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Global Vision for a Social Solidarity Economy: Convergences and Differences in Concepts, Definitions and Frameworks

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Introduction

This paper is part of an ongoing process of discussion and debate about the concepts, definitions and framework of the social solidarity economy (SSE). RIPESS (Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of SSE) has engaged in this process from its first Global Forum on SSE in 1997 through to the present. The vision of SSE has been steadfast, but underlying concepts, definitions and frameworks have, and continue to evolve. In 2012, the RIPESS Board agreed to make the RIPESS Global Vision one of the main themes of the 5th Meeting of the SSE which was held in Manila in October 2013. We organized a global consultation process in which an earlier draft of this paper was widely circulated and each continent took on the responsibility of moving the dialogue through a mixture of live meetings, conference calls and electronic communication. There was also an electronic forum on the RIPESS website that was open for comments from anyone throughout the world. At the Manila Meeting there were around 100 people who participated in a lively and productive World Café exercise to further explore, discuss and share their views on the meaning of the SSE. This paper builds on the whole of this process, as well as the [RIPESS Charter](#) that was adopted in 2008 which lays out our values, mission and vision.

Due to its strong roots in grassroots practice throughout the world, it is unavoidable that there are differences due to culture, history, actors, and language. Sometimes, what appears at first to be a difference melts away with further discussion. Thus, to the greatest extent possible, we seek to find convergences, but also honor and respect the differences that remain.

RIPESS is a network of continental networks that connects social and solidarity economy networks throughout the world. The continental networks – Latin America & Caribbean (RIPESS-LAC), Europe (RIPESS-EU), North America (RIPESS-NA), Africa (RAESS- African SSE Network) and Asia (ASEC- Asian Solidarity Economy Council) – in turn, bring together national and sectoral networks. RIPESS believes in the importance of global solidarity in order to build and strengthen an economy that puts people and planet front and center. RIPESS

organizes Global Forums on SSE every four years and is a nexus for learning, information sharing and international collaboration.

This paper begins with an examination of SSE as a pathway to transformative and systemic change. Then, it re-affirms the values of SSE; explores the diversity of actors, sectors and practices constituting SSE; strategies used by SSE movements; and finally how it relates to key concepts.

