

CO-CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC POLICY FOR THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

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This issue of *Universitas Forum* contains abridged versions of background working papers and country case studies prepared for the International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy (FIESS) held in Montreal (Canada) in October 2011. I had the pleasure of coordinating the Research Committee of FIESS and setting the parameters for these papers, in collaboration with academic researchers and practitioners in the social economy in numerous countries in the North and in the South. The Forum was a great success; attendance surpassed all expectations. Over 1600 participants from 63 countries came together to share knowledge and experiences in the social and solidarity economy over several days. In addition to numerous workshops, forums organized by social movements and plenary sessions, ample time and space was provided for informal meetings to deepen understanding of initiatives, build relationships, seize opportunities to converse with government representatives and supporting institutions from numerous countries and feel part of a growing international social and solidarity economy movement.

The focus of FIESS was on public policy and specifically on the co-construction of public policy: where is this occurring?; in what countries?; in what sectors?; what are the processes of co-construction in various national contexts? These and others were the questions being asked and the impact of these discussions was larger than the important sharing of information. As we hoped, these were leveraging opportunities to press governments that were not present - and even those that were - to embark on new methods of policy design and implementation. In Quebec, the impact was clear as our government now proudly spreads its message of collaboration with and support for the social economy internationally. This is not to suggest that there is no work to be done: quite the contrary. The success of FIESS was to raise the awareness among public figures of the role of the social and solidarity economy in the generation of wealth in their respective countries and globally. The greater success, in our view, was, of course, to demonstrate how the social and solidarity economy is challenging the dominant paradigm with the contrast of its lived realities. An economy committed to social justice, greater equity and respect for the planet requires a rearrangement of economic resources embedded in those values. The social and solidarity economy provides a blueprint for this reconfiguration.

In today's context, this needs no emphasis. The social and solidarity economy, once perceived as an economy of the poor and marginalized, or as a residual and unproductive

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economy that cannot contribute to economic growth, is recognized today as a major contributor to the economy in countries in the north and the south. Moreover, it recognizes the plurality and diversity of different national and social contexts that in many countries includes non-market production and exchange, often referred to as the "popular economy". The overall hope and drive is to construct an alternative economy based on values that decry the catastrophic social, economic and political conditions found in too many countries, only to be reinforced by global institutions that do not challenge these intolerable conditions head on. We read the despair of movements participating in Rio + 20 which has expressed a commitment to the status quo and its emphasis on markets and prices. By further commodifying nature, Rio+20 is a missed opportunity to bring together world leaders from all spheres of society - government, business, social actors and movements - to draft an agenda for future generations that is predicated on a common understanding that "business as usual" cannot continue. The risks of this approach are documented and well known. The risks of embedding deeper inequalities are also understood and yet they are not on the agenda. This is remarkable given the state of the global economy and its urgent need for reform.

The social and solidarity economy has grown internationally and its capacity to contest the dominant paradigm has grown as well. In certain countries, it has achieved the status and recognition it warrants; in others, it is recognized for its capacity to meet needs unmet by the market nor by the state and increasingly as an alternative to "business as usual". In many countries, ministries and/or secretariats have been created to represent the social and solidarity economy; in others, legislation distinguishes the enterprises and initiatives in the social and solidarity economy from other business forms, principally private enterprise. In still other countries, the social and solidarity economy is embedded in the constitution. We are left with hope and concern. I hesitate to use the word despair. The hope is that the evolution and growth of the social and solidarity economy will challenge mainstream thinking as its sheer presence, capacity and political legitimacy makes it impossible to pursue a destructive agenda replete with crises and a dismal lack of solutions. Is this wishful thinking? I don't think so. Although Rio +20 is a huge disappointment, the rising opposition to this thinking cannot be continue to be ignored whether it is in the form of the Occupy movements around the world or in the form of concrete examples of an economic alternative. This is occurring and FIESS provided a critical and dynamic space to build this alternative, an international "agora". In the context of growing oppositional movements, gatherings such as FIESS demonstrate that opposition and construction of another economy are occurring in tandem.

