



Working Paper

**From personalization to institutionalization of
the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) at
the United Nations. Between innovation and
continuity of bureaucracy**

Marion POUZOLET

CIRIEC No. 2023/01

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Abstract

Through the past decade, United Nations (UN) agencies have developed various initiatives in favor of the promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE): the creation of the UNTFSE in 2013, the adoption of a resolution in the International Labor Conference in June 2022, the annual ILO Academy on SSE, etc.

The SSE transnational networks, which are still trying to legitimate the SSE at the international level, often quote these activities as strong institutional support to the SSE. However, this emphasis raises questions about the actual place of SSE concerns in the UN system. The hypothesis here is that, despite the big announcements, SSE (and the few agents who promote it) occupy(s) a fringe position within the UN agencies.

Based on a set of semi-directive interviews with UN agents, this paper provides an opportunity to understand why, despite the absence of a general guideline, SSE has made its way into the agenda of several UN agencies. The analysis assumes that, before being an institutional interest, this appetite for SSE is the result of the commitment of several UN staff. The underlying objective is also to understand whether the emergence of SSE within the UN agencies has produced 'innovations' and 'changes' in the institutions.

All this research work is facilitated by the author's position as a Ph.D. student with a CIFRE agreement. This is a French specificity that enables her, in parallel to her research activities, to be a mission officer for SSE International Forum, one of the major networks of SSE actors on an international scale. This position, therefore, facilitates her access to the field and to the agents interviewed, whom she meets regularly in the context of her employed activities. In addition to the interviews conducted, this paper is therefore based on participant observation and analysis of archive documents.

Keywords: United Nations, SSE, international agenda, international organizations, individual trajectory

The United Nations recognizes and supports the social and solidarity economy. This is what many SSE actors and networks have been saying since the 2010s. Listening to these speeches, one might assume that the United Nations (UN) has set up a whole series of programs in favor of the social and solidarity economy (SSE), released adapted and dedicated funds, or even proposed a legal framework for the notion of SSE. However, it would be wrong to assert that this is the case. This assertion is even more surprising given that no scientific study has taken a particular interest in the place accorded to the SSE within the UN system. Indeed, only in 2014, the think tank *Pour la Solidarité* published a report entitled "SSE and the United Nations, a recent rapprochement" (Masquelin, 2014), but this appeared more as a justification of the interest in dealing with SSE within the UN. Other authors have also looked at SSE in specific international negotiations (Morais & Bacic, 2023; Daugareilh & Poorter, 2022), but never in a global approach to the UN system.

This paper presents an original study of interest in the SSE within the UN. The question of "SSE and the UN" is approached from a number of angles, to reveal and qualify the UN's assertion of a strong investment in the SSE issue. In other words, this paper answers the question: what place is really given to SSE concerns within the UN? The main hypothesis examined here is that SSE has a very limited place, at the margins, within UN agencies, despite the widespread announcements. In examining these questions of investment and recognition, this paper quickly reveals discrepancies depending on whether the point of view focuses on the individual level of UN agency agents, or on the institutional level of inclusion of SSE in action priorities.

This paper thus aims to highlight the difficult transition of interest in SSE in the UN from voluntary and personal initiatives to the inclusion of the priority in institutional guidelines. Indeed, if SSE were so widely supported by the UN, one might assume that it would frequently be included in the multi-year action plans of UN agencies, but this is not the case. On April 18, 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 77/281 "Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development". This was the first general guideline issued by the UN in favor of the SSE. However, SSE had already been included in the practices of several agencies for as long as ten years in some cases. But why? The assumption is that before being an institutional interest, this appetite for SSE is the result of the commitment of several UN agents with a relative freedom of application of their mandate.

Studying this "new thematic" addressed at the UN, the social and solidarity economy, also allows us to question the specificity of the SSE and its effects in an already codified multilateral system. Indeed, according to the UN itself, the SSE advocates values of *"care for people and planet, equality and fairness,*

interdependence, self-governance, transparency and accountability and the attainment of decent work and livelihoods” (resolution 77/281, 2023). Does recognition of the importance of these values lead to their implementation? Put another way, does the emergence of the SSE thematic within the UN produce "innovations" or "changes" in institutions (Louis and Maertens, 2014)? Here again, this paper attempts to identify certain specificities of the SSE while nuancing the remarks considering the heavy bureaucratic weight of the UN.

