, concertation is an important element for ensuring the sustainability of public policy support for SSE in contexts of electoral competition and the rotation of parties in power (Utting 2016b).

But instrumentalization, in most cases, implies moulding SSE to a particular theory of change that tends to be reformist or remedial, rather than radical or utopian. This may bode well in terms of incremental change but it tends to divert attention from the types of political economy and structural issues, noted in the Introduction, that need to be addressed in any process of transformative change. The pragmatism of governments and their bureaucracies that must find manageable solutions to solve problems, the constraints associated with path dependency<sup>14</sup> and the influence on policy making of dominant interests and worldviews, often cause policy makers to moderate their approach to social and sustainable development strategy. Such a process can crowd out any consideration of the deeper structural causes of inequality, vulnerability and social and environmental injustice.

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, 5 August 2017; see also Coraggio 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Path dependency refers to institutional resistance to change that is typically found in bureaucracies due to entrenched worldviews, turf battles, constraints on innovative and critical thinking that derive from hierarchy and fear of upsetting career prospects, and so forth.

### *Institutional isomorphism*

Beyond instrumentalization is another process that can cause SSE to deviate from core principles and practices, namely, 'isomorphism'. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary isomorphism refers to the "similarity in organisms of different ancestry resulting from evolutionary convergence". Closer interaction between organizations associated with different sectors of the economy tends to produce some element of convergence. SSE entities may assume some of the characteristics of the mainstream actors and institutions with which they associate. This may be in terms of organizational and managerial characteristics or the broader agenda of development and change.

Two well-known examples relate to micro-credit and large cooperatives. In some countries, the scaling up of micro-credit has been associated with its commercialization and the growing indebtedness of clients, rather than the empowerment of the disadvantaged. It also tends to focus on individuals as clients, rather than groups as agents of change.<sup>15</sup> Another example relates to what Defourny and Delvetere (1999) have called 'coopitalism'. Like private sector firms, large cooperatives often adopt more hierarchical governance structures and managerial practices that may favour the criterion of efficiency over equity. In some cases they may even begin to outsource work under conventional labour relations. In the case of Mondragon, one of the world's largest cooperatives, it has been argued that some of its practices deviate from cooperative principles and start to resemble those associated with CSR.<sup>16</sup>

A global survey of stakeholders associated with the cooperative movement that examined issues of women's empowerment and gender equality found that: "One of the chief threats that interviewees identified is the pressure to maximize shareholder value to the detriment of social goals. In this sense, co-operatives could become victims of their own economic success, and see their objective as market domination rather than member value" (Schincariol and McMurtry 2015).

Such developments can also impact the nature of advocacy. In several countries and regions large cooperative institutions have not identified or sided with advocacy by and for the broader set of SSE actors. Indeed, in some instances they have overtly opposed it. In Costa Rica, for example, the peak cooperative association, CONACOOB, has been critical of several state initiatives to promote SSE, in particular, the drafting of a framework law on SSE.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the broader agenda of change, SSE involvement in providing social services may, as noted above, help to fill gaps in service provisioning but it can also draw SSE into a neoliberal or privatization agenda centred on subcontracting and the commercialization of social services hitherto provided by public institutions.<sup>18</sup> Both these effects have been demonstrated in the case of Uruguay (Rossel 2015).

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<sup>15</sup> Bateman and Chang 2012; Nelson 2015

<sup>16</sup> Altuna-Gabilondo 2013

<sup>17</sup> In their response to the draft proposal of the law, CONACOOB expressed concerns related to what they perceived to be a top down design process, potential bureaucratization and duplication of state functions due to additional legislation and institutions that were seen as unnecessary given the scope of existing laws and agencies, limited participation of cooperatives in the proposed SSE Council and excessive state control of the implementation process. (See Letter from CONACOOB to the Permanent Legislative Commission, 4 May 2016, cited in Utting and Morales 2016.) Such views contrasted sharply with those of some other SSE actors involved in the drafting process and indicated the extent of tensions within the SSE 'movement'.

<sup>18</sup> This issue is discussed by Rossel (2015) with reference to the case of Uruguay.

A third example, relates to reducing the notion of solidarity to philanthropy which, as Jean-Louis Laville explains, tends to narrowly interpret “the social question in terms of the fight against poverty and assume[s] that voluntary social action [is] key for improving the fate of the poorest. In a nutshell, it prefers individual engagement and ethical awareness over norms emanating from public authorities and political questions.” (2015: 54)

### *SSE and the ‘fourth sector’*

With both instrumentalization and isomorphism SSE tends to be redefined and interpreted in ways that dilute its meaning and purpose. This is apparent in contexts where SSE, or more specifically terms and practices associated with social enterprise and social economy, are subsumed within the so-called fourth sector approach (Sabeti 1998). This comprises ‘blended value’ or ‘for-benefit’ organizations that practice ‘good governance’, demonstrate managerial competency and focus not simply on profit maximization but a ‘triple bottom line’ that incorporates financial, social and environmental objectives. As fourth sector entities, SSE organizations and enterprises sit comfortably alongside transnational corporations, private sector financial institutions or investors practising some form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or social impact investing.

This is problematic in two respects. First, a large body of research has questioned the substance of this approach which, in practice, may address various negative (social and environmental) externalities of business behaviour but nevertheless continues to subordinate social and environmental goals to the financial/economic objective. In reality, the fourth sector approach retains a normative hierarchy that accords primacy to the economic dimension. Furthermore, if we think of the triple bottom line in terms of a three-legged stool, in the case of SSE it stands a much better chance of being a relatively stable stool with three legs of roughly similar proportions. In contrast, as applied to corporations, a vast amount of research on CSR suggests that the triple bottom line tends to produce a very uneven stool where one leg – the financial/economic – remains disproportionately longer than the others.

Another concern relates to diluting the agenda of change. With the triple bottom line and blended value approach, the agenda focuses on one main reformist element, namely the need to address certain negative (social and environmental) externalities associated with economic activity and business behaviour. This may indeed be a worthy objective but it is one that downplays, if not ignores, several other core features of SSE which relate to political, cultural and structural change.

As regards the political dimension, a core aspect of SSE relates to effective democracy, participation or active citizenship, not only at the micro level of decision-making and governance processes within organizations or enterprises but also at the meso level of intermediary organizations and networks and their participation in claims-making and governance in local, national and international arenas. The fourth sector approach may focus on the economic empowerment of producers but tends to ignore the other key purpose of collective action, namely political empowerment. An important distinction between SSE and other fourth sector organizations is how SSE connects with social movements in relation to both its core constituency and political alliances. With both instrumentalization and under

the fourth sector approach, SSE can be stripped of its emancipatory dimension while economic, social and environmental considerations become the be all and end all of SSE.

SSE is also about cultural change in lifestyles, consumption patterns, patterns of human interaction and our rapport with the environment or Mother Earth. The Andean indigenous concepts, *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña*, known in Spanish as *Buen Vivir*,<sup>19</sup> emphasize living in harmony with others and nature, and collective well-being sums up several such aspects. So too do aspects of so-called post-industrial identity politics with its emphasis on environmentally- and socially-conscious production and consumption patterns; active community engagement; bio-, social- and ethnic-diversity; gender equality and so forth. Such aspects are not usually at the forefront of progressive business-related models of change. The key point here is that SSE is as much a politico-cultural project as it is an eco-social<sup>20</sup> one. And by subsuming SSE within the fourth sector approach, the former aspect tends to get lost in translation.

Finally, as noted above, SSE is about structural change that counters trends and effects associated with commodification, concentration, regressive patterns of income distribution and capital flight, not least from the local economies where production or sourcing takes place. Aspects of the fourth sector approach may actually reinforce such processes. This is particularly apparent in the case of market-centred approaches to transitioning towards a 'green economy'<sup>21</sup>. 'Selling nature to save it'<sup>22</sup> or extending property rights over natural resources (which in practice tends to favour elites) may be consistent with a 'blended value' approach but can undermine common pool resources and result in further dispossession of the poor. Similarly, the so-called Bottom of the Pyramid approach<sup>23</sup>, associated with corporate sustainability or social impact investing, may address some issues of concern to the poor or local communities but it is problematic from the perspective of other principles guiding SSE. The notion that the world's poor can be lifted out of poverty via their insertion in the value chains dominated by transnational corporations, either as suppliers or consumers of products geared to their limited purchasing power, generally tinkers with dominant market processes. Apart from the question of what sort of consumption patterns are being promoted, it tends to ignore key issues such as the (generally weak) bargaining power of producers at the bottom end of global value chains and the skewed distribution of both income and value within such chains.