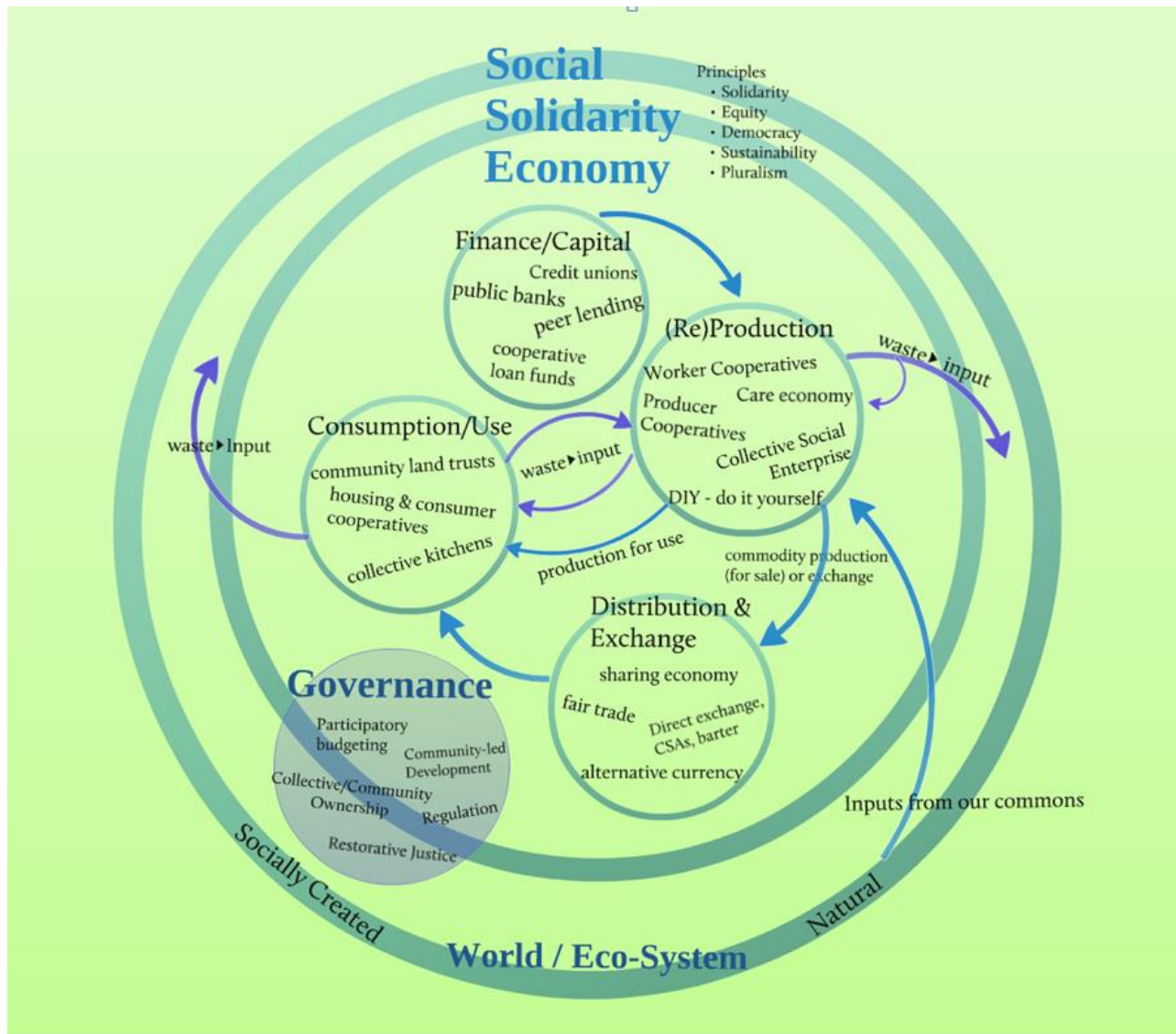
1) Transformative, systemic change

The Social Solidarity Economy is an alternative to capitalism and other authoritarian, state-dominated economic systems. In SSE ordinary people play an active role in shaping all of the dimensions of human life: economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental. SSE exists in all sectors of the economy—production, finance, distribution, exchange, consumption and governance (see Diagram 1 below). It also aims to transform the social and economic system that includes public, private and third sectors, which we explore in detail below. SSE is not only about the poor, but strives to overcome inequalities, which includes all classes of society. SSE has the ability to take the best practices that exist in our present system (such as efficiency, use of technology and knowledge) and transform them to serve the welfare of the community based on different values and goals.

SSE movements must be careful to avoid being coopted in their values by non-SSE perspectives. SSE seeks systemic transformation that goes beyond superficial change in which the root oppressive structures and fundamental issues remain intact. Examples range from corporate greenwashing to strengthening the welfare state while ignoring underlying structures that maintain or intensify inequality.

The actors of SSE should not romanticize ourselves as "being good". We should *actively re-create* our aspirations, and learn to prevent the reproduction of sexism, racism, homophobia, classism and other sources of discrimination and oppression.

Diagram 1 – Social Solidarity Economy



Source: U.S. Solidarity Economy Network / Centre for Popular Economics

Note: This image is taken from a Prezi that was developed by US SEN and the Center for Popular Economics. It therefore includes some examples that may be more familiar in the US than in other countries. Governance has a special position in that it shapes the economic system on a macro-level (eg. national or international) as well as the micro-level (enterprise or community).

2) Values

Social solidarity economy is an ethical and values-based approach to economic development that prioritizes the welfare of people and planet, over profits and blind growth. We re-affirm the values expressed in the RIPESS Charter which includes:

Humanism

We put human beings, and their dignity, culture and full development at the center of our efforts. We are committed to the construction and promotion of projects aimed at building capacities for the individual and the collective development and well-being of people. For this reason, we promote the unrestricted respect, full exercise and interrelatedness of the civic, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights recognized by the various charters and international human rights instruments.

Democracy

We believe that the world, with its diverse societies, work and living environments, and organizations, should be built in a participatory manner, based on the respect for the right of individuals and peoples to decide on their own development. We understand politics as a framework for horizontal relations between persons and social collectives in their quest to satisfy their common needs. We promote participatory democracy based on the participation of citizens in political decision-making at all levels of the public space. We also advocate an economic democracy based on the capacity of people to make decisions about subjects which concern them as workers, consumers, producers and reproducers, as well as on the public character of decisions relating to what is produced, how it is produced, why it is produced, and how profits are redistributed or invested.

Solidarity

We emphasize solidarity as an element that allows us to recognize ourselves in relation to others and to be concerned about their well-being. This implies mobilizing resources and establishing relations with other social collectives and movements in an effort to form an extensive network of people and organizations geared toward building a fairer, more democratic and equalitarian world.

Inclusiveness

We are a network open to the range of practices of solidarity in the economy, which emerge from different realities and sectors. In this perspective, we aim at establishing dialogue based on the respect for ideological differences and the quest for consensus.

Subsidiarity

We recognize and value the capacities and knowledge of individuals and groups to solve their problems and decide on their own projects. In our intervention, we seek to assert the grass-roots development, promoting organizations and associations to overcome common problems and openness to ever greater endeavors.

Diversity

We promote respect for ethnical and cultural diversity, and sexual identity. We also promote and respect the diverse expressions of entrepreneurship in responding as best as possible to existing reality. We encourage the diversity of social solidarity economy players of all sectors of society to be represented and able to defend their interests, particularly women and the social groups marginalized by the current system.

Creativity

We promote innovation and the originality of concepts and discourses with an eye to encouraging the construction of innovative and critical practices and experiences that contribute best to social change. We also promote the adoption of appropriate technologies that respond to the particularity of problems, with the resources available in different cultures and contexts.

