The political mandate of SSE through enhancing women's role as agents of social transformation

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Abstract: Women may be considered at the core of SSE social goals, as "beneficiaries" of SSE policies and enterprises tackling with poverty and exclusion, and at the core of SSE of the SSE governance issue, underlying centre/periphery power relations in SSE. As far as their responsibilities and place in the governance are concerned, the women in SSE appear in a more fragile situation than at first glance. Moreover, three global evolutions affect women empowerment through SSE: increasing "individuation" and importance of "care" in women position in SSE labour forces; standardization of management and challenging assignment for managers in promoting diversity; renewal of the "individual innovative entrepreneur" and potential decline of collective organisations. Promoting women’s role within SSE is in the common interests of men and women, and of a enhanced credibility of SSE, based on diversity and proximity.

Key words: social and solidarity economy, gender, social transformation, empowerment, management,

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Women represent a large part of social and solidarity economy (SSE) working forces, through self-help organizations, care services, local projects or cooperatives. Banks and microfinance organizations consider that women have good repayment capacities.

Recent initiatives in micro-credit, health or education are encouraging as long as they do not maintain women as mere beneficiaries whose essential needs are to be met, but acknowledge their role as key political players and consider that women can build their self-esteem and capacity to act as equal partners in a transformed society and economy.

The difficulty comes from a common view in our Western countries, which consider women's or poverty issues not as global questions, but as 'apart', to be solved only as a result of main global economic or social issues.

Even if a majority of SSE (social and solidarity economy) incumbents are female, women have to struggle to access responsibility and visibility in SSE organizations. They remain under-represented in governance bodies, they are relegated in « women-assigned » jobs such as in care, and they may even face social or cultural abuse.

There are at least two complementary ways of considering women issue within SSE:

- at the core of SSE social goals: women as "beneficiaries" of SSE policies and enterprises tackling with poverty and exclusion;

- at the core of SSE of the SSE governance issue: women as a mechanism underlying centre/periphery power relations in SSE.

I will look forward to these two dimensions, try to analyse their possible interactions and to highlight the challenges to be faced.
My paper is not an academic research. It is based on my personal experience as a SSE manager and author of some papers on its specific legal framework and management. It sets out several challenges for actors which could also be grounds for research.

In the first part of this paper, I will show that women’s “empowerment” through SSE is promoted and that women position is more favourable in this sector than in others. Nevertheless, the different roles really devoted to women in SSE are to be clarified: are they consumers, providers of services or actors of social change?

As far as their responsibilities and place in the governance are concerned, the women in SSE appear in a more fragile situation than at first glance. Moreover, the impact of global evolutions which affect social and solidarity economy is to be analysed. In the second part of this paper, I will analyse three particular trends which affect women empowerment:

- increasing "individuation" and importance of "care" in women position in SSE labour forces:

Societies in Europe are becoming societies of free individuals linked by contractual relationships. This situation derives from a process that has marked human progress in the Western world: individuation. Some people talk about an “anthropological crisis” (Lipietz, 2012) because it concerns the most fundamental aspects of human life in society.

There are two obvious factors which put this evolution in the core of a “gender and SSE” question: solitude and ageing. Countries of the “old” Europe are particularly affected by both. As the “care” response is not technological in nature, but personal, the response will come from organisations that not only participate in the economy but also create social ties. Moreover, most care workers are women.

The place and role of women as care service providers, particularly in SSE will be more and more important in our "modern" societies. Will women be mere labour forces or agents of social transformation in a "care society?"

- standardization of management and challenging assignment for managers in promoting diversity:

Without going so far as to adopt an essentialist point of view of the specific role of women in the organizations, one can easily assert that they contribute to diversity, which is a recipe for overwhelming the crisis and to transform the world. But neither are many women in leading positions to promote differentiated management nor, even if women would promote a different style of management (which has to be proven), will it be easy for them to innovate as individual managers.

My experience as a SSE manager for 40 years, both in health and social welfare and in cooperative bank is that the management tools and methods that SSE enterprises are having to adopt like other types of organisations get progressively aligned on the ones of large capital companies, the ones that have precisely reduced the human dimension in their organisations. Without questioning the relevance of the reference framework, we are destroying the SSE’s specific characteristic with one hand while promoting them with the other (Alix, 2013a).