### *Transformative change*

As indicated earlier, the concept of SSE suggests a number of core principles and practices that bode well for transformative change. This is apparent along five dimensions of sustainable development:

- Economic: employment generation, local economic development, women's economic empowerment; ensuring that the direct producers of goods and services and the local territories where production takes place participate

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<sup>19</sup> See Gudynas 2011.

<sup>20</sup> 'Eco-social' refers to economic, environmental or ecological and social.

<sup>21</sup> Cook et al. 2013

<sup>22</sup> McAfee 2011

<sup>23</sup> Prahalad 2006

fairly in the distribution of surplus and have the possibility of adding value to primary commodities; retrofitting economies in environmentally-friendly ways;

- Social: work integration, decent work, basic needs provisioning, including care, and community cohesion;
- Environmental: protection, stewardship, community-based natural resource management; renewable energy; 'voluntary simplicity'<sup>24</sup>, 'decoupling'<sup>25</sup> or degrowth<sup>26</sup>;
- Cultural: elevating the place of ethics and values of solidarity; environmental, social and distributive justice; community; happiness and *Buen Vivir* in economic and social life;
- Political/governance: active citizenship, collective action, empowerment of the disadvantaged and participatory or democratic governance.

The contention in this paper is that the transformative nature or potential of SSE should not be lost as it is mainstreamed. Mainstreaming and incremental change run the risk of side-lining several aspects of transformative change.

These include:

- **Integrated development:** incremental change is often piecemeal, picking and choosing a particular aspect of the aforementioned dimensions of sustainable development or a narrow set of economic sectors where SSE actors operate. Transformative change is more cognizant of the inter-connections between the different dimensions and the need to advance along the multiple fronts inherent on the concept;
- **Deep structural change:** Incremental change is often characterised by 'an elephant in the room' syndrome, i.e. it pays limited attention to changing the structures and institutions that reproduce and reinforce vulnerability and inequality, including dominant patterns of growth, production, consumption, asset distribution and value appropriation;
- **Progressive politics and collective action:** Incremental change and policy associated with SSE tends to focus on the individual enterprise, entrepreneur or consumer/user of services, and the economic empowerment of women and other small producers. Transformative change emphasizes the key role that collective action and associative practices can play in development and change, as well as the political empowerment of disadvantaged or subaltern groups.

This is not to suggest that all that is transformative is necessarily positive. Neither does it imply that significant gains cannot be achieved through incrementalism. As pointed out elsewhere, and discussed further below, transformative change, as

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<sup>24</sup> The term voluntary simplicity refers to lifestyles where people seek to avoid the negative consequences of materialism by choosing voluntarily to consume and/or earn relatively little whilst improving the quality of life (van Dijk 2014).

<sup>25</sup> The term decoupling refers to situations where greenhouse gas emissions decline relative to the rate of growth or in absolute terms (Jackson 2009).

<sup>26</sup> The term degrowth (*décroissance*) refers to a paradigm shift and a movement for change that rejects the necessity of economic growth given severe economic, social, cultural and environmental effects. It calls for alternative patterns of investment, production, trade and consumption involving such aspects as downscaling production, local economic circuits, self-sufficiency, renewables, reduced consumption and waste, and enhanced well-being through cultural pursuits and adherence to principles and practices such as care, sharing, solidarity and cooperation.

pursued by populist and socialist regimes, has been prone to certain pitfalls (Utting 2013). Messing with the market inevitably prompts economic reactions that can destabilise production, investment and domestic savings. Such regimes often downplay the fiscal question, namely the ways and means of financing change sustainably, in ways that avoid excessive debt and inflation. Furthermore, radical agendas of social change may embolden elite resistance, alienate potential allies and constrict the coalitions of social and political forces needed to bring about and sustain change. The political question also concerns the co-optation of social movements and civil society leaders which can reinforce top-down policy design and change. Issues related to state capacity and legitimacy, which are crucial for transformative change, are often ignored, including problems of middle class brain drain, the competency of the civil service, and the transparency and accountability of public institutions. Such tensions clearly need to be recognized by the proponents of transformative change and factored into policy debates.

## Part 2: SSE and the SDGs

Both the MDG and SDG processes have mobilized interest in the potential role that SSE might play in achieving multiple development goals. Various reports have identified the linkages between SSE and specific goals and called on governments and multilateral organizations to factor SSE into their discussions and planning related to the means of implementation.<sup>27</sup>

But the above analysis suggests that advocates for SSE as a means of implementation for the SDGs face a dilemma. They generally seek to promote a more enabling policy environment, which implies closer interaction with organizations and institutions associated with both the state and the private sector. Such relations may lead to more supportive policies and better terms of insertion in the market economy but, as discussed above, they are also prone to multiple risks and tensions.

In this section we pursue the question of incremental versus transformative change by identifying the opportunities, risks and dilemmas involved in attempts to enable SSE through public policy and market access. We do so by examining processes of change related to four SDG issue areas, namely, food security/sustainable agriculture, access to social services, women's economic empowerment and employment/decent work.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, UNTFSSSE 2014, 2015, Wanyama 2014

## *Food security and agriculture*

*SDG 2. End hunger, achieve food security, improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture*

*24. .... We are ... determined to end hunger and to achieve food security as a matter of priority and to end all forms of malnutrition ... We will devote resources to developing rural areas and sustainable agriculture and fisheries, supporting smallholder farmers, especially women farmers, herders and fishers in developing countries, particularly least developed countries.  
(UN 2015a)*

SSE can play a pivotal role in meeting SDG 2 given the extent to which its activities are centred on improving rural livelihoods, agricultural and local economic development, and healthier consumption patterns. Such goals become ever more important in a structural context where i) the dominant economic model can no longer absorb ‘surplus’ rural labour in urban-based decent work, ii) we face the challenge of having to produce far more food by 2050 to feed a population of 9 billion<sup>28</sup>, and iii) commercial agriculture is severely degrading the environment (UNCTAD 2013).

SSE addresses key problems associated with the two conventional approaches of agricultural intensification, namely, the ‘Green Revolution’ that was pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s for staple crops, and high external input agriculture associated with agribusiness and large-scale commercial agriculture. Both resulted in increased productivity accompanied by higher levels of energy use and increased environmental degradation through over-use of agro-chemicals and mono-cropping. With a strong focus on household food security and production for the domestic market, SSE can also counter the bias towards agro-export production that has been a feature of economic liberalization over several decades.

Much of SSE activity centres on agriculture and food provisioning, whether through the millions of producers who organize in or are otherwise associated with cooperatives<sup>29</sup>, associations of small producers, women’s self-help groups, urban community agriculture, solidarity finance, and fair trade or alternative food networks which directly connect producers and consumers. Moreover, many of these organizations, enterprises and networks adopt or promote agro-ecological practices associated, for example, with lower external input farming systems, agro-forestry and silvo-pastoralism, and the application of indigenous knowledge. In an enabling policy environment, SSE is well-placed to meet the challenge of agro-ecological intensification that SDG 2 demands.

The food crisis of 2008 concentrated minds on rethinking agricultural and rural development policy. Very different approaches emerged. Consistent with the market liberal pathway outlined above is the idea of achieving productivity increases through a “New Green Revolution”. Like its predecessor, this approach modernizes

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<sup>28</sup> In 2009 the FAO estimated that an increase of 70 per cent is necessary (FAO 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Roelants et al. 2014

agriculture through technology and intensification but is more attuned to problems of environmental degradation (Paarlberg 2010).

There are various ways in which SSE can be linked to this approach. Agricultural cooperatives, for example, can benefit from related incentives and technologies. Large corporations such as Nestlé and Unilever that dominate global agri-food value chains have adopted ‘corporate sustainability’ strategies they engage small producers at the so-called ‘bottom of the [income] pyramid’ (Prahalad 2006).