In terms of methodology, this communication was prepared as close as possible to the reality on the ground, while demonstrating methodological and scientific rigor. Indeed, I'm a PhD student in political science who also works at SSE International Forum, one of the main international networks promoting the SSE, as a project officer under a CIFRE agreement¹. Part of my mission is to follow up on international advocacy activities, including participation in meetings of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE (UNTFSSSE, see below) and various other international SSE conferences and public events. Thanks to this dual role, this communication was prepared at the heart of international SSE dynamics. Thus, one of the main methods used was open observant participation (Bastien, 2007). This method is the result of prolonged field work, in which participation sometimes took over from observation, and which necessitated a transition from "pure participation" to observation through a form of "conversion to research". Here, observant participation is based on involvement in numerous internal and external activities of the SSE International Forum, and the International Coalition of the SSE².

This paper is also based on a series of eleven semi-structured interviews conducted by videoconference in English, French or Spanish with (sometimes retired) officials from UNTFSSSE member agencies: four interviews with International Labor Organization (ILO) officials (three of whom are retired), followed by one interview with officials from the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), UN Women, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Latin America Regional Office, and

¹ The CIFRE (Industrial Convention for Training through Research) thesis is a type of French contract for the preparation of a PhD. It involves a 3-year research collaboration between a host organization (in this case, SSE International Forum), a research unit supervising the PhD student's work (in this case, the Centre Emile Durkheim at Sciences Po Bordeaux), and a PhD student devoting her time to research (in this case, the author).

² Created in 2021, the International Coalition of the SSE is composed of five of the main global SSE networks: the GSEF, SSE International Forum, the ICA, the ICMIF, and the AIM. They decided to “[join] forces in order to deploy a common voice and actions to make [their] achievements and resources visible and recognized”.

an interview with a retired agent from the UN Development Program (UNDP). Out of a total of nineteen UN agencies members of UNTFSSSE, these interviews with eight agencies cover 42% of member agencies. The agencies interviewed were selected on the basis of their frequency of participation in UNTFSSSE working meetings: I wanted to interview the most active agencies, as well as those that were less present, in order to gain a better understanding of the different levers of (non-)investment.

This paper is also based on an analysis of grey literature documents produced by the institutions studied, both websites and existing published documents and reports.

This paper is structured in four parts. The first is devoted to the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE. The second analyzes the mandates of the agencies involved in the SSE thematic area. The third will focus on the key role played by certain individuals within UN agencies, while the last will look at institutionalization mechanisms.

The UNTFSSSE as an illustration of UN interest in SSE?

The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE (UNTFSSSE), also known as the Task Force, is, as its name suggests, an internal UN working group whose objectives are defined as follows.

“The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE) aims to raise the visibility of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) within the UN system and beyond. The members and observers of the Task Force have committed to undertake collaborative activities to:

- *enhance the recognition of the role of SSE enterprises and organizations in sustainable development;*
- *promote knowledge of SSE and consolidate SSE networks;*
- *support the establishment of an enabling institutional and policy environment for SSE;*
- *ensure coordination of international efforts, and create and strengthen partnerships.*

The work of the Task Force takes the form of joint initiatives among members: producing reports and briefs, organizing events related to SSE in connection with relevant UN processes and conferences, and creating partnerships and dialogues with governmental and civil society entities.”

- Extract from the UNTFSSSE website, accessed June 1, 2023

According to the UNTFSSSE website, as of June 1, 2023, the Task Force has twenty members, including the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and nineteen UN agencies represented in the figure below. The Task Force also includes fourteen "observers". These are not UN agencies, but mainly transnational SSE networks. These are networks of actors who, as I have seen, play a very active role in UNTFSSSE meetings and activities. Some of them, such as SSE International Forum and RIPESS Intercontinental, have been taking part in activities since the working group was set up. This involvement of non-UN actors in the discussions seems to constitute a form of innovation according to UN standards and practices. Indeed, other UN working groups of this type exist, but, according to the officials interviewed, it seems that none of them are so inclusive of actor networks. Indeed, although observers do not have voting rights, they participate as much (if not more) in UNTFSSSE discussions and projects as full members.