Sustainable development

We affirm our will to promote sustainable development, while protecting the environment and biodiversity, and favoring more harmonious man-nature and spirit-body relations, in which the resources offered us by nature are rationally used to satisfy the needs of people, while respecting the balance of ecosystems. We therefore question the current neoliberal model of economic growth that threatens life on the planet.

Equality, equity and justice for all

We take our stand as part of the fight against all forms of discrimination and domination. Especially, discrimination and oppression against women, children, young people, elderly people, indigenous peoples, the poor and the disabled, must be eradicated.

Respecting the integration of countries and people

We oppose any type of economic, political and cultural domination of the North over countries of the South. We push for the alternative proposal of integration based on cooperation and complementarity among Northern and Southern countries, with an eye to the globalization of solidarity.

A plural and solidarity-based economy

Faced with a neoliberal economic model that excludes persons and peoples, and reduces the motivations of economic activity to the quest for profit and self-interest, and so postulates the uncontrolled market economy as the only creator of wealth and employment, we propose the validity and action in favor of a plural and solidarity-based economy. We propose and work for an economy that combines and balances logics of accumulation, redistribution and reciprocity, expressed in a democratically regulated market, an equitable reassignment of resources by a participating State, and the affirmation of practices of mutual benefit in the framework of a society and a culture of solidarity.

3) SSE actors, sectors and practices

Self-management and collective ownership

Self-management and collective ownership in the workplace and in the community is central to the solidarity economy. Different terms are used throughout the world to refer to collective ownership and management structures. In some parts of Africa, for example, the term *cooperatives* is avoided due to negative historical connotations. Instead, the term *collegial management* is preferred.

- There are many different expressions of self-management and collective ownership including: cooperatives (worker, producer, consumer, credit unions, housing, etc.), collective social enterprises, and participatory governance of the commons (for example, community management of water, fisheries, or forests).
- Legal recognition of these cooperative, collaborative and participatory practices is not a requirement for inclusion as part of the SSE.
- Worker ownership is one approach to achieve workplace democracy, but other collective approaches should be further discussed and shared by the SSE movement.

Non-monetized work and exchanges

Non-monetized work and exchanges are important parts of SSE. Labor should be honored and valued, whether it is paid or not, because it creates valuable output and provides the worker with satisfaction, happiness, and social recognition.

- SSE should discuss and propose ways to measure and value non-monetized work, to give it visibility as an important part of the economy.
- For example, as poverty and other pressures force people to migrate, work such as childcare that would have traditionally been provided by elderly relatives, must be paid for. This tends to undermine the ancient recognition of the social role of the elderly in the community.

Social movements

The solidarity economy has a focus on the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups, as well as anti-poverty and social inclusion work.

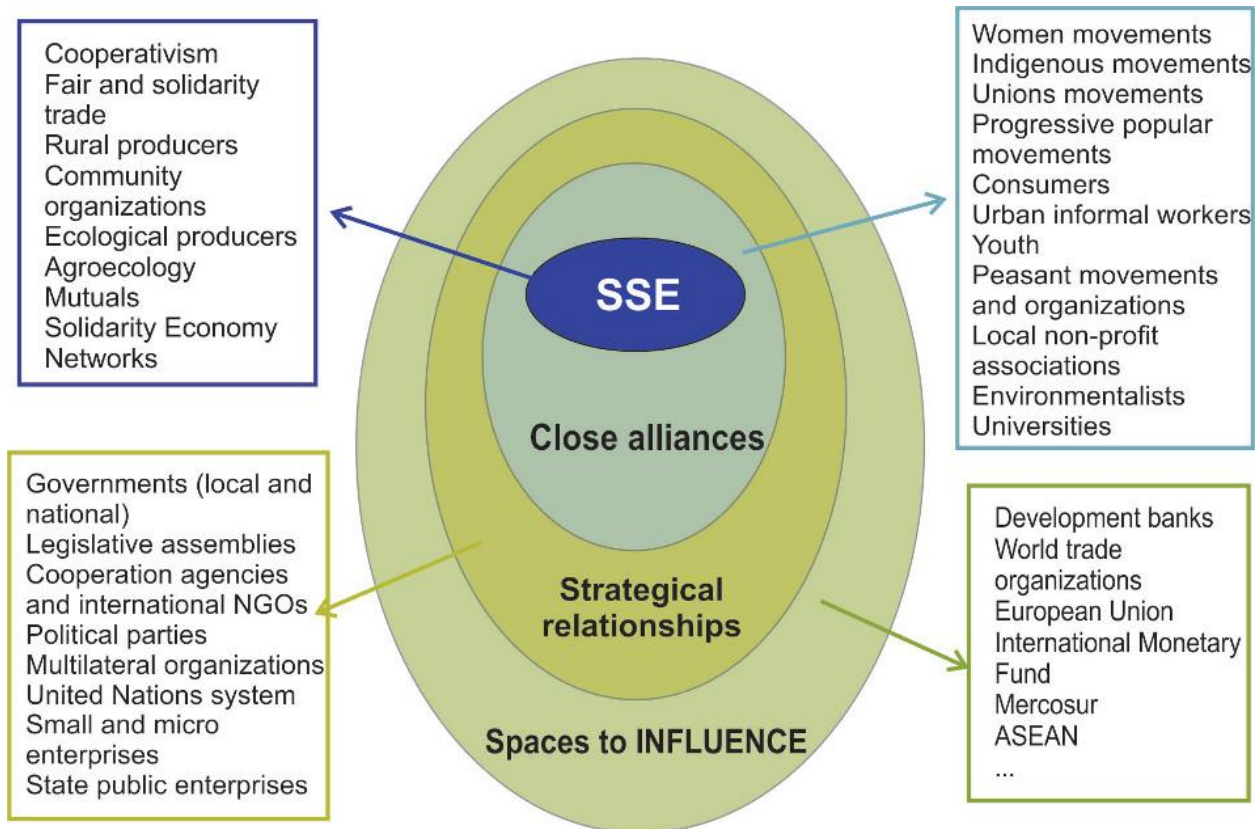
Given the above commitment, we recognize the importance of linking with social movements that are fighting for social and economic justice such as the women's, labor, land reform, small-scale farmers, homeless, poor people's, indigenous, and environmental movements.