Where such approaches yield benefits for SSE producers and organizations in terms of output, yields, decent work, incomes, technology, knowhow and environmental protection, it is consistent with a process of incremental change. But they do little to correct – and, indeed, may reinforce – certain structural conditions that reproduce vulnerability and unsustainable development. While market access can bring various advantages, there may be significant negative environmental externalities related, for example, to biodiversity loss and risks associated with pesticides. Furthermore, the scale of benefits that small farmers derive will depend very much on their bargaining power vis-à-vis other stakeholders in the value chain. Such power often remains extremely weak. Food security goals that rely on imports of food products which are encouraged by free trade agreements can undermine the situation of small domestic producers of, for example, maize, rice and dairy products that cannot compete with food imports whose relatively low price is partly a function of subsidies in the Global North.

It is these concerns that are central to another approach, often referred to as the ‘food sovereignty’ agenda, which is more transformative in the sense defined earlier. This has been promoted by the international movement of peasants, small farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, rural workers and others that make up La Via Campesina. Here attention focuses on securing the land rights of the disadvantaged; enhancing the scope for redistributive agrarian reform; and the importance of local knowledge, production, trade and policy making. It also upholds principles of Fair Trade and agro-ecology, and the need not only for smallholder economic empowerment but also political empowerment through collective organization, social mobilization and participatory governance. It seeks alternatives to food systems that are controlled by agri-food corporations and structured by ‘free trade’ agreements that prioritize corporate/investor rights and facilitate cheap food imports from Northern countries where agriculture is heavily subsidized.

Much can and needs to be done to scale up practices associated with the food sovereignty agenda. Whether through market-based mechanisms or public policy and state support, scaling up such an approach, however, can be a major challenge, as noted in the following examples.

### *Tensions within the Fair Trade system*

The growth and consolidation of Fairtrade networks has seen the global retail market for Fairtrade products increase from approximately US\$ 1 billion in 2004 to US \$ 8 billion in 2015.<sup>30</sup> Growing the market for Fairtrade certified products has brought several large corporations such as Starbucks into the system. The scale and role of corporations has implications for governance and the distribution of benefits (Bacon 2010). Indeed there is a vibrant debate within the Fair Trade

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<sup>30</sup> See Fairtrade International Annual Reports for 2004/5 and 2015/16.

movement on this issue. Whereas the US labelling organization, Fair Trade USA, sees the increasing presence of corporate actors and large scale commercial producers as key for growing market share, others have prioritized goals of small producer empowerment and stricter adherence to principles and standards of agro-ecology. Some Fairtrade organizations in developing countries such as Mexico are attempting to develop their own marketing channels (Smith and Boersma 2012), tapping into growing middle class domestic markets where they can sell higher value products (Reed 2012).

Differences in approach among the leading international and US labelling organizations led to a formal split within the movement in 2011 when Fair Trade USA left the umbrella organization, Fairtrade International. Such differences in approach affected not only the distribution of benefits within the system but also power relations within governance and decision-making. The voice of small producer organisations is more apparent within the governance structure of Fairtrade International. Such developments have favoured decisions to increase both the fair trade floor price and the social premiums that support various local projects. Meanwhile, particularly in Latin America, national and regional producer associations have become stronger, gaining a more robust voice within Fairtrade International and also ensuring that the transformative features of Fair Trade are not diluted through an incremental approach. This has involved broadening the focus away from merely considering how to secure premium prices in export markets towards:

- small-scale producers capturing for themselves the benefits of a growing Fair Trade market in their own countries and regions;
- adding value to primary products through processing;
- balancing export-oriented commodity production with the principles and practices of ‘food sovereignty’; and
- the ongoing political empowerment of producers through organizing at different scales – locally, nationally and internationally – more effective participation in policy processes and the governance structures of intermediary organizations, and building coalitions and alliances.

#### *Promoting food sovereignty through public policy*

The tensions between incremental and transformative change also play out when states become proactive in promoting food sovereignty. The cases of Ecuador and Nicaragua are illustrative in this regard.

In 2008 Ecuador became one of the first countries to incorporate the concept and goal of food sovereignty into the Constitution (Peña 2013). This was followed a year later with the enactment of the Food Sovereignty Law. Various supplementary laws, state agencies, legislative committees and local ordinances have sought to consolidate the food sovereignty regime, with the active participation of many grassroots organizations (Peña 2015).

Applying the concept of food sovereignty and the law in practice, however, has been extremely challenging. The upshot has been that issues related to productivity rather than redistribution have tended to prevail (Ramos and Baldeon 2017). This reflects the influence of organizations representing commercial farmers, particularly in coastal regions, within the policy process, as well as tensions with the broader development strategy that has increasingly leaned towards foreign direct

investment and free trade agreements, not least in a context where revenues from oil and gas have declined (Henderson 2016).

A key element of the global food sovereignty agenda is land reform which is considered necessary to address gross inequalities in agrarian structure, ongoing processes of land concentration and tenure insecurity that many producers experience. The need for land reform was recognized in the Constitution of Ecuador. It took eight years, however, before the Rural and Ancestral Land Law (*Ley de Tierras Rurales y Territorios Ancestrales*) was enacted.

The participatory process of drafting the law revealed divergent positions among different groups of potential beneficiaries and the state. The indigenous confederation, CONAIE, withdrew from the consultations which they believed amounted to tokenism and had excluded certain groups (Peña 2015). Tensions between the state and certain indigenous groups have intensified, resulting in the closure of – or attempts to close – several civil society advocacy organizations, including ones that had defended the rights of communities protesting mining and oil exploration projects in what they claimed were ancestral lands (OHCHR 2016).

The land reform law that was passed in 2016 laid the foundation for various forms of support for family and communal agriculture including preferential credit, fiscal exemptions, incentives for environmental protection, land titling, inheritance rights, social policy and infrastructure (Morejón 2016). Its transformative potential, however, was constrained by various omissions, loopholes and generalities. While the law and its subsequent regulations provide, for example, for the possibility of expropriation of large idle private holdings, various mechanisms and conditions are in place that can effectively prevent expropriations and limit redistribution to market sales of idle land (Yulan 2017). The autonomy of organizations in the implementation process is also in doubt given administrative conditions that allow the state to approve beneficiary organizations that can exert claims (Yulan 2017). And concerns have arisen that the participatory dynamic that was apparent in designing the law will decline significantly as state institutions exert control over the implementation process (Peña 2015) and are given ‘excessive discretion’ to decide issues ‘without prior debate and participation’ (Ramos and Baldeón 2017).

Ramos and Baldeón (2017) sum up their analysis of the law and its regulations as follows: “Within the national debate, [they] position the lack of productivity in agriculture as the principal problem to be resolved. Ignored are structural realities [related to land use and concentration, the feminization of rural work, and so forth] that underpin the land question in the country ....” The tendency has been to reduce the change strategy to technical aspects. The development of ancestral lands is addressed primarily through access to credit for those in possession of communal land. The criteria for authorizing foreign investment are reduced to compliance with an investment plan and its compatibility with national development strategy, ignoring questions of land and other resource concentration and impacts on food sovereignty. In short, incrementalism, in the form of food security – that is, how to adequately feed the population – appears to trump transformative change in the form of food sovereignty – how to “democratize access and control over resources like land, water, and seeds.” (Peña 2015).

The challenges associated with scaling up SSE can also be seen in the case of a major food production programme in Nicaragua, known popularly as *Hambre Cero*

(Zero Hunger). This is one of several support programmes aimed at achieving goals that are enshrined in the Food Sovereignty and Security Law passed in 2009. While this programme is discussed in greater detail below in relation to the SDG on gender equality, it is relevant here to note the following.

The core aspect of Zero Hunger consisted of providing women from low income families who had access to small plots of land with a package mainly comprising farm animals that would yield both food for household consumption and cash income from the sale of eggs, milk, meat, piglets, calves etc. The Zero Hunger project model was originally designed by an NGO in the late 1990s, as a response to heightened vulnerability following Hurricane Mitch. As is typical for an NGO project, however, its scale was limited, in this case to approximately 3,000 women. When the incoming government of Daniel Ortega adopted the Zero Hunger model as a national priority programme in 2007 the number of beneficiaries increased dramatically to approximately 150,000 within eight years. This example demonstrates the crucial role that the state can play in scaling up SSE related initiatives. But this expansion came at the expense of diluting several key components of the NGO project, such as the value of the asset package, the emphasis on cooperative and pre-cooperative organization of the women involved and environmental components, such as biogas digestors (Chamorro and Utting 2015). And as noted in the discussion below related to the SDG 5, other aspects related to gender equality were also ignored. In short, while state involvement was key for scaling up this programme, there was a trade-off between scale and substance which weakened the transformative dimension.