It is one of the main manager’s current challenge to build a management model ‘from the bottom up’, so that the theoretical framework can be adjusted according to practical considerations. It becomes more and more complex for managers to brave standards. Personal motivation is one of the essential prerequisite for achieving this goal: this is why enterprises need managers for whom diversity forms part of the day-to-day way of life, for instance women.
These principles that apply to companies in general are vital in the social and solidarity economy, since the latter’s organisational model, constantly being challenged, has to be supported by managers motivated to innovate and to act differently from mainstream.

The place of women to favour diversity and those types of organisation in which communication is oriented towards transforming the rules of community/society is crucial for SSE. Will women be motivated enough to meet the challenge both to become managers and to promote different ways of thinking?

- renewal of the “individual innovative entrepreneur” and potential decline of collective organisations:

On the one hand, social and solidarity economy is used to describe private, non-capitalist or a-capitalist organisations, with special status and rules: cooperatives, associations and mutuals, and sometimes foundations. The social economy also refers to principles and values: sharing of objectives and resources within people-centred companies (not companies with shareholders), whereby groups of people develop economic solutions according to their needs.

On the other hand, social enterprises, social entrepreneurship and social business are now pushed to the forefront of the social and economic stage, in the hope that they will provide solutions to the crisis that has been tearing the world apart since 2008. These ‘solutions’ are increasingly being discussed as a potential substitute for the third sector and/or for social economy in the fight against exclusion and poverty and in the search for ‘sustainable development’.

As far as social enterprises are concerned, the status, the process, the governance seem to be viewed as less important, at least less than the existence, close by the economic goal, of a ‘social’ goal and of an entrepreneur, supposed to be at the origin and the guarantee of innovation. This entrepreneur’s figure is more male, endowed with a pioneer spirit, than female. Women are supposed to prefer non for personal profit legal structure.

If less attention is paid to the governance and to the link between the process and the result, what would be the impact on the way women collective initiatives will be treated?

Social and solidarity economy is supposed to rely on a decentralised power, exerted by stakeholders, i.e people -civil society concerned. As a consequence, to exert its very specific political mandate - promoting the response of civil society in economy- SSE should enhance women’s role.

But the evolutions do not automatically contribute in that regard. The three trends underlined above (more and more women in SSE labour forces, a more standardized management and the promotion of the key role of the - individual- entrepreneur) could make it ever harder to promote female management and support for women collective initiatives in SSE within the next years.

Challenges are also opportunities. I will conclude on the political mandate of SSE through enhancing women’s role and the kind of alliances which should be forged in a strategy for change, taking into account the obstacles from SSE on the one hand and the obstacles from women on the other.
1 – The gender equality and women's empowerment in SSE: a favourable but ambiguous situation:

A high percentage of labour forces..

In the UK (Teasdale S, McKay, Phillimore and Teasdale N, 2011), 67% of the third sector workforce is female (compared to 64% in the public sector and 40% in the private sector), most of those in caring roles (59% within health and social care, 13% within education).

The French Social and Solidarity Economy Observatory (ONESS, 2009)\(^1\) states that 67% of working forces in SSE are women (60% in the private sector), in sectors where female employment is traditionally predominant. Women work essentially in non-profit organizations, associations, foundations and mutual societies (about 70% of total employment, compared to 45% in cooperatives and 27% in worker’s cooperatives), specially in social care (75% of total employment), banks and insurance (61%), education (63%) and health (79%).

The UN-Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy\(^2\) (TFSSE) puts gender equality and women’s empowerment at the core of the challenges of sustainable development. Employment in SSE organizations is considered as particularly important for poor women facing labour market discriminations and "work-family conflict". SSE organizations and enterprises are put forward as often providing flexibility in time management, providing opportunities for paid work that can be managed with responsibilities associated with unpaid care work.

... In often poor quality of jobs:

Even in the Northern countries, female work is still analysed as transitioning from informal economy towards decent work.

In the French SSE (ONESS, 2009), only 55% of women have full time jobs, compared to 75% of men. In home care services, the percentage is reduced to 19%. Part-time work is more common than in the rest of economy, including managerial levels: 45,8 % of jobs in 2006, compared to 22,2% in the private sector and 27,4% in the public sector (ONESS, 2009). More than 25% of jobs are temporary contracts, compared to 8% on average; 65% are permanent contracts if one excludes work integration social enterprises (WISE), where temporary contracts are commonly used. The proportion of State-aided contracts reach record levels, even when WISE are excluded: 42% of non profit organisations declare such contracts. State-aided contracts would represent about 15% of the total work in NGOs. Non-profit organisations have often been a testing ground for State-aided employment policy and, as a result, in the front line to invent new employment contracts which are sometimes conceived outside labour law. The mean gross annual remuneration for a full-time permanent job is 29 999€ for women and 35 500€ for men, in all different sectors and enterprises.