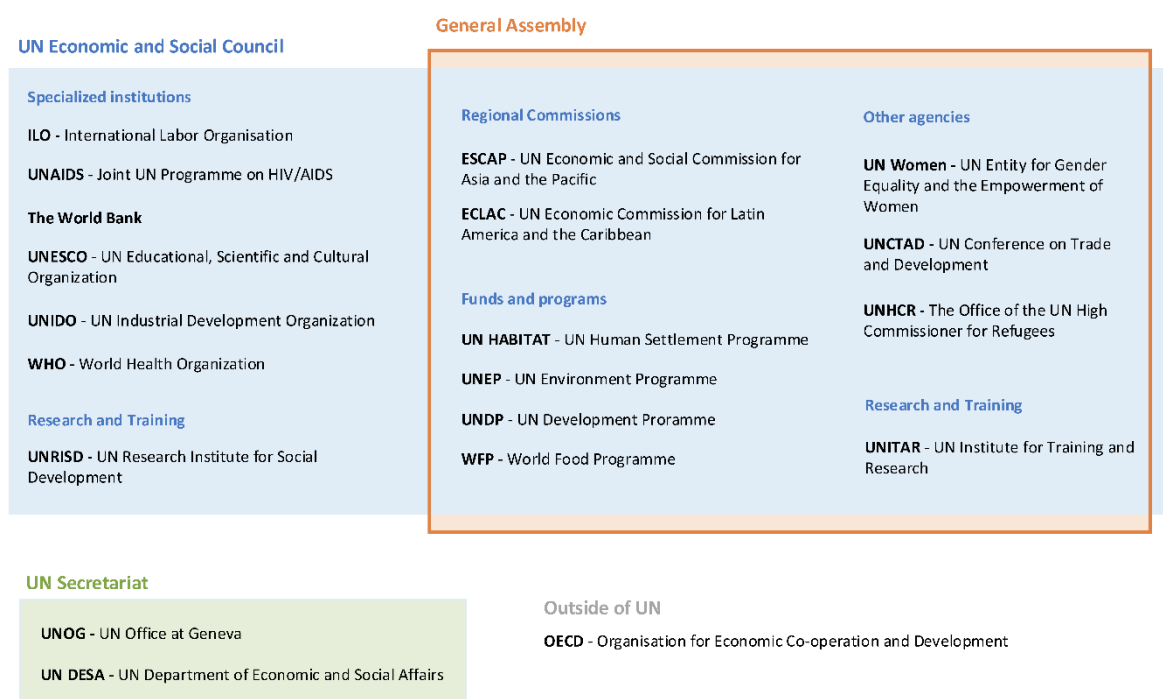


Figure 1 – Diagram of UNTFSSSE Members

This working group was created following a conference organized by UNRISD in 2012 on the social and solidarity economy. It was on this occasion and "around a cup of coffee" that several agents from UNRISD, UNDP, ILO and UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) suggested the creation of an inter-agency discussion space dedicated to the thematic: *"Seeing the interest we said, well, it would be important to have an interagency spaces in which we can try to increase the visibility of social and solidarity economy and to coordinate*

the different initiatives that the institutions had on social and solidarity economy" (extract from interview with a retired ILO agent). At the first meeting, held in September 2013, fourteen agencies were represented, which clearly illustrates the enthusiasm generated by the creation of this working group.

On the other hand, the level of attendance of members and observers over the years is in practice difficult to collect, as the working group does not methodically monitor the arrival and departure of members³. In fact, this working group is deliberately not formalized, in other words, it has no legal form of its own, as *"the bureaucracy is killing everything"* (extract from an interview with a retired ILO official). In concrete terms, several agencies such as UN Women and WHO are counted among the Task Force's "members" but have not participated in meetings for several years. In the case of UN Women, for whom I was able to speak with an officer, she told me that she no longer even read the e-mails circulating about UNTFSSSE, due to lack of time. As a result, she was unaware that the draft resolution at UNGA was going to materialize a few days after our meeting. Another example would be the FAO, an agency that was very involved at the start of UNTFSSSE, then totally absent from the discussions following the departure of its representative. The meeting of March 7, 2023 marked the return of the FAO to the UNTFSSSE, not yet "officialized" on the UNTFSSSE website on June 1st, with the presence of the Latin America regional office, with whom I was able to discuss.

These two examples raise the question of why each of the UN agencies is involved in the Task Force. On this question, the answers of the agents diverge. For the majority, the UNTFSSSE is a simple *"initiative of motivated officials"*. Thus, their presence (or absence) at meetings is justified by a personal appetite: *"there are people behind it who are passionate about SSE, who are pushing it"* (ILO), *"there was not a specific request for our section to work on this specific issue it was more of out of personal interest to attend a few meetings"* (UNCTAD). Other respondents relate these observations to the matter of their mandate to participate in UNTFSSSE activities. The presence of certain UNTFSSSE members is therefore directly linked to their mandate. This is the case of UNDESA, for example, which justifies its participation as follows: *"This is not personal. I think there was a clear linkage between cooperative and SSE. Therefore, since we have that mandate [on cooperatives], it will almost be like a dereliction of duty if we did not participate"*. These various elements must also be put into perspective, considering the budgetary and human (and therefore time) constraints that make it impossible for certain agents interested in the thematic

³ In fact, it is a misuse of language for UNTFSSSE itself to consider that "UN agencies are members" of UNTFSSSE, as there is no formal agreement from institutional governance to participate and/or be associated with this working group.

to participate actively. All this suggests that we should take a closer look at the mandates of UNTFSSSE member agencies.