### *Social services and assistance*

*SDG 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*

*SDG 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*

SDGs 3 and 4 promote health and quality education and learning opportunities for all. As noted elsewhere (Utting 2015b), SSE organizations play an important role in providing both healthcare and other forms of social assistance, for example, child and elderly care, and disability support (Defourny and Nyssens 2008, ESCWA 2014). A survey of 655 SSE organizations in 6 OECD and one emerging economy found that this sector accounts for 26 per cent of all SSE activities (OECD 2013). In Uruguay, SSE organizations are key participants in a public-civic partnership approach to extending some aspects of healthcare to hitherto underserved populations (Rossel 2015). In numerous countries cooperatives provide a diverse range of services from home care to hospitals (Wanyama 2014). Beyond health service and care provision, mutual associations often play an important role in providing health insurance. Development strategy in parts of West Africa is turning to community-based mutual health organizations as a major partner in social protection policy (Fonteneau 2015). Throughout Africa community-based savings and credit organizations have been engaged in raising awareness about HIV/AIDS (Wanyama 2014).

Education and training is another prominent field for SSE organizations, not least in contexts where governments are promoting active labour market policies and work integration in the wake of the global financial crisis. Over one-fifth (21 per cent) of the SSE organizations surveyed in the OECD study operated in this sector.

Worldwide, cooperatives and other SSE organizations are active in providing education finance, building and operating educational establishments, and providing services related to skills training and knowledge development. Furthermore, increased family income associated with remunerated work in SSE organizations is often used to meet education costs. (Wanyama 2014).

From the perspective of transformative change, state efforts to promote the role of SSE in the fields of health and education are often circumscribed. Contractual relations may enhance the dependency of SSE organizations on the state, stimulate competition at the expense of co-operation among SSE organizations and enterprises, and limit their autonomy and capacity to innovate and engage in advocacy.

### *SSE and the welfare state*

As noted above, how SSE is positioned in relation to welfare state restructuring and social policy is an important question to address when considering its role in incremental versus transformative change. In several European countries, governments have turned to SSE in the context of restructuring or down-sizing the role of the state and privatizing state services. In Italy, for example, recent legal and policy reforms promote preferential procurement involving social cooperatives (EC 2016; Utting 2017). In the case of Uruguay, discussed below, the enhanced role of SSE in service delivery partly conforms to this logic but also explicitly aims to fill gaps in social service provisioning to underserved social groups or geographical areas.

Where such processes serve to fill gaps in service provisioning and consolidate state-SSE partnerships their value in terms of incremental change can be significant. But the trajectory of state responsibility and support for social protection via SSE also need to be constantly appraised. In both Italy and Republic of Korea, for example, certain forms of financial support or incentives have subsequently been rolled back, in some contexts due to austerity policies (Italy); in others, due partly to unintended consequences, such as free-riding by private enterprise in the case of Republic of Korea (Mendell et al. 2010)

When considering the issue of incrementalism versus transformation a key question related to social service provisioning is, then, whether the promotion of SSE is part and parcel of the downsizing of the state or of welfare state expansion. The cases of Costa Rica and Republic of Korea, where support for SSE has been a feature of an expanding welfare state regime, contrast with the situation currently playing out in much of Europe.

In Costa Rica the rise and development of SSE historically was associated with the consolidation of a welfare state and a comprehensive social protection regime (Utting and Morales 2016). An extensive network of community development associations (*Asociaciones de Desarrollo Comunal* – ADC) was developed that provided key services, particularly in underserved rural areas experiencing agrarian frontier colonization and in urban areas experiencing rapid rural to urban migration. The ADCs were a key mechanism for channelling state resources for infrastructural development (for example, roads, electricity, sanitation, socio-cultural centres), social service provisioning and housing.

Today the communal movement comprises nearly 3,400 development associations, with an official membership of a third of a million volunteers. Associations, known as *Asadas*, organize water and sanitation systems, supplying water to a quarter of the population. Cooperatives provide electricity to approximately 15 per cent of the population while 9 per cent access healthcare through health cooperatives (Censo Cooperativo 2012; Utting and Morales 2016). A key feature of this system is mandatory funding through the tax system. A law passed in 1984 allocates 2 per cent of income tax to the communal development associations. Through time, however, this transformative approach has come under strain. Various governments have failed to comply with the 2 per cent funding norm; retrenchment of state employees has weakened the state support agency, *DINADECO*; and clientelistic relations have affected service provisioning.

From the perspective of transformative change, the case of Republic of Korea is also significant. In this country, the expanded role of SSE in social service provisioning is not a function of down-sizing the state; on the contrary it is part and parcel of the expansion of the welfare state that ensued following the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s. A key instrument was the 1999 National Basic Livelihood Security Act (NBLSA), implemented in 2000, which extended the right to social security to all citizens and provided disadvantaged groups with both welfare benefits and work opportunities through grassroots 'self-support sponsoring organizations' and 'self-support promotion centers' (Park 2008). The Act promoted 'rehabilitation communities' (later renamed 'rehabilitation enterprises') to create jobs and income for the disadvantaged, usually beneficiaries of the NBLS programme's income support. These entities are particularly active in labour-intensive service sectors such as patient care, house repair, cleaning, recycling, food distribution and delivery services. Once established and certified by local governments or the Ministry of Health and Welfare, they are eligible for government loans, preferential status as contractors for government projects, subsidies for hiring NBLS programme beneficiaries and a range of enterprise support services.

The NBLSA symbolized a shift from a 'developmental' state (Woo-Cumings 1999) to a 'productive' welfare state (Kwon 2014),<sup>31</sup> with the state playing a more comprehensive role in social assistance and service provisioning. As in the past, however, the state turned to other actors to assist with implementation. The traditional reliance on families and business firms now extended to third sector or voluntary organizations in local communities (Park 2008: 5). Due to limitations and growing criticism of philanthropic organizations and NGOs, attention focused increasingly on social enterprises (Jung et al. 2015).

The role of social enterprises in the productive welfare regime was further strengthened following the enactment of the Social Enterprise Promotion Act in 2007. To receive the maximum level of subsidies provided by government, social enterprises must be certified by the Ministry of Employment and Labour. Various ministries and departments adopted programmes to support social enterprise. Initially, labour cost subsidies for newly created jobs were the main support mechanism. Other forms of support comprised brand and technology development,

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<sup>31</sup> Within international political economy literature, the developmental state generally refers to contexts where a state, with a relatively strong and competent bureaucracy, is proactive in regulating and planning a country's economic development pathway, has a long-term planning horizon guided by what are perceived to be national interests, provides incentives for particular firms and industries, strategically carves out niches in the international market and division of labour, and actively supports infrastructural development and partnerships with the private sector.

marketing, training and preferential procurement. Bylaws, ordinances and programmes introduced by local government in several areas of the country facilitated implementation. Local governments and other agencies could also recognize start-up enterprises and provide some level of support. By late 2015 there were approximately 1,500 social enterprises. Government funding for this sector amounted to 155.9 billion Won (approximately USD 150 million) in 2014.

### *Overcoming dependency and bureaucratisation*

A look at programmes in Uruguay and Quebec, Canada sheds light on some of the other tensions associated with instrumentalization noted above. Around the world, many NGOs are transitioning from being donor-dependent charitable organizations to income-generating social enterprises. In Uruguay this transition has positioned NGOs as important providers of public social services in the context of welfare state restructuring. An analysis of the role of NGOs in programmes associated with child care and other forms of social protection for children and adolescents identified a mix of positive and negative outcomes (Rossel 2015). On the plus side, NGO involvement expanded access to such services and filled gaps in service provisioning. It provided a mechanism for NGOs to influence policy and service design, and enhanced the capacity and professionalization of the delivery organizations. From the perspective of incremental change, such outcomes are significant. There were, however, several worrisome implications from the perspective of transformative change. These included the high level of dependency on state resources which reduced the independence of NGOs and their willingness to innovate and engage in critical advocacy. Furthermore, competition among NGOs for state resources undermined networking, co-ordination and building a cohesive SSE movement. The contracting relation also resulted in the bureaucratisation of organizations.