In the UK (Teasdale S, McKay, Phillimore and Teasdale N, 2011), the mean gross hourly pay men/women differential is 33% in private sector, 22% in public sector, 16% in the third sector. The gender pay gap is smaller in the third sector than other sectors and almost disappears for higher managers.

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\(^2\) http://www.unrisd.org/tfsse
The gender pay gap for managers is: 10% in private sector, 11% in public sector, 11.3% in the third sector (source 2009 LFS), less than for lower managers and professionals: private sector 27%, public 9%, third sector: 15%.

A more difficult and 'gender-based' access to leadership positions

According to the UN-TFSSE, within agricultural cooperatives, women tend to be more numerous in commodity sectors such as fruits, spices, cereals and dairy, where requirements related to ownership of land and capital investment are often less onerous. Women are often concentrated in low value sectors and may have weaker ties to support organizations such as cooperative unions and federations or other external support organizations.

In France, SSE offers career opportunities. Women represent 54% of managers in SSE (30% in the private sector), but have a more difficult access to leadership positions (director-general, ...) where they are in minority and where the gender pay gap is the highest (20 000€ per year). Women are heavily under-represented in president positions (69 % of NPOs presidents are men) and in large SSE organisations.

In the UK (Teasdale, May 2012, responding to the 2011 SEUK survey), women represented 41 % of board members of social enterprises, 45 % in health and social care, youth, community, childcare, education... Women make up 65% of all managerial and professional positions within the third sector. However, Fergus Lyon and Anne Humbert (Lyon and Humbert, 2013, p.8) point out that, "While the legal form of organisations and age did not appear to impact on the gender make up of boards, the analysis shows that there are significant differences between sectors. In particular, women dominated boards are more likely to be found in sectors that have stereotypically been a focus for women’s employment such as youth and care. In social enterprises where women dominate the boards, 73% of the workforce is female, compared to 47% female workforce in social enterprises with male dominated boards and women making up 57% of the workforce in social enterprises with balanced board". In the UK, organizations with a majority of women on the boards are concentrated in smaller organisations and with a more localized focus.

More and Whitt’s (2000) indicate that in the US men are disproportionately more present on voluntary organisations’ boards, more likely to occupy multiple seats and to be involved in a various number of sectors compared to their female counterparts (“Non-Profit boards in the US remain bastions of the White, male privilege, More and Whitt’s, 2000, quoted by Lyon and Humbert)

Female social entrepreneurs facing stereotypes

Fergus Lyon and Anne Humbert examine the extent to which social enterprises (defined as trading organisations with social objectives) are tackling gender equality issues in governance. " Much of the interest in social enterprise in the UK has been driven by a policy agenda that originated under the New Labour Government ..where social enterprise was seen as a policy vehicle to deliver a range of services ... Similar interests were expressed by the Coalition Government in 2010 although with dramatic cuts in expenditure. They have shifted from focusing on democratically owned (or socially governed) organisations to a broader organizational form that includes much of the voluntary and community sector and party of the private sector as well (Lyon&Humbert, 2013, p.4).

Among the 51 representative Ashoka Fellows for France, Belgium and Switzerland, only 16 are women, and they make up the majority in health (unlike in the four other categories: work integration and economic development, education, fight against exclusion, environment and sustainable development).

In a non-published note of the French Minister of Social Affairs, the obstacles towards female social entrepreneurship are identified:
- The women who create their enterprises are more graduated, but have less experience. They explain their entrepreneurial spirit as a mean to create their job.
- They have less capital, a factor which influences the size and the sustainability of their enterprises. The women have less access to finance, specially to the banking system, even if this findings should be updated and nuanced (Marlow, Patton, 2005) as some public policies are specially conceived to help women’access to finance.
- The type of sectors in which they develop their activities are less profitable than the ones chosen by male.
- The sector they invest in are “gender-based” : in 2010, 13 % of the female entrepreneurs are in the field of education, health or social welfare, compared to less than 4,5% of male. More than 10% of female entrepreneurs are involved in family care services, compared to 4% of male. More generally, female entrepreneurs are more numerous in tertiary markets: shops, care services, education, health and social welfare.