The following statement on relations between SSE and social movements and the Diagram 2 below, developed by RIPESS LAC (Latin America and Caribbean), illustrates the vision of RIPESS on the relations between SSE, social movements and institutional actors:

- Relation of SSE with other social movements: there should be no "single platform" putting all of them together, but alliances depending on specific issues and commonalities.

- SSE should develop alliances with movements that share objectives and values of SSE.
- SSE can make short-term provisory alliances with other actors for specific agendas, but should have a clear identity and strategy to be able to relate without cooptation.
- SSE should be able to influence through advocacy important spaces such as political parties and national governments without losing its identity.

Diagram 2: SSE, Social Movements and Institutional Actors



Source: RIPESS-LAC (RIPESS Latin America and Caribbean)

Note: the categories represented in the above figure should not be understood as rigid ones. In many cases, groups and sectors could be either defined as being part of SSE, or better fit in the close alliances section. Sharing and endorsing the vision and values of SSE and abiding by the democratic practices it puts forth is key to determine where does a group stand in regard to SSE.

Fertile bases and allies

There are many fertile bases that hold great potential to develop as allies. Some of these bases are partially aligned with, but are not a part of, the solidarity economy, such as the popular economic/informal sector. Others identify with a particular aspect – such as green, organic, or fair trade – that is aligned with solidarity economy values, but may be in conflict with other values in important and structural ways. Nonetheless there is great potential to build alliances and mutually supportive collaborations.

- **Popular economy and informal economy** – the popular or informal sector of the economy is very important given that many people, particularly in the global South, depend on it for their livelihoods. For example, three-quarters of the population in Mali are involved in the informal economy. The popular economy is comprised of economic activities that are not covered by formal arrangements such as taxation, labor protections, minimum wage regulations, unemployment benefits, or documentation. Many self-employed workers, micro-enterprises, traders, and mutual aid practices are part of the popular economy. The popular economy is not the same as the solidarity economy, but is aligned in many ways because the actors often find collective ways to provide for social and economic needs, such as lending circles, community kitchens (*comedores populares*), mutual aid, mutual insurance systems and so forth.
- **Organic, green, fair trade** – there are many trends and movements that reflect solidarity economy values and yet may or may not be included in the solidarity economy. An example of the latter would be Wal-Mart, which has its own brand of Rainforest Certified Fair Trade Coffee but at the same time engages in union busting and uses its massive market share to depress prices and wages. Yet there are certainly practitioners in these sectors that are valuable allies and others that are already part of the social solidarity economy.
- **Consumer practices** – SSE values consumer practices as an important tool to transform the system of production. These include forms of collectively organized consumption such as consumer co-operatives, solidarity purchasing groups, collective kitchens and some forms of the sharing economy as well as ethical consumption and voluntary simplicity.

Given that democratic and collective ownership and management is a core value of the SSE, the question arose regarding the inclusion in SSE of the self-employed who are aligned with SSE principles. There was agreement that collectives of the self-employed such as the [Freelancers Union](#), a New York-based mutual for independent workers, and [Homenet](#), a Southeast Asian network of home-based workers, are clearly included in the SSE, but the relationship between the SSE and self-employed individuals needs further discussion.