The background papers

A Research Committee of the FIESS, made of academics and representatives from Canadian and international organizations, was convened to prepare five working papers on the Forum's themes. These background documents are available thanks to the generous support of four major partners of FIESS: the International Development Research Center of Canada (IDRC), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Center for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

The objective of the working papers, written by experts on each of the five FIESS themes, was to provide an overview of the challenges and issues raised by each theme: territory and local development; innovation and collective entrepreneurship; solidarity finance; work and employment and food security and sovereignty. Through the case studies, they also analyzed the relations between government and civil society in several countries that are useful illustrations of collaborative approaches to policy formation. These papers document experiences in many parts of the world that have significant heuristic value; they are not presented as best practices or as models to replicate. Rather, they situate the discussions in different national contexts and introduce pertinent theoretical debates on the role of the social and solidarity economy today. As the social and solidarity economy continues to evolve, these papers are offered as a “work in progress”.

Specific working themes

Territory and local development: the social and solidarity economy is above all the outcome of collective action at the local level, and the most successful initiatives are rooted locally. This theme was central to the Forum, and it is within this theme that the role of public powers and local actors was broached.

Innovation and collective entrepreneurship: the social and solidarity economy is characterized by new entrepreneurial initiatives in every sector, through a collective approach which includes social, economic and environmental commitments. Innovation is at the core of this collective entrepreneurship. Whether it be new legal forms, new partnerships being developed, new ways of meeting needs or new production modes involving further workers, there is no doubt that the social and solidarity economy generates innovations. These innovations are developed within many sectors (housing, tourism, etc.) and often lead to the implementation of public policies that ensure them a better stability.

Solidarity finance and trade: access to capital suited to the needs of the social and solidarity economy remains the greatest challenge in every country. Also problematic are the availability of suitable financial products, tools for supporting emerging enterprises, marketing, market access, etc. Within this theme, researchers explored the links between the social and solidarity economy, local markets, procurement programs, and responsible investment.

Work and employment: wherever it develops, the social and solidarity economy addresses a need for job creation. It also promotes democratization in the work place. In southern countries, processes of formalization of popular economy activities leading to the creation of decent jobs are increasingly taking this path. Additionally, in several countries, the labour movement plays an active role in the development of the social and solidarity economy. For this reason, the role of unions in the support of social and solidarity enterprises creation and local and regional development must be analyzed in more detail.

Food security and sovereignty: the issue of food security and sovereignty is approached very differently in countries in the North and in the South. Several developing countries have designed and adopted food security policies thanks to a dialogue with civil society organizations. Within this context, this theme addresses the emergence of social and solidarity economy enterprises producing and transforming food, and beyond that the contribution of the social and solidarity economy to food security and sovereignty.

Country case studies

A number of case studies were also produced for FIESS that are available in their complete version on the web site of the *Chantier de l'économie sociale* (<http://reliess.org/centre-de-documentation/>). The case studies are not limited to a single experience within each country but include a variety of initiatives (national, regional or municipal) that provide an overview of the current and potential partnerships between government and civil society. The case studies document a broad array of experiences in six countries on four continents where the social and solidarity economy has made significant progress (Canada, Bolivia, Brazil, Mali, South Africa and Spain). More specifically, they describe the processes underlying the co-construction of public policy that address one or more of the forum's themes. Each case study was co-authored by practitioners and local researchers and coordinated by the Research Committee, reflecting the commitment of the Forum to develop and nurture an ongoing dialogue between the different actors engaged in the social and solidarity economy and to create opportunities for collaboration.

We welcome the opportunity to now publish abridged versions of these papers in *Universitas Forum*, expand the dialogue generated by FIESS and contribute to the growth of social and solidarity initiatives throughout the world.