Helene Ahl (Ahl, 2006) demonstrates how the founding fathers of economy like Schumpeter, see the "entrepreneur" as a "self-made man", motivated by a desire of conquest, a daring taste and an ambition to create, through his enterprise, a "private kingdom". Recent academic articles use the following adjectives to describe the entrepreneur: very determined, committed, visionary, bold, brave, independant, forward-looking, free, vigorous... These descriptions are not gender-neutral and describe the entrepreneur as a male figure.

Women setting up or running social ventures are more likely to adopt a not for personal profit legal structure. Female led social enterprises are analysed as less profitable and more reliant on grant income (Teasdale and co, 2012).

The gendering of social enterprise is a sectoral differenciation. Women are less represented in larger or more commercially oriented organisations. "The analysis showed that female dominated boards had an average surplus of 4% compared to 5% for male dominated boards" (Lyon&Humbert, 2013, p.14).

Solidarity, egality and ambition for an integrative economy are at the core of values of social entrepreneurship. The latter, according to these gender stereotypes, is considered as providing an easier access to women than a conventional approach. In a essentialist vision, female social entrepreneurs are seen as naturally inclined to care and to work towards the most impoverished people on the one hand. Re-emerges, on the other hand, a "hero conception" of male social entrepreneurs who are described as sorts of contemporary "Robin Hoods" (Macadam & Treanor, 2012), doing justice to oppressed people and being in accordance with his duty to protect and to provide the needs of the weakest.

2 - The "essential" character of governance and diversity in and for SSE:

Governance is not just a matter of composition of the board, but a wide range of complex processes, rights and duties (Chaddad, 2012): property rights, formal authority, incentives, administrative controls, organisational structure, selection of partners, contractualisation methods...

'Collective’ social-economy enterprises” (legal groups of individuals: mutuals, cooperatives, associations) are at the origin of the social and solidarity economy movement. They are governed democratically by their members and the profits are not distributed, or only partially; part of the added value is held in reserve, reserves are assigned to common interest, and ownership is shared (no individual owner). Such organisations apply the principle of ‘double quality’, according to which a person is both employee and shareholder, consumer and shareholder or citizen and shareholder (Alix & de Nanteuil, 2014).
I have pointed (Alix, 2012) that from 1990 to 2010 economic theory has moved on from an approach considering the social economy as a sector (as an answer to government inadequacy and ‘market failure’) to an more partnership-based approach, taking into consideration the different methods of economic coordination (because the market cannot operate without government coordination and cooperation mechanisms). This acknowledges the assertion that the Social Economy is not a sector for the production of goods and services but a specific form of governance based on cooperation, according to principles defined by a network of people.

Indeed, during the same period, legal systems have evolved at a different pace. They do not recognize any specific legal framework for multi-stakeholder initiatives, for public or collective management and proprietorship, or for the hybridisation of resources within the same organisation.

Research in economics has not yet properly underlined how important the method of economic action actually implemented is as a means of distinguishing between organisations. It has not yet established any global theory about the link between different governance methods and the means of production of goods and services. As a result, there is no objective reason not to promote a set of co-existing/pluralistic corporate models rather than just ONE model, in order to encourage diversity as opposed to monoculture.

This trend has to be taken into consideration within a ‘supply and demand’ market, where different types of social enterprises co-exist (see II-3 below).

Jean-Michel Servet (Servet, 2007) recalls that, according to Polanyi, the three forms of economic ‘integration’ (reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange) occur side by side within the same society: “In the same manner in which either reciprocity, redistribution, or householding may occur in a society without being prevalent in it, the principle of barter also may take a subordinate place in a society in which other principles are in the ascendant” (POLANYI, [1944], 2001, p. 59). These different forms of ‘integration’ are not development ‘stages’, and no succession over time is implied. Several secondary forms of ‘integration’ may exist alongside the dominant form, which may disappear for a while and then return.

Being an ideal-type of reciprocity, under the domination of other coordination in the sense of Polanyi, SSE is always in competition with other models. Its particular governance based on reciprocity, which is its decisive competitive strength, is always threatened by the corporate governance model of the joint stock company model.

This is why governance and diversity, and, as a result, the gender issue are at the core of SSE challenges. Three main evolutions in the global environment have a fundamental influence on these topics.
II - FACTORS OF INFLUENCE, WOMEN'S ROLE IN SSE GOVERNANCE AND EVOLUTION OF SSE

1 – The increasing "individuation" and the importance of "care" reinforces the role assigned to women in SSE labour forces:

Societies in Europe are becoming societies of free individuals linked by contractual relationships.