The diversity of UN agency mandates: different approaches to SSE, but a very marginal position

"There is no UN doctrine on economic or social matters. There may be objectives to be achieved, but there is no doctrine, since States have had different approaches since the creation of the UN. [...] This has faded somewhat over the decades, but the fact remains that each State decides its own economic policy. That's why it's always very complicated to agree on an economic approach at the UN".

- Extract from an interview with a retired UNDP agent (translated from French by the author)

This interview excerpt places us directly in the global political context of the UN, in which it is particularly difficult for Member States to agree on an economic approach, and in particular an economic approach that would concern SSE in our case. As an example, the recent UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 77/281 recognizes SSE as a means of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and not as an economic doctrine. The aim of this section is thus to better understand how the various UN agencies⁴ are addressing SSE in the context of their own mandates.

First of all, it seems appropriate to focus on the ILO, which is to date the only UN agency with a clear mandate to act on SSE since the adoption of the June 10, 2022 conclusion and resolution on SSE and decent work. In addition, this agency has had a specific mandate on cooperatives since its Recommendation 193 of 2002. For twenty years, a "unit" of the Enterprise Department had been entirely dedicated to cooperatives. Its scope of action then covered four areas of activity: normative support for constituents, research, capacity-building and awareness-raising.

"Before, the ILO had an official mandate for cooperatives, but no clear mandate for the SSE. That is why, based on what we were already doing on SSE, especially on national specificities, the organization actively engaged in a general discussion on SSE."

- Extract from an interview with an ILO agent (translated from French by the author)

⁴ Of the eighteen UNTFSSSE member agencies, this section focuses on the seven agencies for which I was able to interview a current employee.

This interview implies that several ILO officials enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in their work to cover SSE, and thus slightly outside their assigned mandate (on cooperatives). This flexibility, made possible by agreement and support from the hierarchy, enabled the ILO to position itself as an expert agency in SSE matters. At present, however, despite the adoption of the conclusion a year ago, there is no "SSE Unit", but rather a "Cooperative Unit"⁵, which illustrates the slow institutionalization of SSE in UN agencies.

With the exception of UNDESA⁶, for all other agencies the mandate is clear: there is no explicit mandate to work on SSE. It would seem, then, that the decision to direct activities towards SSE organizations (or not) is, once again, a matter for the individuals in charge of implementing the mandate assigned to them (see table below). For example, the FAO has a mandate dedicated to family farming, and the agents in charge of the project decide to take a particular interest in agricultural associations and cooperatives. Similarly, UNRISD has a research project on transformative economies, with a strong focus on the SSE. On the other hand, while UNCTAD has a mandate to work on social entrepreneurship, the officer I spoke to told me that he didn't feel he was working on the SSE.

Agency	Thematic mandate that enables SSE to be addressed	Mandate expressed as specific to SSE entities	Number of staff working on SSE (approx.)
ILO	Decent Work	SSE (2022), Cooperatives (2002)	≈ 10
UNDESA	SDGs / Social Policy	Cooperatives (1992)	2
FAO	Family Farming		4 (not 100%)
ECLAC	Economic Development		1
UNRISD	Transformative Economies (research)		2
UNCTAD	Social Entrepreneurship		?
UN Women	Women Economic Empowerment / Human Rights (research)		?

Table – SSE-related UN agency mandates and human resources

⁵ The question of replacing the cooperative unit by a social economy unit is currently the subject of lengthy debate within the agency and international SSE networks.

⁶ Since 1992, UNDESA has been responsible for producing the biennial report for the UNGA resolution on the role of cooperatives in social development.

The table above also illustrates the very marginal place given to SSE within UN agencies, given the limited number of staff working on the thematic. At UNDESA, only two of the agency's 500 staff members work on SSE, and at the ILO only around ten out of a total of 1,100 staff members at the Geneva headquarters. Once again, this information serves to temper the claim that UN agencies are investing heavily in the SSE.

The elements listed above, therefore, seem to illustrate a strategy of change within UN agencies that could be described as a renovation strategy (Louis and Maertens, 2014). In other words, the agencies are proposing forms of reformulation of their mandates, reinterpretation or even redefinition of priorities, while minimizing the out-of-mandate aspect of their activities. In order to gain a better understanding of the internal dynamics of UN agencies, we will first look at the role of officials, the individuals who bring the agencies to life, and then at the other levers of decision-making and action within the UN: the member states (also known as constituents) who make up the agencies' governing bodies and participate in the negotiation of international texts.