4) Strategies

It is important to build micro to macro strategies:

- ***Building practice on the ground:*** This is the core of the social solidarity economy that the research, policies, advocacy and communication is informed by and that it supports and enables. The concrete practices are often grounded in concepts such as autonomous development and self-help, as opposed to ceding responsibility to the local or national government. Making things as local as is feasible, that is, following an approach of subsidiarity, is key to SSE.
- ***Building and strengthening SSE networks:*** Strengthening local, national, continental and international SSE networks is critical to support the practices on the ground, using the tools of research, policy work and advocacy. We need an active leadership that networks the initiatives in the territories around the values of SSE.
- ***Research:*** We must be able to make the case for the SSE through quantitative and qualitative data. A wide range of research is called for, including academic, community-based, action research, data gathering, and systematization of experiences.
- ***Policy work on local, regional, national and international levels:*** We seek to create policies that enable, not direct, the SSE.
- ***Advocacy:*** This work includes organizing and pushing for policies, legal statutes, and various other types of support for the SSE.
- ***Access to markets:*** The SSE movement needs to develop strategies to increase access to local, national and where appropriate, international markets for SSE enterprises.
- ***Raising visibility:*** Since the framework of the SSE is relatively unknown, we must engage in raising awareness about, and engagement with, the SSE. Our targets include the general public, potential allies, as well as practitioners who are part of the SSE, but who do not identify with the framework. Two central strategies to raise visibility are:
 - **Education** about the SSE and its many aspects can take many forms, including workshops, forums, trainings, courses and seminars. Community-based education is often the first step in the process of SSE mobilization, organizing or economic development. Popular education is particularly important to SSE given the shared transformative, democratic and egalitarian values.
 - **Communications:** articles, books, video, media coverage and social media are all important ways of raising awareness about the SSE. [Socioeco](#), for example, is a library of these types of resources that we continue to support and build.

5) Further Exploration of Key Concepts

RIPESS is inspired by and recognizes the importance of the concepts and approaches discussed below, while at the same time acknowledging that our understanding of each has to be deepened and discussed. This is work in progress.

Social Economy vs Solidarity Economy

The **social economy** (Diagram 3) is commonly understood as a “third sector” of the economy, complementing the “first sector” (private/profit-oriented) and the “second sector” (public/planned). The third sector includes cooperatives, mutuals, associations, and foundations (CMAFs). These entities are collectively organized and oriented around social aims that are prioritized above profits, or return to shareholders. The primary concern of CMAFs, as societies of people, is not to maximize profits, but to achieve social goals (which does not exclude making a profit, which is necessary for reinvestment). Some consider the social economy to be the third leg of capitalism, along with the public and the private sector. Thus, advocates of the social economy push for it to be accorded the same legitimacy as the public and private sectors, with a corresponding level of support in public resources and policy. Others, on the more radical end of the spectrum, view the social economy as a stepping stone towards a more fundamental transformation of the economic system.

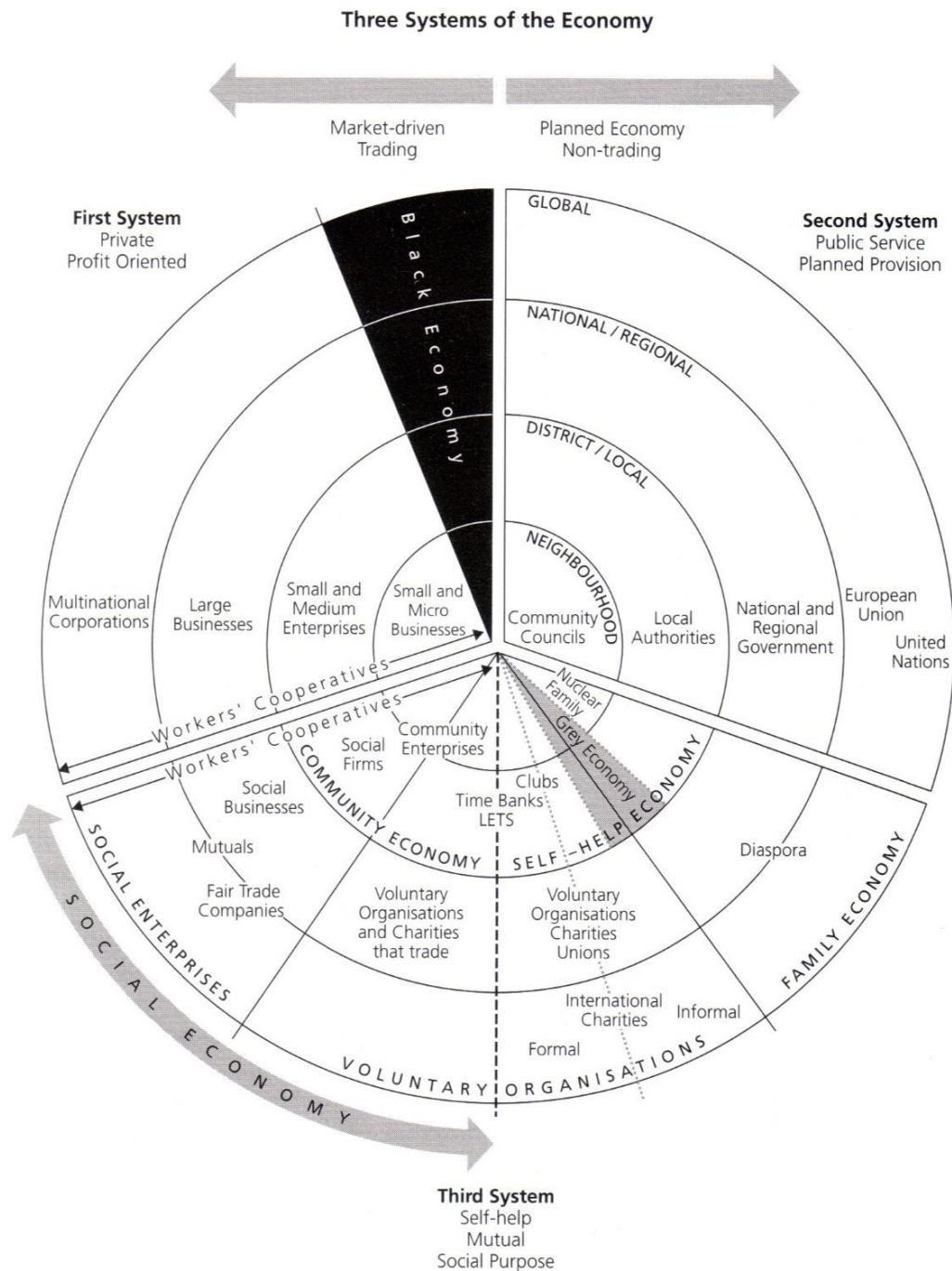
The **solidarity economy** (Diagram 4) seeks to change the whole social and economic system and puts forth a different paradigm of development that upholds solidarity economy principles. It pursues the transformation of the neoliberal capitalist economic system from one that gives primacy to maximizing private profit and blind growth, to one that puts people and planet at its core. As an alternative economic system, the solidarity economy thus includes all three sectors – private, public and the third sector.