"Individuation" results from the disintegration – particularly marked in Europe – of the family and the church which, traditionally, were havens of solidarity in the form of “holism” (each individual is part of a whole). Of course, the holistic way of life could be oppressive, trapping women in family communities and domestic roles. The irreversible process of individuation has gradually prevailed over reciprocity.

The SSE embodies both a feeling of revolt against this process and the recognition that there are other forms of relationship between individuals besides the State/market relationship: caregiving cannot be bound by commercial considerations. Nowadays, excessive individuation combined with the disappearance of socialisation through work is driving many people to recreate this associationism. Most of people in the 21st century will try to hold on their individual freedoms through self-fulfilment, while recreating, through voluntary work and social and solidarity economy, the warmth of a freely consenting community.

In reciprocity, a pillar of the social and solidarity economy, the “contract” is based on the general idea that people help others because they believe that, one day, someone, the community, will give them help when they need it.

These issues are crystallised in the population ageing process. The people who work with the elderly reflect traditional gender roles. They are mostly women who have entered the job market late, and whose “life” experience carries more weight than their professional skills. The current situation raises some fundamental problem for women, because of the continuing existence of the traditional right to care and of the family, when feminism is partly based on the rejection of “self-sacrifice” within the patriarchy.

As far as the issues that need to be addressed are not only technological in nature, but personal, a climate of trust is therefore vital and the response will come from organisations that not only participate in the economy but also create social ties. The SSE provides a positive response to individuation, notably in regard to:
- elderly people for whom reciprocity is lacking,
- accommodation, as attitudes towards parent/child reciprocity have changed,
- extra-curricular activities.

Large companies and public service delegations cannot be relied upon to solve these problems, the responsibility for which “falls” on the shoulders of SSE and, specially, on women: while self-entreprise is making a strong comeback, SSE is one best way of avoiding domesticity and, while providing solutions to individuation issues, raise the gender question.

No doubt that female working forces in SSE care services will increase significantly in the coming decades. Will it encourage women active participation in transforming our societies towards a better

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3 This chapter reproduces some wording of debates in Confrontations Europe that I have synthesised in a collective work "For an economy of trust in Europe: The contribution of the SSE. From crisis to social change", 2014, under the direction of Nicole Alix and Matthieu de Nanteuil.
understanding of care and reciprocity, as well as in promoting female leadership and more diversity in managing organizations? Some doubts have to be expressed for two reasons at least.

2 - In more standardized management processes, promotion of diversity lies on individual managers:

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) is part of a production system that is based on the sharing of objectives and resources within people-centred companies rather than capital companies, whereby groups of people develop economic solutions according to their needs. Therefore, the SSE is supposed to place a high value on people – every person – and on collective action within economic organisations.

Companies in general, regardless of their status (capital companies, public enterprises, social economy enterprises), are increasingly adopting models and standards that are supposed to help grasp and cope with the world’s complexities.

This rationalisation movement, which has made a useful contribution to the industrialisation of production processes, has also resulted in a loss of sense, innovation, responsiveness, etc. The standardisation of companies is criticised because of the negative effects it produces:
- loss of meaning: unhappiness in the workplace as people follow instructions rather than suggest solutions;
- loss of personal involvement by people and employees in companies, and by voluntary workers in society (Alter, 2009);
- loss of innovation when processes and labels confine rather than promote;
- loss of diversity due to the modelling of companies using management tools and to the failure to recognise the specific role of people-centred companies.

The management science emphasises the need to rehabilitate the working community and cooperation. Way of working of SSE becomes a sort of ideal type (Segrestin, 2012; Zamagni, 2012).

Unfortunately, the social economy has not been spared from this standardization. Over the last 40 years, as a manager in health and banking sectors, I have witnessed the pressure on the social economy enterprises to adopt non-specific management tools and methods. The specific characteristics of people-centred companies in the SSE are being threatened by the ever-widening use of management tools and regulatory systems developed for capital companies. Conversely, we fear and criticise SSE organisations because they often loose their distinctive features (becoming too big, too concentrated, in competition to each other..).

But we do not associate the two phenomena with each other. My theory (Alix, 2013a) is that the management tools and methods that SSE enterprises are having to adopt like other types of organisations are precisely the ones that reduce the human dimension in the organisation of companies. So we are destroying the SSE’s specific characteristics with one hand while promoting them with the other, without questioning the relevance of the reference framework.