Some of these constraints have been avoided in the case of child care services in Quebec, Canada, largely due to the quality of participation and adherence to principles of solidarity (Mendell et al. 2010, Mendell 2014). A new family policy introduced in 1997 led to the development of an extensive network of approximately 1,000 SSE child care centres. Heavily subsidized by the state, the centres are democratically controlled by committees of parents, community representatives and primarily female employees. Furthermore, the centres are organized under an association which is represented in the Chantier de l'économie social, an intermediary organization or 'network of networks' that is highly influential in shaping provincial government policy. They have also coalesced to form a solidarity cooperative that operates as a single buyer of various goods and services. This acts as an important market for other SSE producer and service organizations and has promoted principles and practice of fair trade and ethical consumption. Other sectors of SSE, such as providers of early childhood education have also been integrated in the day care system.

The case of Quebec illustrates the key role played by active citizenship and proactive adherence to solidarity principles in ensuring that the development of SSE and SSE policy enables transformative change, when understood as a process that locks in safeguards against the dilution or distortion of the SSE agenda as it is mainstreamed. Aspects of institutional and political culture associated with quadripartite dialogue involving government, labour, the private sector and civil society, as well as 'concertation' (discussed below), combine with the presence of a strong trades union and cooperative movements and community organization to

ensure a relatively high degree of ongoing policy support. While policy support for SSE declined following elections in 2014 that ushered in a new provincial government committed to reducing government spending, the impact on child care services and some other aspects of SSE was less than expected due to practices and processes that had been locked in over two decades.

### *Gender equality*

#### *SDG 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*

SDG 5 calls for women's economic empowerment via equal rights to economic resources and ownership and control of land and other assets, financial services and natural resources (target 5.a); full and effective participation in decision-making processes (target 5.5); and recognition, facilitation and adequate recompense for unpaid care work (target 5.4). As noted below, SSE can play a crucial role in relation to all three of these objectives.

As regards enhanced access to and control over economic and natural resources, cooperatives and other SSE organizations can facilitate access to finance, markets, skills development, agricultural land and forests; enhance collective bargaining power to negotiate more favourable prices, and improve access to information and transport to reduce transaction costs (Muradian 2015, Heyer et al. 2002).

While effective participation of women within SSE governance can be very uneven, improvements have been noted in recent years.<sup>32</sup> This is partly due to the fact that it has become an important issue area particularly in relation to cooperatives, and partly due to the rapid rise of SSE organizations whose membership mainly comprises women, for example, women-owned cooperatives, self-help groups, mutual health and savings and credit organizations in Africa, community forest groups in India and Nepal<sup>33</sup>, and social enterprises providing proximity services in western Europe or Quebec. It is important to note that the empowerment that derives from participation in SSE organizations can have important spillover effects in terms of women's emancipation and claims making in the domestic and public spheres.

SSE is important for attaining objectives associated with care and valuing domestic work. Many SSE organizations provide opportunities for better balancing responsibilities for remunerated work and unpaid care. Furthermore, a vibrant area of SSE expansion, particularly in developed countries, relates to social enterprises that provide local care services. Domestic workers are organizing in associations such as HomeNet or national associations that engage in collective bargaining (Budlender 2013).

Many governments are increasingly proactive in promoting policies, programmes and institutional arrangements that are geared towards these objectives. Such initiatives appear to bode well for realizing SDG 5. A closer look, however, at specific programmes suggests the scope for incrementalism and the limits of transformative change. Such limits are evident where:

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<sup>32</sup> In relation to the cooperative sector, see Schincariol and McMurtry. 2015.

<sup>33</sup> See Agarwal 2015.

- i) gender equality programmes related to social protection essentialize a woman's role as a care provider, with the tendency to focus on this aspect as the be all and end all of social and economic support aimed at women;
- ii) where 'participation' is limited to specific actors within the broader women's movement or where increased voice for women in decision-making forums is not matched by effective bargaining power, rendering 'voice' somewhat cosmetic;
- iii) government policy to empower women focuses only on economic empowerment and not political empowerment;
- iv) women's empowerment programmes enhance local access to physical resources but fail to address issues of patriarchy and ongoing structures of gender inequality within the family and community.

An international research project on this topic summed up the key concern as follows: "...while SSE can contribute to sustainable development and become an alternative to current economic (mal)functioning by offering innovative forms of production, consumption, exchange and financing, it can only be truly transformative if it also addresses the reorganization of social reproduction, integrating the political goals of gender equality and more equitable power relations." (UNRISD 2015)

#### *Women's empowerment in Nicaragua*

Several of these limitations and constraints affect the ambitious women's economic empowerment programmes that are being implemented in Nicaragua.<sup>34</sup> Two such programmes, Zero Hunger referred to earlier, and Zero Usury (*Usura Cero*), have made impressive gains in terms of incremental change. They have greatly facilitated access of some 300,000 low-income women (the equivalent of approximately 20 per cent of the economically active female population) to assets (mainly farm animals and roofing materials in the case of Zero Hunger) and concessionary credit for urban-based micro-enterprise activities (in the case of Zero Usury).

In the case of Zero Usury, while 72 per cent of women surveyed noted that the programme had generally met their expectations in terms of improved access to credit and expanded business opportunities, governance issues associated with the poor functioning of the 'solidarity groups' in which women beneficiaries were organized were not adequately addressed (Grupo Cívico Ético y Transparencia 2014).

In the case of Zero Hunger, most studies report a positive overall impact in terms of food production, consumption and selected aspects of women's empowerment (Cáceres et al. 2013, Kester 2010, IEEPP 2011, Grupo Venancia 2015). Apart from technical and political issues that have constrained or distorted progress,<sup>35</sup> other aspects have undermined the programme's transformative potential. The empowerment of the women involved in the programme is constrained by cultural and social factors, associated with *machismo* and women's roles and identities as 'housewives' rather than 'producers'; their lack of control over family budgets; and

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<sup>34</sup> This section draws heavily on Chamorro and Utting 2015.

<sup>35</sup> These included limited human resources for training and technical assistance, clientelism in the distribution of benefits in certain geographical areas, and reducing the range of benefits and programme goals in order to expand coverage of more selected benefits.

limited leadership roles in communities. Such gender issues have not received the attention they deserve (Grupo Venancia 2015). Furthermore, the collective action dimension associated with women's organizing (and organizing at multiple scales) remains underdeveloped. In short, cultural, social and power dimensions of gender inequality have been ignored, as has the political empowerment of women beneficiaries (Chamorro and Utting 2015).

### *Women's empowerment in Kerala, India*

One of the world's largest women's economic empowerment programmes related to SSE is found in the Indian State of Kerala. Initiated as a poverty eradication programme by the state government in the late 1990s, Kudumbashree developed into an extensive network in which some four million women organize collectively to enhance livelihood security and wellbeing through self-help initiatives, micro-enterprises and the development of cooperatives (Mukherjee-Reed 2015, Shihabudheen 2012).

Furthermore, they participate actively in planning and implementing development programmes and projects and stand as elected representatives in local bodies (Mukherjee-Reed 2015; Kumar and Jasheena 2016, Oommen 2007, 2014). Important in this regard is their participation in the implementation of the national social security and right to work scheme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) passed in 2005, which guarantees a rural household up to 100 days paid employment a year carrying out unskilled work in public works programmes. While the performance of the scheme has encountered serious problems throughout much of the country, a key differentiating factor relates to active local level participation in policy design and implementation, which can counter technocratic top-down planning, control by vested interests and corruption (Abraham 2016). Through Kudumbashree, not only did women participate actively in the scheme, thereby overcoming gender norms that constrained women's work in the public sphere, but they also participated actively in the planning process through local level structures (Mukherjee-Reed 2015).

In contrast to many development projects and programmes, which took off in the 1990s, centred on the promotion of women's self-help groups (SHGs) and micro-credit, Kudumbashree assumed various 'transformative' features. The key to success has been the emphasis placed not only on social protection and economic empowerment but also women's political empowerment. As noted by El Khoury: "Kerala's more holistic approach anticipates that only where linkages are made between literacy, political empowerment and economic empowerment can SHGs be successful in poverty alleviation and empowerment." (El Khoury 2015: 281).