The central role of UN agents in prioritizing SSE within their mandate

This section looks at the role of UN agents who claim to work on SSE, as part of their explicit mandate or its implicit interpretation. During the interviews, I noticed that several people were repeatedly cited by the interviewees as having done a lot for the visibility and recognition of the SSE within UN agencies. Four personalities, all now retired, thus emerged from the discussions, and illustrate the various individual levers available to UN agents.

Peter Utting, former Deputy Director of UNRISD, launched the research program on transformative economies in his agency and was the initiator of UNTFSSSE, which he chaired during its first year. It was over coffee in 2012 that he proposed to colleagues from other agencies the creation of inter-agency discussion forums dedicated to the SSE. He managed to muster the necessary resources to launch this informal initiative and organize the first meetings, which have become routine over the years. This example illustrates the effects of the mobilization of an individual, the informal freedoms of UN agents that can have institutional repercussions.

Jürgen Schwettmann and Vic Van Vuuren illustrate the power of individuals in UN agencies, and in particular their ability to raise awareness of specific issues and mobilize the necessary resources. Both have held positions of responsibility within the ILO and have brought their personal convictions to bear on the visibility of the SSE thematic. For example, while Jürgen Schwettmann was Director of the Partnerships and Development Cooperation Department

(PARDEV) from 2012 to 2015, he was a key interlocutor for Peter Utting at the launch of UNTFSSSE. Vic Van Vuuren was Director of the Enterprise Department from 2016 to 2022 and Chair of UNTFSSSE. While he frequently repeats that "SSE is the best kept secret in the world", he has also mobilized the resources at his disposal to offer greater visibility to the SSE, as he explains in the interview extract below.

"I was able to persuade the Governing Body of the ILO to put the social and solidarity economy on its annual conference in 2022. It was the first time in the history of the ILO and in the UN that the social and solidarity economy was discussed in a formal way. And out of that, we developed a strategy on how to take the social economy forward. So, it's all very new at the ILO level that we are now focusing not just on cooperatives, but on the broader social and solidarity economy and its impact in reducing the social deficit, creating jobs, decent jobs, etc."

- Extract from an interview with Vic Van Vuuren

The question of the influence of the hierarchy by individuals in positions of responsibility needs to be qualified, however, as other factors come into play in decision-making, including the wishes of constituents and the sensitivity of people higher up the hierarchy. Still on the example of the ILO, Director General Guy Ryder's interest in the cooperative movement was recalled by respondents as an institutional support in favor of the SSE.

Roberto Di Meglio was the fourth person cited by respondents as having played a key role in raising the profile of the SSE at the UN. Roberto Di Meglio began working in the ILO's Cooperatives Unit in 1989. As Senior Specialist on SSE and Local Economic Development, his time at the ILO has been best marked by the regular organization of the ILO SSE Academy⁷ since 2010. His personal trajectory has also been a valuable resource in mobilizing agencies and agents around UNTFSSSE. Indeed, he worked for over 15 years in Latin America and made contacts with a number of people whom he then invited to join UNTFSSSE, as illustrated by the interview extract below.

"The person who was in charge of being the focal point [for the UNTFSSSE] move away to England. And so ECLAC stayed with no representation, and this was based in the division of social affairs or social development, and now the issue is

⁷ "The ILO Social and Solidarity Economy Academy (SSE Academy) is an interregional training opportunity gathering practitioners and policymakers from all around the world, to share their experiences and meet leading SSE specialists. This high-level capacity building program on SSE was proposed by more than 200 practitioners on the occasion of the ILO Regional Conference on Social Economy held in Johannesburg, in October 2009." Extract from the ILO Academy on SSE website, consulted on June 1, 2023.

in the division of production and productivity. We had contact with Roberto Di Meglio because Roberto worked in Chile in the ILO office some years ago and he was friend of a colleague from this division. We made the link with the Task Force through Roberto. And so, we took part in the Task Force, and we started working in the Latin America chapter of the Task Force."

- Extract from an interview with an ECLAC agent

This interview excerpt thus illustrates the role of interpersonal relations in the UN staff's networking and involvement in UNTFSSSE.

The quote below also addresses the difficulties and consequences of this strong personalization of interest in SSE within UN agencies. The main consequence is indeed the question of the continuity of involvement in SSE-related thematic following the departure of individuals. For example, in the case of ECLAC, but also of the FAO as we saw above, the official who represented the agency in the UNTFSSSE left his post. His successor, who was probably less interested in SSE, did not take over the representation at UNTFSSSE, thus creating a break in the agency's presence.