Enterprises suffer from the lack of diversity. On average, people are more willing to contribute more actively, regardless of the nature of work to be done, if they know they will have to work with a diversified group of persons (Katherine Philips, quoted by Ann Mari May, 2014). As far as social dimension is concerned, this diversity becomes a real necessity. For instance (May, 2014), male and female economists reveal important differences in their predilection for market solutions as opposed to state solutions. Overall economists tend to prefer market solutions, considered as more efficient, but this tendancy is more present in male than female economists, in Europe and in the States. Women are more likely to accept State intervention to address social inequalities. An increase in the
number of female economists is likely to lead to an environment where the existence of different points of view will be considered as a normal situation and in which individuals will make more efforts to assimilate different ideas.

Nowadays, responsibility to build a management model ‘from the bottom up’ lies on individual managers and not on processes. It is more and more difficult to adjust the theoretical global framework according to practical considerations. This is why enterprises need "atypical" managers, including women. As Norbert Alter (Alter, 2012) expresses so well, "atypical" managers are doing not just what they have been told, but work tirelessly to go beyond their prescribed role to move towards the role they dream to exert; they are responsive to weak signals that allow to interpret situations and they know all the world can be different than the one they are living in.

These principles that apply to companies in general are vital in the social and solidarity economy. Since the latter’s organisational model is constantly being challenged by the other two forms of coordination, the market and redistribution, “ordinary transgression” is a right and a duty for social economy managers (Rousseau, 2009), who must put practical considerations ahead of the norm.

The role of social economy managers – even more than managers of other people-centred organisations – is to measure the differences between theory and practice, to challenge on a daily basis the main theories and methods used to model human activity, and to develop practices and use the power of myth and utopia to create and bring to life a common project for the benefit of all.

This is why promoting diversity and proximity in types of organisations makes sense from a gender point of view. Promoting women’s role and place brings changes into communication, interaction within the enterprises and within the society as a whole.

3 - The renewal of the "individual innovative entrepreneur" does not value the place of women in collective governance of SSE enterprises:

Since the failure of socialist countries, as demonstrated above, the status, the process, the governance seem nowadays less important than the existence, close by the economic goal, of a ‘social’ goal, even if this social goal has to be measured. The result (the social impact) seems to depend more heavily on the existence of an entrepreneur than on a collective process of empowerment.

As seen above, this entrepreneur's figure is more male, endowed with a pioneer spirit, than female. Women are supposed to prefer non for personal profit legal structure.

If less attention is paid to the governance and to the link between the process and the result, it will have an impact on the way women collective initiatives will be treated.

Teasdale (2011) wonders about the impact of increased marketization and professionalization of the third sector on women’s participation. Lyon (2013) examines the extent to which social enterprises are tackling gender equality issues in governance or whether they are reinforcing existing patterns of inequality. "They have shifted from focusing on democratically owned (or socially governed) organisations to a broader organizational form that includes much of the voluntary and community sector and party of the private sector as well".
CONCLUSION

While not a panacea, social and solidarity economy is a specific method of governance, another way of exerting power, a set of practices which helps to re-think the “big theories” in day-to-day action, a way to prove that methods of governance have impact on outcomes and outputs.

As far as democracy, gender and responsibility are concerned, there are differences between cooperatives and mutual societies solutions and corporate solutions – were they ‘social business’ solutions. It influences empowerment and responsibility, women autonomy and the way they are considered (either as consumers, or producers, or as social transformers).

As Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, 2009) observed, there are a great many examples of self-governed enterprises, but, due to a lack of theoretical explanation – based on human choice – major policy decisions are still based on the assumption that individuals do not know how to organise themselves and will always need to be organised by external authorities. The ‘tragedy of the commons’ model shows what people do when they are in a situation that they cannot change, not when they are independent enough to create their own institutions and influence standard setting and perceived benefits. Worse still, when models based on the assumption that individuals do not communicate and cannot change the rules are applied outside their intended scope, they can do more harm than good. For example, they can destroy the institutional capital built up over years of experience.

Social and solidarity economy is only a set of practices, but is really a set of practices which challenges big theories. No big theory is able to cope with the whole world. Women are at the core of this struggle for diversity. In the name of diversity also, social and solidarity economy could be a good field of practice for women, a way to exert their power and responsibility in a specific way, which has to be reinvented permanently, because life is changing every day.

Of course, research has to check whether women act really differently: Do they rely more than men on their day-to-day practices and a sense of the community in their management? do they act in a more interdependent manner, not rejecting complexity and diversity, which is very relevant for SSE?

SSE should promote this type of research programme. Promoting women’s role within SSE is in the common interests of men and women, and of a enhanced credibility of SSE, based on diversity and proximity.

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