Crucial in this regard is the participatory and decentralized governance structure of Kudumbashree, comprising neighbourhood groups, ward-level area development societies and community development societies at village or municipal levels. Decentralization transferred control of significant public funds to the local level and enabled women greater voice in local governance. As noted above, participation in such entities afford women significant leverage in planning and policy design and implementation, as well as increased capacity to access or mobilize resources for economic empowerment via productive activities.

Kudumbashree's transformative potential, however, confronts a number of challenges. While it has generated significant gains for women, progress is

constrained by structural and other conditions. As regards economic empowerment, income-generating activities are circumscribed by the low profit margins that typically characterise the economic sectors in which they operate, the precariousness of demand or orders from private firms in the value chain, unwillingness of landlords to rent land, and lack of certainty about the future of government programmes (Mukherjee-Reed 2015). The transformative potential related to political empowerment and decentralized governance is constrained by the nature of the relationship with the state. As Devaki and Thampi point out, in that relationship women are often positioned more as a needs-related interest group – as enablers and consumers of goods and services and other economic resources – than as critical political activists. Within such an institutional arrangement – one created by the state – criticism of the ‘patriarchal mainstream public sphere’ can be muffled (Devika and Thampi 2007). Furthermore, traditional gender relations constrain participation. As a study of the impacts of Kudumbashree in one village reveals: “Property laws, the kinship system and family structure also restrict [women’s] access to economic resources.” Women’s roles remain closely linked to domesticity, which not only constrains participation in the public sphere but also ensures that any such participation increases the so-called double burden of work in both the domestic and public spheres (Scaria 2014).

Certain features of politics and bureaucracy have also undermined the programme’s effectiveness and participation. These include the domination of local governance structures by one political party, corruption, clientelism, vote bank politics, turf battles among government entities, bureaucratic capture of planning processes, problems of co-ordination within the multi-tier governance system, politicization of recruitment criteria, underserved communities such as tribal communities and fisherfolk, greater centralization in several areas of (national) government, and dependence of local government institutions on state funding.<sup>36</sup>

### *Employment and inclusive growth*

*SDG 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.*

In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, an increasing number of governments have turned to SSE as a means of generating employment. This reflects growing awareness of the potential role that SSE can play in both social inclusion and transitioning from conditions of precarious employment associated with the informal economy towards decent work.<sup>37</sup> Particularly important in this regard is the role of social enterprises in work integration associated with the unemployed, the disabled and other disadvantaged groups; and the importance of cooperatives in employment. Recent data related to cooperatives reveal that in 79 countries surveyed, employment associated with cooperatives involves approximately 250 million people (Roelants et al. 2015). In a context of stagnant or declining employment in Europe, nearly half of the social enterprises surveyed in another study increased employment (OECD 2013). In the OECD countries, work integration is a major SSE-related activity (OECD 2014). Whether through local government initiatives, as in Seoul, Republic of Korea; national programmes, such

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<sup>36</sup> See Devika and Thampi, 2007, Kumar and Jasheena 2016, Oommen 2014, Shihabudheen 2013, Williams et al. 2011

<sup>37</sup> According to the ILO, the number of people experiencing precarious employment amounts to approximately 1.5 billion (ILO 2013).

as *Argentina Trabaja*, Costa Rica's National Strategy for Employment and Production, Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment in South Africa and the Kenyan Youth Enterprise Development Fund,<sup>38</sup>; or specific projects, as in Tunisia and Algeria,<sup>39</sup> government institutions in several other countries are turning to SSE to boost employment, including youth employment.

Such developments bode well for transformative change. They may not only result in incremental improvements related to employment generation and labour standards; they also point to a potential structural change whereby scaling up SSE serves i) to counter the tendency associated with contemporary capitalist development of growing precarious employment associated with informalization, ii) the inability of the formal sector to fulfil its conventional role of absorbing so-called surplus labour, for example, from sectors such as agriculture, and iii) jobless growth associated technological change. How effective, then, have public policies been in enhancing the role of SSE in employment generation and decent work? The cases of three countries – Italy, South Africa and Republic of Korea – where public policy associated with SSE has emphasized its role in relation to employment generation shed light on this question (Utting 2017).

In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, the government in Italy (along with several others in the European Union), turned to SSE in an effort to realise objectives related to employment creation and work integration. Building on laws that recognized and promoted worker buyouts, social cooperatives and social enterprises, various forms of support have been provided, including preferential procurement and subsidized loans. In South Africa, the government's New Growth Path Framework of 2011 emphasized the potential of social economy in job creation and anticipated 260,000 new employment opportunities related to SSE by 2020. In recent decades the objectives and nature of government support in Republic of Korea for SSE have also evolved in this direction. Both the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 seriously challenged the so-called 'East Asian miracle' centred on an industrialization model that guaranteed employment and rapidly rising levels of living for broad sectors of the population. The state has turned to the social economy as a possible solution to deal with jobless growth and increasing social polarization through employment creation, the provision of social services, revitalizing communities and social inclusion.

While employment promotion under conditions of decent work, and more specifically work integration, are important for achieving SDG 8, various tensions have arisen that impact the quality of SSE and its transformative potential.

### *Jobs versus capabilities and decent work*

Government initiatives to promote employment and work integration often take place within a macro-policy environment that simultaneously promotes labour market flexibilization and de-regulation that can undermine labour standards and

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<sup>38</sup> See Wanyama 2013

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/projects/lang-en/index.htm>

labour rights. In such contexts there is a risk that jobs rather than the more encompassing objective of decent work become the prime policy objective.<sup>40</sup>

Promoting decent work within SSE can be a major challenge. As noted earlier, some large cooperatives and social enterprises, for example, face competitive pressures that may cause them to shift the balance between efficiency and equity objectives in favour of the former. Furthermore, given the nature of the organizations and enterprises involved, SSE constantly faces the challenge of how to upgrade working conditions. Such entities are often located in low-value segments of the value chain, lack bargaining power and rely on volunteer labour. And they often involve women producers and workers who are marginalized or subordinated in terms of access to resources, legal rights and cultural norms (Nippierd 2002).

The global report on gender equality and cooperatives, referred to above, notes that while co-operatives are often active in member education and training, "... almost 50 per cent of survey respondents reported that training sessions relevant to women's empowerment and gender equality are never held within the co-operatives with which they are most familiar. Another 60 per cent stated that training sessions specifically for women members are never conducted." Schincariol and McMurtry 2015)

While financial incentives can lead to a rapid increase in cooperatives and social enterprises and related employment, the lack of a comprehensive support regime can lead to high failure rates. In South Africa, for example, new laws and incentives led to the rapid growth in the number of cooperatives. The failure rate, however, was extremely high (Steinman 2017). This was due to limited managerial skills and policy and institutional support, as well as lack of awareness or uptake of cooperative values and organizational practices. Survival rates were as low as 12 per cent in 2011, later rising as policy and institutional support for cooperatives increased. Recent years have also seen the expansion of new forms of social enterprise, including fair trade organizations, agro-ecology producers and associations, and activities associated with social entrepreneurship (Littlewood and Holt 2015). Despite the emphasis within the 2003 Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) agenda<sup>41</sup> on small enterprise development and black entrepreneurship, the growth of social enterprises has been slower than that of cooperatives and non-profit organizations (NPOs). This is due to the absence of a legal category that recognizes and caters to the specificity of social enterprises; tax legislation that discourages non-profits and social enterprises from trading; lack of institutional support for social enterprises; and the reluctance of existing Business Development Services institutions, to engage other than traditional enterprises (Steinman 2011).

### *SSE versus SMEs and the fourth sector*

In many countries public policy support for SSE is part and parcel of enhanced government support for small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) development. Just as the role and purpose of SSE can be diluted when SSE organizations and

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<sup>40</sup> The concept of decent work, as defined by the ILO, comprises four elements of employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue.

<sup>41</sup> By targeting micro and small enterprises, the BBBEE Act and subsequent codes of practice sought to address criticisms of the previous Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) agenda that had more of an elite and corporate focus.

enterprises are categorized as fourth sector entities, as examined above, the same may occur in relation to SME development.

In some contexts, subsuming SSE under SME development can serve to mobilize financial and other resources to support SSE. In Costa Rica, for example, constraints on government spending have made it difficult for some newly established state institutions to access funding for SSE. Channelling funds to SSE from already existing programmes targeting SMEs provided an alternative means of supporting SSE (Utting and Morales 2016).

