

ILO Academy on Social and Solidarity Economy

Since the 2008 financial crisis, economic development has been reconsidered and innovative approaches are becoming increasingly relevant internationally. The 'Social and Solidarity Economy' (SSE) is a chief player among these approaches. It refers to enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which have the specific feature of producing goods, services and knowledge while simultaneously pursuing economic and social aims and fostering solidarity. The SSE has a distinct and valuable role to play in finding solutions for job creation. It can help to cover the needs of members which have been ignored or inadequately addressed by the private or public sector, creating a strong, sustainable, prosperous and inclusive society. Analogous concepts have been locally and regionally advanced in different parts of the world since the 80's, but particularly in the past seven years the international development community has progressively recognized the SSE as a pathway to fair and sustainable development. An expression of this was the recent implementation of the 'United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE', an endeavour which today synchronizes transversal efforts on the SSE in approximately 25 UN agencies, inter-governmental organizations and observers from civil society.

Within the United Nations System, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has been pioneering the advancement of SSE for many years. Indeed, the ILO has been committed to supporting co-operatives since its very foundation in 1919. Its first Director-General, Albert Thomas, was a supporter of the international co-operative movement. ILO's constitution itself states that "universal and lasting peace can only be established if it is based upon social justice". Corresponding initiatives were reinforced in 1966 through a recommendation aiming at the promotion of co-operatives in developing countries, and particularly in 2002 with the issuing of a broader recommendation concerning the tripartite promotion of democratic and collaborative co-operatives in all sectors and all countries. Moreover, in recent years the ILO has been championing the regional and interregional exchange of local expertise in SSE, the inclusive co-construction of collective intelligence and the building of grassroots worldwide networks by means of its initiatives of capacity building and south-south cooperation.

ILO's efforts on SSE have been of various natures, from technical activities (advice on policy and law, access to finance, organizational development, capacity building, networking, etc.) to establishing international partnerships and politically influencing high level Government decision making, in different settings (informal and formal economy, rural and urban communities, a variety of economic sectors and sub-sectors) or working with people from all backgrounds in global networks.

Among these efforts, the 'ILO Academy on Social and Solidarity Economy' emerged as a hub and catalyser of innovative initiatives to support the SSE. It started as a high level capacity building programme, which was proposed by more than 200 practitioners on the occasion of the 'ILO Regional Conference on Social Economy' held in Johannesburg, in October 2009. This proposal developed into the first edition of the SSE Academy, organized in Italy (2010) by the International Training Centre of the ILO (ITC-ILO). The second edition happened in Montreal (2011), attuned to the 1st International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy (FIESS) which was held in the same city in the previous week. The third edition happened in Agadir (2013) in collaboration with the REMESS (Réseau Marocain de

l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire). The fourth and fifth editions were held respectively in Brazil (2014) and South Africa (2015) and had a strong focus on knowledge exchanges and collaboration between Latin America and Africa. The most recent edition of the SSE Academy happened in Puebla (2015) in partnership with the Mexican National Institute of Social Economy (INAES).

The ILO Academy on SSE lasts one week and gathers policymakers, practitioners, promoters, workers and researchers from all around the world. Its flexible and interactive dynamics allows for an enriching experience both for long-experienced experts and newcomers in the theme. The conversations and debates throughout the Academy comprise the understanding of concepts related to Social and Solidarity Economy, the relevance of this perspective as a new development alternative, modalities and strategies of implementation and the innovative creation of communities of practice and collaboration. Participants of the SSE Academy often express wonder and appreciation concerning the easiness with which they assimilate and enhance in-depth knowledge and the spontaneity in which they meet new people and forge key relationships. In addition, participants also have the chance to perform field visits to local SSE enterprises or projects and to discuss these local experiences as to other cases from all around the world. Furthermore, in the last editions of the SSE Academy a distance-learning package introducing principles and practices of the SSE became available for the participants before the face-to-face sessions.

Since 2012, the ILO has also been fostering the emergence of a multilingual virtual community of knowledge exchange and cooperation around the activities of the SSE Academy. This effort started with the launching of an open interactive virtual space called 'Collective Brain' of the SSE Academy. This multilingual space allows that participants and former participants of the SSE Academy keep permanently coupled and involved in order to exchange and deepen knowledge on SSE. This initiative was later further expanded with the introduction of a specific virtual area for South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) on the SSE, which was named 'Meeting Point' for SSTC on the SSE. Based on the principle of solidarity and non-conditionality, the SSTC can be regarded as a SSE compatible approach for sharing experience and good practices and for supporting capacity development, technology transfer and even resource mobilization or the formation of international chains and networks of production and consumption. The multilingual virtual community clustered around the SSE Academy has today around 700 members from all continents, who either participated in at least one of its editions or became actively interested in the Academy by somehow interacting with its former participants.

At last, it is highly relevant to bear in mind that the world is at present getting ready to kickstart the implementation of the path towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this context, the Social and Solidarity Economy comes forward as a critical approach in order to ensure a structure of economic governance which is effectively inclusive and sensitive to the voices of local communities. As such, the ILO Academy on Social and Solidarity Economy grows into a key initiative within ILO and the UN System in order to further Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, while simultaneously acknowledging the increasing importance of innovative development approaches in a changing world which is becoming highly connected and less restrained by geographic distances and national borders.