

Research Issues on Social & Solidarity Economy and the Future of Work

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to reflect on the forces transforming the world of work, share some cooperative and SSE responses, and suggest areas for policy research and action.

Before doing that, a few words on the International Labour Organization. The ILO is the specialized agency of the UN with a mandate on social justice and decent work. It has had a Cooperatives unit since 1920. It remains the only specialized agency of the United Nations with an explicit mandate on cooperatives.

In 2002 an international standard, a Recommendation on the promotion of cooperatives was adopted at the International Labour Conference. Last year, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians adopted guidelines concerning statistics of cooperatives which sets a statistical standard toward achieving harmonized and internationally comparable data on cooperative enterprises.

In the last decade the ILO has expanded its support for cooperative development to the wider social and solidarity economy through research, policy advisory and capacity building and development projects and academies on specific topics that bring researchers, practitioners and policy makers together. The work of the ILO on cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy focuses on rural and informal economies and migrants and refugees where workers face some of the most pronounced decent work deficits.

FORCES TRANSFORMING THE WORLD OF WORK

This year the ILO celebrates its centenary. On this occasion a Global Commission was established on the future of work. The report of the commission “Work for a Brighter Future” identifies new forces transforming the world of work, such as technological advances, the greening of economies and changes in demographics. In response, the commission proposed a human-centred agenda consisting of three pillars of increased investment – in people’s capabilities, the institutions of work, and decent and sustainable work.

The 108th International Labour Conference, held in June 2019, adopted a landmark ILO Centenary Declaration. Cooperatives and social and solidarity economy are mentioned in the declaration, which is focused on the future of work, but also reaffirms the 100-year-old mandate of the ILO.

The Declaration recognizes that in these times of “transformative change in the world of work” and “persistent inequalities”, “it is imperative to act with urgency to seize the opportunities and address the challenges to shape a fair, inclusive and secure future of work for all”. The text refers to cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy as follows: *“The ILO must direct its efforts to (...) supporting the role of the private sector as a principal source of growth and job creation by promoting an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and sustainable enterprises, as well as cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy in order to generate decent work, productive employment and improved living standards for all”*.

Moving onto the forces that are transforming the world of work, I would now like to reflect on environmental, technological demographic changes and the cooperative and social and solidarity economy responses to them. In each case I will add some research questions of relevance as well.

Environment

Climate change concerns are affecting the world of work in various ways. Green jobs and green enterprises are on the rise. Cooperatives and other SSE organizations can be instrumental in ensuring a just transition while working on climate change adaptation and mitigation. Mutual insurance for crops, diversification of crops, energy saving irrigation and construction techniques are a few adaptation strategies cooperatives can use.

Prominent examples in mitigation include forestry and renewable energy cooperatives. Forestry cooperatives and solidarity associations have been set up in Japan, Korea, US, Canada and Indonesia to secure livelihoods of forest communities while using sustainable forestry practices. In urban areas in the Global South cooperatives are set-up in waste management. In India, Brazil, Colombia and South Africa waste-pickers’ cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations provide services for improved waste management and recycling, negotiate with local governments to integrate their members into waste management chains and support their members in accessing occupational safety and health, training, and financial services. Trade unions have been involved in a number of these cases.

In the renewable energy industry, SSE organizations are gaining ground in Europe harnessing wind and solar power as well as biogases. They have a number of competitive advantages, including democratic local control over energy production and use, the capacity to create local employment, and reasonable pricing.

What are the financing mechanisms for such initiatives to allow for their replication in the countries of the Global South? What is the role of having a social and solidarity economy ecosystem in place, to get such initiatives in climate action off the ground? What other livelihoods related innovations are cooperatives and wider social and solidarity economy organizations involved in for improving resilience of local communities to climate change?

Technology

New technologies are changing the way work is organized and governed. They are redefining the relationships between workers and employers especially in emerging sectors like the platform economy. Due to limited or non-existent national and/or international regulatory frameworks there are significant risks of decent work non-compliance.