Similar effects are evident in South Africa. Important in this regard is the role of the Small Business Development Agency, which was legally established in 2004 under the Department for Small Business Development (DSBD), and several DSBD programmes. These include the Cooperative Incentive Scheme, aimed at creating competitive cooperatives within the context of black economic empowerment; and the National Informal Business Upliftment Strategy, aimed at enhancing the viability of hitherto precarious informal economy producers and entrepreneurs, in particular women, youth and persons with disabilities in townships and rural areas.<sup>42</sup> But training related to cooperatives and social enterprises has, until recently, tended to conform to technical specifications typically associated with small and medium-sized enterprises rather than SSE enterprises (Derr 2013, Fury 2010).

Other issues have been noted in the case of Republic of Korea. A policy of applying strict criteria for certifying social enterprises that are eligible for financial incentives has attempted to protect the social enterprise brand. It runs the risk, however, of generating a number of contradictory effects. As noted in an OECD study (Mendell et al. 2010):

- the criteria tend to favour established for-profit enterprises, which tend to be companies or corporations, as opposed to cooperatives or non-profit organizations.
- once government subsidies end, the entities in question may abandon their social mission, thereby undermining the objective of the subsidy which had been to create permanent social enterprises to support the disadvantaged;
- the fact that cooperatives can only bid for government contracts as a social enterprise can cause some to dilute what may be a well-functioning co-operative model;
- government sponsored social enterprise can create a culture of dependency, thereby stifling innovation and autonomy.

#### *Social sector employment versus multi-sectoral development and the future of work*

In both Italy and Republic of Korea, public policy efforts to harness SSE for employment creation have focused primarily on social services (EC 2016, Choi et al. 2017). While this sectoral focus may yield obvious benefits in terms of mobilizing resources for social protection for underserved populations and territories, it runs the risk that social enterprises will be “ghettoised’ as only serving the disadvantaged or as a welfare-to-work programme”, rather than seeing SSE as concerned more broadly with multiple sectors catering to the public interest (Mendell et al. 2010). In many countries, public policies supporting SSE

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<sup>42</sup> See: <http://www.dsbd.gov.za/index.html>

organizations and enterprises focus on their role as service providers. Those producing goods, often receive far less support.<sup>43</sup>

Given that SSE is fundamentally concerned with distributional justice, countering the externalities associated with commodification and local economic development, it calls for an enabling policy environment that promotes a multi-sectoral approach. As pointed out in relation to Republic of Korea (Mendell et al. 2010):

“Recognising the potential for social enterprises to emerge in all sectors is important to integrate their activities into socio-economic development strategies for local communities. This link to strategic local development strategies is missing in the current focus on the enterprises individually and on those engaged primarily in the production of services. It also contributes to an image of social enterprise that does not recognise it as an alternative business form complementary to the private sector that can compete in the market, meeting broader socio-economic or triple-bottom-line objectives.”

Public policy in Italy aimed at supporting social enterprise was similarly constrained during the 1990s. Over time, however, legal and policy reforms have encouraged a broader approach. Referring to a law enacted in 2006, a European Commission report notes:

“The innovative character of the law consists of the opening up towards new sectors of activity other than welfare, and the variety of the types of enterprises eligible to become social enterprises. As compared to the social cooperative legal form, the social enterprise legal category covers a wider range of activities, namely: (i) welfare; (ii) health; (iii) social care; (iv) education, instruction and professional training; (v) environmental and ecosystem protection; (vi) development of cultural heritage; (vii) social tourism; (viii) academic and post-academic education; (ix) research and delivery of cultural services; (x) extra-curricular training; and (xi) support for social enterprises.” (EC 2016:15).

Whether diversification can actually occur in the context of dependency on the state remains an open question. Such dependency often facilitates the scaling up of SSE in some sectors but, as has been pointed out in relation to Italy: “... the strong dependence of social enterprises on public policies has also contextually contributed to constraining their development. Th[is] integration ... has progressively induced them to sideline their ability to discover new needs and meet the demand for unmet services better than public providers.” (EC 2016)

A transformative approach not only promotes the role of SSE in multi-sectoral development; it also recognizes the potential of SSE in the context of changing investment, production and consumption patterns associated with greening the economy and so-called post-industrial society. As Carina Millstone (2015) observes, despite some significant hurdles, one possibility for future growth lies within the expanding fields of green economy (renewable energy, more environmentally friendly transport, green buildings), digital enterprise, healthy living, and nutrition and community healthcare provisioning. This type of transformation and sectors

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<sup>43</sup> Mendell et al. 2010 make this point referring to Republic of Korea.

involved may provide important opportunities for value driven, localised and community-centred enterprises. If consumption patterns were to change in ways conducive to sustainability, SSE organisations could position themselves as “the natural providers of goods and services to respond to these new considerations of the consumer-citizen”.

A transformative perspective would also situate SSE in the ‘future of work’ debate which has a longer-term horizon and addresses structural issues (Borzaga et al. 2017). This approach contrasts with current public policy discourse that tends to position SSE as a partner in achieving short- and medium-term policy objectives to address employment problems linked to the effects of recession. The analytical foundation of this debate has two perspectives. One concerns the fact that globalization and technological developments such as automation have resulted in an increase in both un-/under-employment and conditions of precarious employment associated with diminished labour rights and benefits. Another, recognizes a broader crisis of capitalism that manifests itself in structural inequalities and the inability to reproduce and expand conditions of decent work (Coraggio 2013, Morais et al. 2017, Utting 2015). SSE is positioned, then, as a potentially significant means of generating employment under conditions of decent work to address a long-term structural problem (Borzaga et al. 2017). From this perspective, interest in SSE relates not only to conventional sectors such as food, agriculture, care and social services, but to multiple economic sectors such as sustainable tourism, renewables and cultural industries.

## **Concluding Remarks**

As implied throughout this paper, SSE is well-placed to facilitate the attainment of the SDGs given its emphasis not only on specific goals but also integrated development (balancing economic, social and environmental dimensions<sup>44</sup>) and active citizenship. To the extent that recent efforts by governments to promote SSE can mobilize resources for the development of SSE and level the playing field for SSE organizations and enterprises, they are to be welcomed.

The above analysis, however, suggests that the task of crafting an enabling policy environment for SSE confronts major challenges. Drawing mainly on examples of countries with governments that have been relatively proactive in terms of recognizing and supporting SSE, we have seen that the upshot of such efforts is often partial gains associated with incremental change. Particularly relevant in this regard are advances related to work integration, social service provision, preferential credit and procurement, small enterprise development, women’s economic empowerment and food security.

Far more problematic is the challenge of realizing the transformative vision of the SDGs. This, we have argued, requires both integrated approaches and transformations in the structures that reproduce and deepen inequality, exclusion and environmental degradation. Such transformations relate to patterns of investment and accumulation associated with highly unequal distribution of assets and income, the carbon economy, patriarchy and so forth. Promoting SSE in order to realize the transformational vision of the SDGs also requires a broad policy approach that recognizes the multi-faceted potential of SSE related to the different

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<sup>44</sup> To this standard tripartite conceptualization we can also add cultural dimensions (Saner 2015)

dimensions of sustainable development and, more specifically, its role in relation to multiple economic sectors. Furthermore, it demands a new politics of change, where subaltern groups can effectively mobilize, exert claims, enhance bargaining power, build coalitions and shape the policy process.

In Part 1 it was argued that two overarching constraints relate to instrumentalization and isomorphism. Regarding the former, we saw that governments often support aspects of SSE for quite specific ends, for example, work integration, supporting a particular aspect of social service provisioning or boosting productivity in agriculture. Furthermore, this may occur in a context where the state is down-sizing its role in the economy. While government support can play a key role in taking SSE to another level in terms of scale, this may be at the cost of side-lining certain transformative elements of SSE. Additional concerns relate to issues of dependency, reduced autonomy and innovative capacity as SSE organizations and enterprises enter into contractual relations with the state to provide specific services.

Although state engagement with the SSE agenda raises its visibility in the policy process, it is often reinterpreted quite narrowly in terms of business with a social purpose. Goals associated with productivity and efficiency can marginalize others associated with redistribution and equity. Bureaucratization may stifle innovation. Such developments are central to the issue of isomorphism, where SSE organizations and enterprises assume features of conventional business organizations or New Public Management.