These different elements on the important role played by individuals in making the SSE visible and promoting it within the UN agencies may call into question whether there is a specificity of people working on this thematic.

"Sincerely, it's something I'd like to have the time to study one day, because I have the impression that the people who work on cooperatives first of all, but we can extend this to the SSE, there's something in common in terms of value, in terms of sensitivity. This is something that struck me a lot and that I didn't see. Maybe because I had "my nose to the grindstone", but with hindsight, I realize it now. There's a unifying element for people working on this thematic. And you can see that, even within the Task Force, when we discuss things, there's actually something, there's a different sensibility. I don't want to say that these people are perfect and have no faults. I don't think we should be too extreme or naive about that either. [...] I saw it very early on when I started in the unit. There were even other colleagues who felt that there was something different in the cooperative unit, in terms of atmosphere, in terms of the way of working. There's something different about it, and in hindsight, I say to myself, maybe the thematic we're working on means that... well, if you really want to persevere in it, you have to share a minimum of values".

- Extract from an interview with an ILO agent (translated from French by the author)

This interview excerpt paves the way for further research on this subject, but it does allow us to put forward a few hypotheses: people who work on SSE (over a long period) within UN agencies seem to have a particular affinity with SSE and share the values promoted. This would indirectly create better relations and working conditions within the departments in charge of SSE. A very concrete example of the application of values promoted through SSE is UNRISD's decision to put an end to unpaid internship contracts (a widespread practice within the UN) and offer students paid junior consultancy contracts.

Moreover, it is worth remembering that all these individual impulses have always taken place within the framework of the agents' mandate.

"We cannot focus on everything that the resolution is asking. So, we have to choose that this year we'll focus on this and then next year we'll focus on something else. Because it's also asking to support to agriculture and women led cooperatives, so we don't have the capacity to do everything all at once. Now where does the personal conviction come? Maybe the personal conviction comes in which elements of the resolution we are going to support this year. So, you know, maybe if it wasn't me, maybe somebody else would say, look let's focus this year on women led cooperative because you know the empowerment of women is also an important international agenda issue."

- Extract from an interview with an UNCTAD agent

This interview extract clearly illustrates the adjustment work carried out by UN agents, who decide on the application modalities of their mandate and thus their interpretation of the priorities to be implemented. We are therefore looking directly at the renovation strategies used by agents to bring about change, to orient UN activities towards SSE. This work is carried out in the context of the mandate available to the agents, which then invites us to pay more attention to the definition of the mandates of UN agencies and the consideration of SSE in their elaboration.

The institutionalization of UN interest in SSE as driven by the commitment of UN constituents

The role played by individuals in promoting the interest and visibility of the SSE within UN agencies is indisputable in view of the elements discussed above. However, these personal investments are not enough to speak of genuine recognition, or even interest, in the SSE on the part of the UN as a whole. If we look specifically at the ILO, for example, the impetus provided by certain agents is undeniable, as we have already seen, but it is important to remember that the request to take an interest in the SSE came from the ILO's constituents first.

The ILO is a tripartite UN agency. Its constituents are therefore not only Member States, but also representatives of employers' and workers' unions. In 2009, following the economic crisis of 2008, it was the ILO's constituents who called for the organization of a regional conference, held in Johannesburg⁸, on the SSE as a response to the crisis in Africa. This first SSE event is considered by many to have been a "trigger". Indeed, following this conference, the demand for a training offer on the SSE emerged: thus, was created the ILO Academy on the SSE. In 2022, it was again at the request of workers' representatives that the ILO organized a tripartite discussion on the SSE on the 110th International Labor Conference.

The fact that the SSE is discussed in the assembly of a UN agency also illustrates "the UN interest in SSE", but in practice this concerns very different actors. Indeed, UN staff have no power to act in these negotiating forums, where it is the Member States (and other constituents where applicable) who decide on the direction and future of the agency. Still in the case of the ILO, the June 10, 2022, conclusion on decent work and the SSE led to the unanimous adoption of a definition of the SSE: a world premiere. This event was widely publicized by SSE actors, who saw it as a major recognition of the SSE by the UN. However, in practice, the interest accorded to a thematic by a UN agency from an institutional point of view is measured more by the importance given to it in the biennial program and budget.

"I spoke earlier about the program and budget that will start in 2024. To be more "technical", in internal jargon, we have different lines in the program and budget. So, it's the organization's strategy over the next two years. So, we're divided into products. There are several products, one for example on everything to do with gender equality, another on fundamental rights and principles at work, and so on. We have different types of products, so before we were in a product that was linked to our [Enterprise] department as a whole. Now we're going to have to report on our own separate product. So, SSE will have its own component in the budget program, whereas before we were "drowned", in that of the department which grouped together five units. So that's already a very concrete element. It's already changing the way things are done, even from an institutional point of view. We're a little more autonomous, but now we need to translate that into human and financial resources. So, some things have started to change, but not totally yet."