For the positive potential of technology to be realized, and its threats to be countered, new models of collective ownership and democratic governance could be used. Cooperatives and the wider SSE can help strengthen voice and representation of workers in the platform economy. Platform cooperatives are being established in recent years by self-employed and gig economy workers. They increase the negotiation power of their members and improving working conditions by creating economies of scale.

Taxi drivers are among workers that set up worker cooperatives and use online applications to counter the intermediation of ride-hailing companies that withhold rights and benefits from the drivers. In the US, cooperatives such as Green Taxi Cooperative in Denver and People's Ride in Michigan offer alternatives to Uber and Lyft through driver-owned platforms.

Within the field of technology, youth are drawn to cooperative ownership. CoTech is a network of ethical co-operatives providing technology, digital and creative services. It started in the UK but has members from around the world now.

At the ILO we are interested in research that shows how in the platform economy cooperatives and other SSE organizations advance workers' rights, negotiation power, and improve representation and voice.

Demographics

Demographic changes are also playing a key role in shaping the world of work in the next decades. Each year close to 40 million people enter the labour force; at the same time, the population is ageing in many countries. Women are participating in greater numbers in the labour force, and

cross-border migration is expected to continue to rise. Such changes exacerbate existing care deficits.

Care provision

These shifts pose policy challenges for care provision. In the absence of affordable and accessible public or other private options, cooperatives emerge as innovative providers of multiple services. Cooperatives and other SSE organizations can play a complementary role to local and national governments in developing and providing improved care services in child care, ageing, disability, reproductive and mental health, post-trauma care, and rehabilitation and prevention as meeting the needs and aspirations of their members and communities is a priority.

ILO research shows, user-owned cooperatives and the wider social and solidarity economy enterprises deliver people-centred quality care around the world especially in rapidly ageing countries in Western Europe (e.g. France, the UK and Sweden), North America (e.g. the US and Canada) and Asia (e.g. Japan and the Republic of Korea). As employers, care cooperatives tend to provide better and fairer wages and benefits to workers, especially when they are members of the cooperative. Women often comprise the majority of workers and members in care workers' cooperatives in the US, Italy, India, the Philippines, Argentina, Uruguay, Guatemala and South Africa.

There is no 'one size fits all' social and solidarity economy solution for care. Political, legislative, social, and economic contexts are different. But documenting good practices and lessons learnt can help emerging care cooperatives navigate their own contexts. For policy makers, the cost benefit analysis in social and solidarity economy vs. other forms of care provision may be important in decision making. A concern that has been raised is whether care cooperatives are trying to fill a retreat of government services. We will need to document the complementarities, and possible tensions, between public, cooperative, and other private provision of care.

Women empowerment/gender equality

Women have opted to work in cooperatives and other SSE organizations for paid work that can be managed alongside responsibilities associated with unpaid care work. Women workers in the informal economy often choose to come together through cooperatives and other SSE organizations to improve their livelihoods, enhance their access to goods, markets and services (like insurance) and improve their collective voice and negotiation power.

In the US, immigrant women homecare workers have been setting up cooperatives, with the support of unions and community organizations, to secure better wages, improved quality of jobs and

healthier working environments. Women only cooperatives exist in countries like Mexico, India, Nepal, and Nigeria to Morocco, Iran, Lebanon and Turkey often in sectors where women are the main producers and service providers and also in contexts with restrictive gender norms.

There is concern when these cooperatives are set up largely or even solely on external push rather than from members' understanding of and conviction in working in cooperatives. It would be valuable to develop context specific monitoring indicators around the workings of these women specific SSE organizations.

In social and solidarity economy organizations across the board it would also be important to track equality indicators such as women's participation in governance, management, membership, asset ownership and income parity to see how they are truly faring on gender equality.