The solidarity economy seeks to re-orient and harness the state, policies, trade, production, distribution, consumption, investment, money and finance, and ownership structures towards serving the welfare of people and the environment. What distinguishes the solidarity economy movement from many other social change and revolutionary movements of the past, is that it is pluralist in its approach - eschewing rigid blueprints and the belief in a single, correct path. The solidarity economy also values and builds on concrete practices, many of which are quite old. The solidarity economy, rather than seeking to create utopia out of thin air and theory, recognizes that there currently exists a concrete utopia, a utopia in action. It is rooted in the practices of participatory democracy and promotes a new vision of the economy, an economy that puts people at the center of the system and values the links rather than the goods.

Thus the solidarity economy explicitly has a systemic, transformative, post-capitalist agenda. The social economy, on the other hand, refers to a sector of the economy that may or may not be part of a transformative, postcapitalist agenda, depending on whom you’re talking to.

RIPESS uses the term **social solidarity economy** to embrace both the solidarity economy and the more radical end of the social economy. Defining the social solidarity economy framework is a long and ongoing process. For example, Brazil’s solidarity economy definition was built by SSE advocates and practitioners over many years through forums, meetings, and consultations.

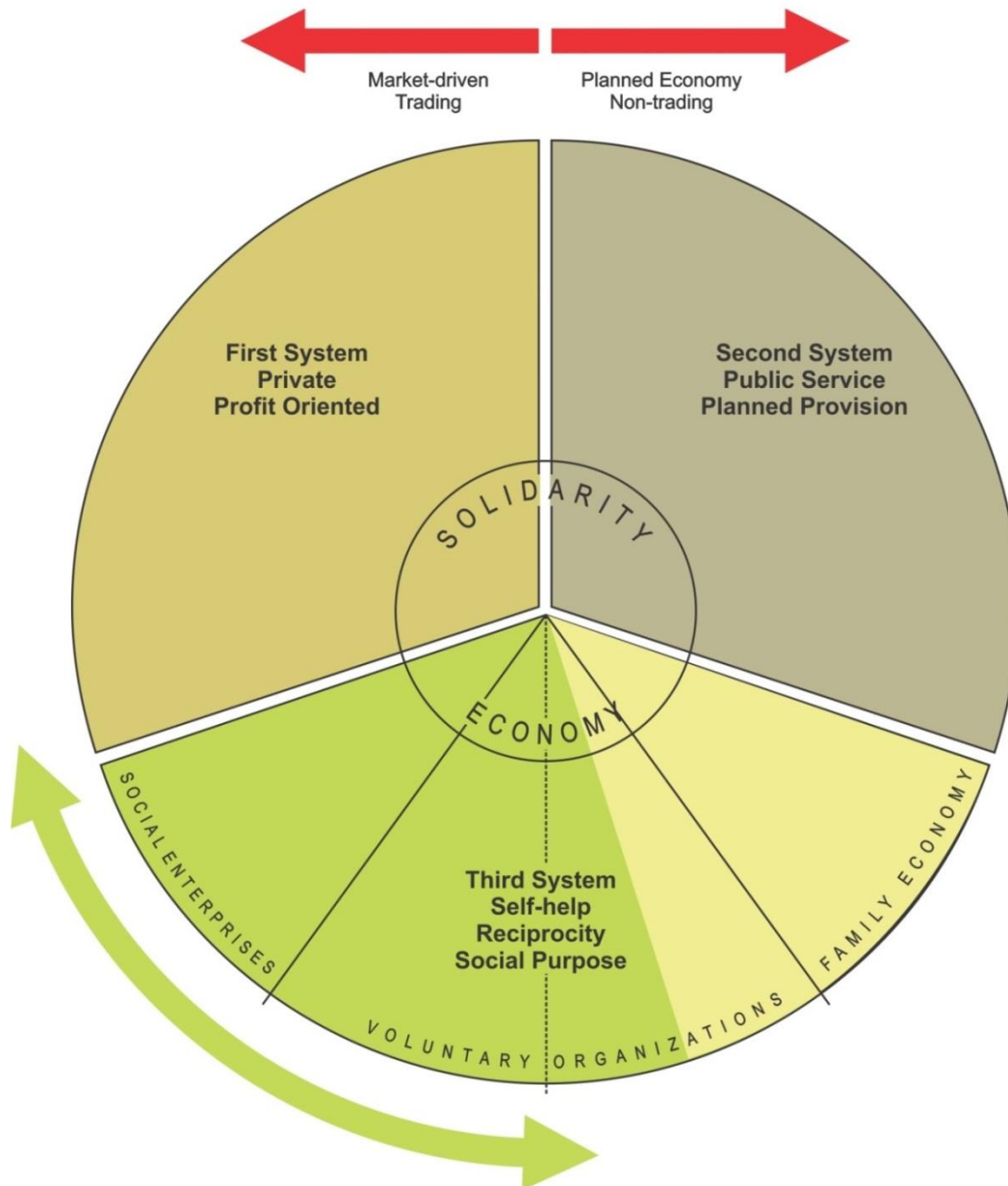
Diagram 3 – Social Economy



Source: *The Resilience Imperative: Cooperative Transitions to a Steady-state Economy* (New Society, 2012); Mike Lewis (2007). *Constructing a Sustainable Future*, Centre for Community Enterprise (www.cedworks.com) & BC-Alberta Research Alliance on the Social Economy (www.socialeconomy-bcalberta.ca). Originally published in John Pearce (2003). *Social Enterprise in Anytown*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation www.centralbooks.co.uk

Diagram 4 – Solidarity Economy

The Solidarity Economy - An Emerging Movement



Source: *The Resilience Imperative: Cooperative Transitions to a Steady-state Economy* (New Society, 2012). Originally published in Mike Lewis (2007), *Constructing a Sustainable Future*, Centre for Community Enterprise (www.cedworks.com) & BC-Alberta Research Alliance on the Social Economy (www.socialeconomy-bcalberta.ca). This diagram is an adaptation of the previous one.

Social solidarity economy and regional contexts

RIPESS understands that the political, cultural, and historical realities of different continents and countries call for a flexible approach to terminology, strategies and entry points.