- Extract from an interview with an ILO agent (translated from French by the author)

⁸ At the time, Jürgen Schwettmann was Director of the ILO's Regional Office, and Vic Van Vuuren was Director of the ILO's South Africa Office. They were both involved in the organization of the conference.

This interview excerpt clearly shows that the introduction of SSE into their agency's programs and budgets represents strong support from their institution. This opens up the possibility of greater recognition for the work carried out (which will therefore be carried out in direct application of the mandate, and no longer through its interpretation), as well as better human and financial resources. Nevertheless, as the interview extract below illustrates, mentioning SSE in programs, budgets or action plans (depending on how each agency calls it) does not systematically lead to access to additional resources. A new budget line may simply give greater visibility to existing work, without opening the door to additional resources.

In this section, we've talked a lot about the ILO, as it's the only agency to date with a clear mandate on SSE, but discussions between the governing bodies of the various agencies to integrate SSE into their action plans do exist in other agencies. During our interviews, we heard that the FAO regional office for Latin America intends to include SSE in its next action plan, currently under preparation. Conversely, other agencies, whether UNTFSSSE members or not, are a long way from these discussions which would make it possible to include SSE in the institution's priorities.

On April 18, 2023, by adopting by consensus the resolution 77/281 "Promoting Social and Solidarity for Sustainable Development" at the UN General Assembly, UN Member States sent a message of support for the SSE and their intention to include it in the activities of UN agencies working to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, as illustrated by the extract below.

"Encourages relevant entities of the United Nations development system, including United Nations country teams, to give due consideration to the social and solidarity economy as part of their planning and programming instruments, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, so as to provide support to States, upon their request and in accordance with their mandates and to identify, formulate, implement and assess coherent and enabling policy measures and frameworks for developing the social and solidarity economy as a tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and in this regard acknowledges the work of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy"

- Extract from resolution 77/281, 2nd operational paragraph

However, the transposition of these intentions into concrete consequences within the UN system is not systematic. Some of those interviewed were even skeptical about the effects of this resolution.

"I don't know that there's going to be much consequence at the global within the UN system. Consequence of that is that we've got this instrument that we can use to our advantage in taking forward the debate of the SSE and that depends then on the players of the UN Task Force, how they're going to use that, how are we going to take it, the ILO, the different UN agencies. Unless how we use that to our advantage otherwise it can just be a resolution that's passed and forgotten. So, it's going to need proactive leadership to make this work to our benefit."

- Extract from an interview with Vic Van Vuuren

This interview extract reminds us of that recognition of the SSE in an international text does not systematically translate into additional resources. However, this mention of the SSE will be a very useful reference point for promoting discussions on the SSE within the agencies. Recognition of the SSE by international texts, such as this resolution, would ultimately have boomerang effects for UN staff: staff highlight the SSE thematic in their activities and with their governing bodies, who then decide to place the thematic on the agenda of international discussions, these discussions then produce reference texts that are either directly transposed into action plans (implemented by UN staff), or mobilized as references by staff to obtain additional resources, or forgotten and unused. So, once again, the leadership of individuals who take up the theme within the UN plays a central role in the application of this UN interest in the SSE.