Migrants / Refugees

Looking at global population flows the future of work is expected to witness a continued increase in migrants and refugees. As most migration is related to livelihoods the responses also need to be related to the world of work. Here are some social and solidarity economy responses on refugees:

- SSE organizations in host communities employing refugees (e.g. Swedish housing cooperatives, Lebanese agricultural cooperatives);
- SSE organizations in host communities providing a range of services including access to work permits, jobs, essential services and training with the active participation of refugees (e.g. Jordanian agricultural and multipurpose cooperatives, Italian social cooperatives);
- Refugees joining existing cooperatives and SSE organizations in host communities as members (e.g. Turkish and refugee women artisanal cooperatives);
- Refugees forming refugee-only SSE organizations in host communities for job creation and access to essential services and training, often with the support of development agencies (e.g. farmers' cooperative in the US, kindergarten cooperative in Morocco, dairy cooperative in Ethiopia, women artisanal cooperatives in oPt and Bangladesh among Rohingya women);
- Governments and support organizations procuring goods and services from local cooperatives and other producer organizations (e.g. Purchase for Progress initiative); and
- Returning refugees rebuilding their own communities (businesses, homes and infrastructure) through cooperatives to facilitate reconciliation, create jobs and access essential services and training (e.g. Northern Sri Lanka).

For migrant workers, we need to track whether social and solidarity economy provides for low-barrier entry to formal jobs and entrepreneurship, and access social protection in the host countries? So far there are individual cases and country level experiences for instance on how in host countries' social

cooperatives are working with local governments and international organizations as in the case of Italy. These cooperatives provide a range of language training and other social services for integrating refugees.

Moving beyond the few repeated case studies we need to document the social and solidarity economy difference in providing services for migrants and refugees compared to other types of service providers. We also need to know what measures/initiatives do social and solidarity economy organizations adopt in refugee response that can be replicated and expanded upon.

Statistics

The participatory co-creation of a coherent international statistical framework on SSE holds a great deal of promise.

First, by giving voice to SSE institutions it would ensure that their various realities are adequately reflected.

Second, it would provide guidance to countries on how to understand and value SSE, by better capturing its size, composition, and contribution.

Third, it would facilitate comparability across countries, while allowing for some flexibility in application depending on national circumstances and policy priorities.

Fourth, by enabling SSE issues to be integrated into national surveys conducted by statistical offices, it would reduce the reporting burden on SSE institutions, especially the small ones. This has equity and sustainability implications for reporting.

One clear next step for us at the ILO, after the adoption of guidelines concerning statistics of cooperatives is to support user-producer dialogues at the national level, notably with national statistics offices, government agencies responsible for administrative data on cooperatives, and the cooperative movement and researchers. Often in countries producers and users of statistics do not communicate with each other. The guidelines on statistics of cooperatives are a starting point to initiate such dialogue. The key players can come together to see where their current efforts around gathering statistics stand, and how they compare to the proposed outline in the guidelines.

While moving onto standards around statistics of social and solidarity economy maybe a desirable step, having internationally agreed upon minimum definitions on the boundaries may need to come before that. Efforts to reach common, harmonized methodologies and impact indicators on SSE organizations could benefit from the establishment of a working group that does not only include

researchers and practitioners but also national statistics offices.

At the ILO having concrete information on SSE contributions to decent work indicators is important for us. Having said that the burden of measurement should not be born solely by SSE organizations or researchers. The State has a central role to play in setting the statistical boundaries, monitoring and tracking how SSE contributes to addressing social, economic and environmental needs.

Engagement with decent work 128w, 1.0min

The SSE organizations may not be able to provide a comprehensive response strategy to the changes in the world of work, but there is a need for research to show what it does differently in addressing decent work deficits. Let us think for instance in agriculture, understanding the role of SSE organizations in eliminating worst forms of child labour, or forced labour which are widespread in agricultural sector especially the Global South.

The elimination of child labour is a fundamental right at work. We are starting to look into the role of cooperatives and other SSE organizations in elimination of child labour. Having researchers support in understanding the role that SSE organizations play in child labour elimination would be very valuable to inform practical actions on the ground.

Conclusions

There are growing calls for new forms of business and new models of growth. The world needs innovative solutions to improve employment opportunities and working conditions, the organisation of work and production, and the governance of work. Social and solidarity economy organizations have a unique opportunity. They can actively contribute to shaping the future of work we want. Clearly they cannot do it alone. Emerging alliances, for instance, with trade unions is critical. We look at the research community to provide the empirical evidence and theoretical insights that build on the past and look into the future to inform our policies and actions for a better future of work for all.