- **Africa:** in French speaking Africa, where RIPESS has the strongest presence, the expression that is used is *social and solidarity economy*. For example, in Mali, the National Policy to Support Social and Solidarity Economy (PNESS) adopted in October 2014 uses the SSE terminology.
- **Asia:** the Asian Solidarity Economy Council (ASEC) takes the *social enterprise* as a starting point along with the need to build *solidarity economy supply chains*.
- **Europe:** *social economy* and cooperativism in general are quite strongly rooted in Europe, and pre-date the transformative framework of the solidarity economy. In general, there is rising attention for social economy at the EU institutional level and increasing support at the local level, where the spreading of spontaneous solidarity economy initiatives is more and more recognized.
- **Latin America and Caribbean:** RIPESS-LAC uses the *solidarity economy* framework. Despite some differences in definition, there is broad agreement about its systemic and transformative agenda and that it is built around a core of ethical principles.
- **North America:** Quebec builds on the concept of the *social economy* and seeks to create a movement for transformation that is very practical and grounded at the local, territorial level. In the rest of Canada, the emphasis is on the territorial framework of local economic development. The U.S. was able to start with a fairly blank slate and the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network deliberately chose to work within the *solidarity economy* framework, as an unambiguously transformative movement.

Social enterprise

A comparison of the definition of *social enterprise* used by social enterprise associations in the UK, the US, Europe and Canada, shows that they have the following features in common: 1) the enterprise serves a social aim such as fighting poverty or social exclusion 2) it primarily generates income based on the sale of goods and services rather than depending on grant funding and 3) profits are reinvested in the social mission rather than maximizing value for stockholders.

Where the definitions differ is in terms of ownership and control. The *stockholder* form vests control with owner(s), whether it is an individual or a group investors that purchased shares in the enterprise. In this case, control is accorded to capital – the amount of money that has been invested in the enterprise. The *stakeholder* form vests control in some collective of those that have an invested *interest* or *stake* – not only a monetary one – in the enterprise. This could include the workers, the community, the beneficiaries, or a non-profit organization.