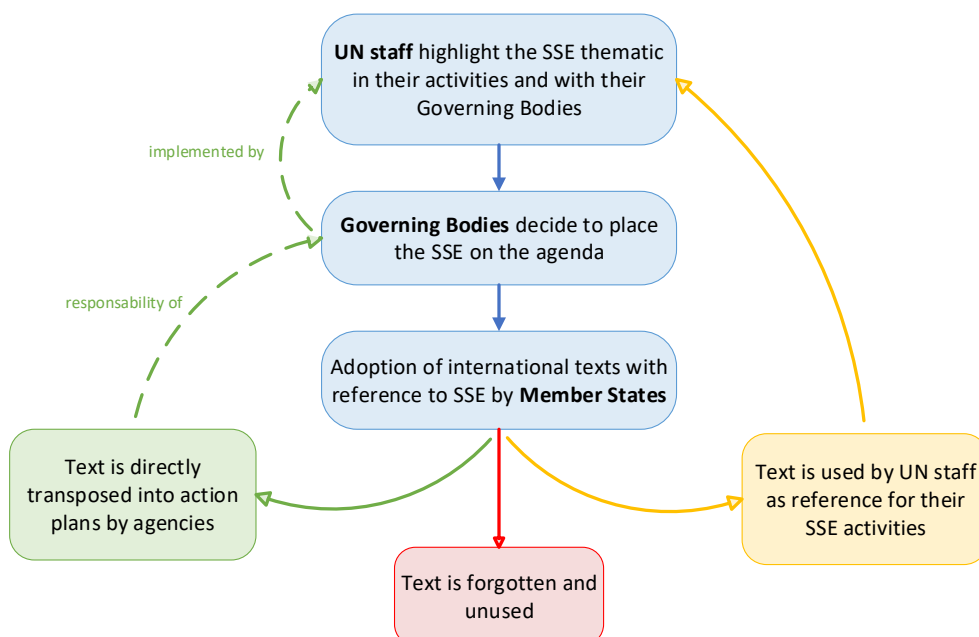


Figure 2 – Diagram of boomerang effects of the adoption of international texts on UN staff

Finally, resolution 77/281 gave institutional recognition to the UNTFSSSE. This Task Force, often cited as the epitome of "the UN interest in the SSE", had never before been mentioned in an official UN text, preferring its informal status as mentioned above. The General Assembly mandates UNTFSSSE to produce a report on the contribution of SSE to the achievement of the SDGs for its 79th session. In the end, this request isn't all that surprising, given that it was this same Task Force that produced the background and justification for this resolution for the member states that supported the project. Once again, we can see that the various impulses and leadership provided by individuals, whether informal or through interpretation of the mandate, are gradually translating into an institutionalization made possible by the support of Member States (and other constituents where applicable).

Conclusion

The UNTFSSSE is often presented as the symbol of the UN interest and dynamism in the social and solidarity economy. However, this paper has taught us to qualify the high level of activity of this Task Force, which remains an informal forum for exchange, with certain irregularities in the level of participation of its twenty members and fourteen observers. Furthermore, the UN interest in SSE should not be analyzed as a whole. It is important to distinguish the actions of UN agents from the institutional positions validated by multilateral governance⁹. Thus, without underestimating the strong dynamism of the agents involved, on the scale of the UN, the SSE occupies a very restricted place, on the bangs of major global concerns.

This paper has, however, revealed a kind of change of scale for discussions on the SSE within the UN. A few years ago, discussions took place in the UN cafeteria, then became routine in multi-stakeholder meetings, and most recently have been discussed in multilateral arenas, at the International Labor Conference in 2022 and the General Assembly in 2023. The absence of a clear mandate for the SSE has not, however, prevented staff from working on this thematic, which they see as central to the implementation of the mandate given to them. Indeed, as part of a strategy of renovation in favor of the SSE, certain agents benefiting from the support of their superiors can propose their own interpretation of the mandate.

⁹ As we come to our conclusions, it is worth reiterating that the various elements reported and analyzed in this paper concern only some of the agencies involved in SSE-related thematic areas, and members of UNTFSSSE. The initial conclusions and analyses can in no way be automatically transposed to all other UN agencies, which may be organized differently.

The question of agents' freedom in applying the mandate also raises the question of their sensitivity to the values promoted by the SSE. Although this would require further research, it would seem that agents who invest a great deal of time in the thematic share the values of the SSE, which creates unique working conditions. However, the scope for innovation and the application of SSE values in practice are limited by the bureaucratic constraints imposed by the UN. In practice, therefore, innovations are produced on the margins, often informally and with very few resources.

Finally, it seems that this paper opens up new research perspectives. Indeed, while this paper has focused solely on UN agencies and their agents, it would seem relevant to look at the articulation of their work with the other actors in the transnational SSE public action network. The role of member states and the themes they wish to promote within the UN would merit particular attention, in order to better grasp the levers that facilitate the supranational institutionalization of the SSE. The role of transnational SSE promotion networks would also be of interest, given their historical proximity to UN officials. For example, several UN officials met each other at the Mont-Blanc Meetings¹⁰, where they used to take part. Finally, while the UN produces its own expertise on the SSE, it would also be relevant to look at relations with the various researchers (and international research networks) on the SSE. The latter are sometimes solicited by agencies as outside experts, but there is still little visibility on the results of these requests, and how they are used. We therefore have a fine research program to pursue the question of international recognition of the SSE.

¹⁰ The Mont Blanc Meetings is an international conference organized every two years since 2002, initially as an alternative response to the Davos Forum. The event aims to bring together SSE actors from around the world, as well as policy makers and UN officials, to promote the exchange of best practice and the construction of a common roadmap. This event is organized by the association now known as SSE International Forum.

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Marion POUZOULET



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