Conceptualizing Solidarity Economy. Mapping Its Diversity

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ABSTRACT:

Amid recent hype over efforts to give capitalism a more human face, an alternative movement – the movement for a social and solidarity economy (SSE) – has slowly been gathering steam. This movement, which really consists of a networked set of very diverse initiatives ranging from consumer cooperatives to community gardens and fair trade, seeks not simply to compel greater charity from the rich or to channel profit-making towards social ends. Rather, it seeks to forge alternative economies around principles of social solidarity, cooperation, and community-based development. This paper chronicles the emergence of the solidarity economy concept and maps the rise of a global SSE movement, from its purported origins in Western Europe and Latin America to the creation and consolidation of an intercontinental network for the social and solidarity economy. I chart the movement’s loose definitional boundaries and I assess the prominent role of practitioners in the existing research on SSE. I argue that the movement’s potential lies not in its generation of entirely new economic relations or in clearly delimited sectors, but in its ability to put already existing (non-capitalist) economic relations into motion. The movement draws its energy not from revolutionary theory, but rather roots itself in the proliferating number of economic experiments already taking place around the globe.

While the open-ended nature of the movement has facilitated its spread around the globe, the diversity of initiatives has also presented problems of incoherence. The criteria for including or excluding certain types of organizations or activities within the social and solidarity economy differ from one study to another. The definitions and what is covered vary from one country or region to another. The evaluation methods are not constant from one institutional context to another. For some authors, the social economy and the solidarity economy are virtually synonymous and constitute a specific sector of the economy. Nevertheless it remains a difficult sector to delineate, covering an extremely wide range of views and practices. For other authors, social economy and solidarity economy are distinct. Whereas the social economy might constitute a discrete sector, the solidarity economy cuts across state, market and third sectors. And for yet others the point of solidarity
economy is not to find a sectoral niche within capitalist economies but to bring about radical transformation. These diverse agendas and outlooks make it difficult for researchers trying to study the global movement. Nonetheless, out of this diversity of perspectives has emerged an initiative to map solidarity economy movements around the globe. The mapping project might not be precise with its categories, but it may bring visibility to the movement and new data for researchers to work with. As part of this global mapping initiative, this paper presents the results of research project mapping solidarity economy in Philadelphia, PA, USA.

Sources


Miller, Ethan. 2006. “Other Economies are Possible,” *Dollars and Sense*.