Whereas the UK and US associations include both the stockholder and stakeholder forms of ownership/control, the European and Canadian associations restrict their definition to include only the stakeholder form.

| | Social aim | Engage in sale of goods and services | Reinvest profits in social mission | Ownership/control by stakeholders |
|-----------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Social Enterprise (UK) | Y | Y | Y | Mixed |
| Social Enterprise Alliance (US) | Y | Y | Y | Mixed |
| EMES (Europe) | Y | Y | Y | Stakeholders |
| Enterprising non-profits (Canada) | Y | Y | Y | Only operated by a non-profit |

Given that the SSE holds that *self-management* and *collective ownership* in the workplace and in the community (section 3, page 6) is of central importance, there is alignment with the sub-set of social enterprises that have a stakeholder form of ownership/control. As in our discussion of the popular economy (section 3, page 8), here too, there is fertile ground for an alliance with stockholder social enterprises.

We recognize that it is more likely that we'll find greater alliance with smaller and locally owned social enterprises. We also acknowledge the danger that social enterprises are sometimes used to undermine social welfare programs. In Europe in particular, the social welfare infrastructure is being dismantled and privatized. In some cases, delivery of social services through social enterprises is an extension of the social welfare state; in others, social enterprises are used in a way that enables the state to shed its responsibilities.

***Buen vivir* and the Rights of Mother Earth**

SSE embraces the concept of the Rights of Mother Earth which is embedded in the *buen vivir* (living well) paradigm and draws heavily on indigenous visions of humans living with respect for and in harmony with Mother Earth as opposed to having simply a utilitarian relationship. It must be clear that *buen vivir* is not a "model" to be generalized. Its expression changes from community to community, culture to culture, nation to nation. Nonetheless, its different expressions tend to be firmly related to, and rooted in, key elements (both material and immaterial, measurable and unmeasurable), such as: community bonds, culture, access to land, access to means of production and infrastructure, high levels of participation and effective involvement of community about their future, food sovereignty, peace, gender equity, biodiversity, healthy environment, etc.

Growth & Degrowth

SSE questions the assumption that economic growth is always good and states that it depends on the type and goals of the growth. For SSE, the concept of development is more useful than growth. For example, human beings stop growing when they hit adulthood, but never stop developing.

SSE should engage in the advancement of indicators that shift the emphasis away from growth and towards development and *buen vivir*. SSE needs measures that can lift up the value of not only physical resources (eg. land, water) but also non tangible assets such as happiness, mental, workplace and social wellness, indigenous knowledge, non-monetized work, and so forth.

Development must prioritize the environment, and the redistribution of power and wealth between rich and poor. SSE seeks to create economic development that is equitable in its own right, as opposed to economic development that generates great inequality even if it is subsequently lessened through re-distribution.

Rural development is of particular importance for the welfare of these communities, in addition to being critical to reducing forced migration. For example, the state should protect SSE initiatives such as community forest management in Nepal and India from big corporate domination.

In their concern for an approach and practices that go beyond growth as the dominant framework, SSE and the degrowth movement share some potential grounds for convergence. However, degrowth is a concept that warrants further discussion within the SSE movement in order to develop a clearer shared understanding.

Commons

Commons are resources, both natural and socially created that are collectively managed for the benefit of a community or the earth. *Natural commons* include for example, clean air and water, though these are increasingly being privatized or used for private gain.

Socially created commons include things such as language, folk tales and Wikipedia. Thus the commons does not refer only to the protection of the environment, but also to social resources that support basic rights to health, education, equity and diversity.

The commons should never be privatized. They must be managed by the State and/or the Community. A minority opinion in the Global Vision Workshop in Manila, argued that if the state and the community have no resources to protect and manage the commons, the private sector could be involved, under the strict control and with participation of the community, including the distribution of the economic gains resulting from its use.

Corporate social responsibility

There are varying levels of comfort with concepts such as social enterprise and corporate social responsibility. This is complicated by the fact that different countries have different definitions of these terms.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices and discourse aim to integrate an ethical approach into corporate practices and in theory, can be consistent with SSE values. In practice, while there are many examples of CSR that are commendable, there is a very real danger that CSR is used as a public relations tool. Corporations such as Coca-Cola and Shell Oil brand themselves as champions of sustainability, local economic development, and community empowerment while at the same time engage in practices that are harmful to workers, the environment, local communities, small businesses and family farmers.

Another risk is that the voluntary CSR framework is given preference by governments and corporations over the adoption and enforcement of a human rights approach based on legal obligations. SSE actors should take advantage of opportunities for fruitful CSR partnerships when realized in conditions of equality, but must be careful of cooptation.

Role of the State and NGOs

SSE recognizes the effectiveness of state or NGO-run community development programs, provided that they are effectively participatory. Mechanisms should be put in place so that communities and civil society organizations can actively participate in the decision process such as co-construction of policy and appropriate programs. Participatory budgeting is an example.

SSE initiatives must have full autonomy and recognition, regardless of their legal status. Programs from the state or NGOs should work to support these initiatives so that they are empowered to develop their own priorities without external influences.

Conclusion

We recognize that the vision of SSE will continue to evolve and be developed as we continue building an alternative model of development. We also recognize the importance of engaging our members, other social movements, researchers and academics in this effort to build a better world for all humanity, in respect of Mother Earth, for the present and for the future.