These tensions were examined in relation to four sets of SDGs. In the case of food security and sustainable agriculture, we saw that agricultural cooperatives, women's self-help groups, solidarity finance, fair trade networks and so forth, position SSE as a key means of implementation for realizing SDG 2. The limits of transformative change were discussed via the examples of fair trade and Ecuador's food sovereignty agenda. Market- and corporate-friendly standards and governance arrangements have diluted some aspects of the original pro-poor and agro-ecological agenda within some sectors of the fair trade movement. Public policy in Ecuador has tended to lean towards goals associated more with productivity than redistributive justice for peasant and indigenous populations.

Concerning social service provisioning (SDGs 3 and 4), notwithstanding some important differences in approach, the cases of Italy, Republic of Korea and Uruguay revealed tensions that can arise when public policy for SSE centres on social service provisioning in a context of welfare state restructuring. Issues of dependency on the state, bureaucratization of SSE organizations and reduced autonomy were also noted.

The discussion of gender equality and women's economic empowerment (SDG 5) identified some notable advances in countries or states such as Kerala, Nicaragua, and South Africa. It also highlighted key constraints on transformative change in contexts where cultural norms that inhibit women's empowerment are not challenged or where state capacity to meet ambitious goals is weak.

Finally, in relation to employment and decent work (SDG 8), the discussion of Italy, South Africa and Republic of Korea noted the limits of approaches that prioritize job creation as opposed to decent work, small enterprise development as opposed to

SSE, and employment or work integration in a narrow range of sectors as opposed to the broader economy.

Whether public policy for SSE leans towards incrementalism or transformation has much to do with four variables that determine the quality of SSE policy in terms of effective design and implementation (Utting 2017). These include i) state capacity (e.g. budgetary, technical and administrative resources and competencies) to effectively design and implement laws, policies and programmes, ii) the degree of policy coherence, understood in terms of whether different government policies are complementary and synergistic or contradictory from the perspective of SSE development, iii) participation, that is, the extent to which SSE actors, intermediary organizations, networks and social movements effectively influence and shape policy design, implementation and review through diverse forms of contestation, advocacy, dialogue, bargaining and ‘co-construction’ of policy, and iv) the sustainability or durability of policy and institutionalization in contexts where political parties and leaders that have been supportive of SSE leave office or where fiscal and other resources used to support SSE suddenly decline.

The state of play regarding each of these variables can vary significantly by country, even in ones where governments have been relatively proactive in relation to SSE policy. While additional research is required on these aspects, Figure 2 provides a rough approximation of the situation in seven countries. It can be noted that no two countries are positioned similarly in relation to all four variables. Furthermore, within some countries, such as Brazil and Republic of Korea, we see significant variations in relation to specific variables.

**Figure 2: Assessing the quality of public policy for SSE**

	State capacity	Policy coherence	Participation	Sustainability
Brazil	++	++	+++	+
Costa Rica	++	+++	++	++
Nicaragua	++	++	++	++
Philippines	+	++	++	++
South Africa	+	+	+	++
Republic of Korea	+++	++	+	+++
Italy	+++	++	+++	+++

+: Relatively low

++: Moderate or mixed (i.e. a combination of positive and negative aspects)

+++ : Relatively high

Source: Utting 2017

As regards the analysis of SSE and SDG performance in this paper, in Ecuador we saw that issues of participation and policy coherence were particularly important for understanding the limits of transformative change. In Nicaragua, constraints related to state capacity and effective participation explain much of the limits of the Zero Hunger programme.

While the performance of states with regard to capacity and participation varies significantly by country, a more common problem relates to policy (in)coherence.

The instrumentalization of SSE often occurs within a context of economic and financial liberalization, privatization and, in some cases, austerity measures that reduce state budgets and other resources. Such contexts can seriously constrain the capacity of states to mobilize resources to support SSE. Additionally, macro-economic, trade and investment policy, financial regulations and social and labour market policies can undermine the development of SSE or skew resource allocation towards other actors and sectors. In such contexts, SSE may continue to operate on a very uneven playing field that favours particular enterprise and economic sectors where SSE is a minor player.

The issue of sustainability or durability of public policy for SSE affects countries such as Brazil where recent political changes raise doubts about the durability of SSE policy support. It is also an issue in Nicaragua in the context of the sudden decline of financing generated through the regional south-south co-operation accord with Venezuela, known as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), which mobilized resources for SSE development amongst other programmes.

How might a more transformative agenda be promoted? Key questions for policy makers, activists and academics concerned with these issues relate to the following:

- **Narrow versus holistic approach:** Are governments adopting a comprehensive approach or picking and choosing among SSE principles, sectors, types of organizations and enterprises and sustainable development dimensions;
- **Top-down decision-making or cosmetic participation versus effective stakeholder engagement** and active citizenship at multiple scales (local, sub-national and national, regional and international): Are SSE actors and related social movements, and representative intermediary organizations, playing a key role in policy making, implementation, monitoring and review at different levels of governance?
- **Rhetoric versus effective resource mobilization:** Are levels of funding, human resources and technical support for SSE significant and commensurate with stated policy objectives?
- **Policy coherence versus policy incoherence:** Are policies aimed at promoting SSE reinforced or undermined by other dimensions of social and (macro-) economic policy and development strategy?
- **Short-term versus long-term vision** and institutionalization of policy support: Are the political, legal and institutional foundations to ensure ongoing policy support being constructed?

The above analysis of SSE policy as it relates to the SDGs has highlighted numerous instances of government action that bodes well from the perspective of transformative change. They include:

- the prioritization of SSE programmes within the portfolio of national development programmes, as in Nicaragua;
- the shift, noted in Italy, from a narrow 'social service' focus towards a multi-sectoral approach;

- incorporating SSE within an approach that seeks to expand rather than constrict the welfare state and social policy, as in Republic of Korea, Costa Rica and Kerala, India;
- securing long-term support for SSE via institutionalized legally-mandated financing mechanisms (as opposed to ad hoc annual budgetary transfers), as in Costa Rica and Italy;
- consolidating regional solidarity initiatives of the type that have benefitted the development of SSE in Nicaragua (through ALBA) and Italy (through the EU);
- locking in long-term support for SSE via law and multi-party commitment as has occurred in Quebec and Italy;
- enabling not only women's economic but also political empowerment and participation in policy design and implementation, as in the case of Kudumbashree in Kerala, India;
- overcoming the fragmentation and divisions or other inherent weaknesses within advocacy for SSE through effective social mobilization, coalitions, networking and alliances, as in Brazil and Italy.

A good starting point for strategizing a transformative policy approach would be to envisage a scenario where the various elements, identified above, related to questions of capacity, participation and sustaining long-term support, come together in specific country contexts.<sup>45</sup> The challenge for governments that commit to SSE in their policy discourse is to advance on multiple fronts simultaneously.

Often the elephant in the room is the issue of policy (in)coherence. The point made earlier, referencing Coraggio 2012, that progress in relation to the development of SSE is not only about growing or replicating SSE organizations and enterprises but also systemic change, is important to remember. Worldviews, analytical approaches or concepts such as food sovereignty, political ecology, feminist economics, *Buen Vivir* or democratic socialism are important for keeping the spotlight on the elephant, namely, issues of economic growth, commodification, investment/production/consumption patterns, asset concentration, gender relations, discrimination and skewed patterns of distribution and power relations that reproduce inequality, vulnerability and social and environmental injustice.

As noted in the Introduction, the above critique of is not meant to suggest that all that is 'transformative' is unproblematic or that significant gains related to social inclusion and sustainable development cannot be achieved through incrementalism. Furthermore, an incremental approach may be key for building the broad-based coalitions and alliances that are needed to energize, democratize and sustain and the process of change. But as the SSE agenda is mainstreamed, it is important that policy makers and advocates for government support for SSE be aware of the tensions affecting public policy that can undermine the transformative potential of SSE and the various means of addressing such limits. While the nature of the risks and solutions will vary significantly by country and region, this paper hopes to have shed light on likely issue areas and key factors that explain variations in the performance of public policy aimed to supporting SSE.

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<sup>45</sup> See also Utting 2016b and 2017

As SSE enters the mainstream, as civil society networks call on governments to provide support, and as an increasing number of governments adopt policies aimed at enabling and scaling up SSE, it is important to identify, analyse and debate the implications of mainstreaming SSE for realizing the transformational vision of the SDGs.

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