



# UNRISD

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

**Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy**  
An UNRISD Conference Co-Hosted with the ILO  
6–8 May 2013, Geneva, Switzerland

**Opening and Introductory Remarks**  
Sarah Cook – Director, UNRISD

On behalf of UNRISD, I am delighted to welcome you all to this conference on Social and Solidarity Economy—co-hosted by UNRISD and the ILO.

I will of course leave the Director General of the ILO, Guy Ryder, to welcome you to this location, but would like to start by expressing the sincere appreciation of all of the UNRISD team to the ILO for an excellent, smooth and productive collaboration, and for hosting us in these premises. We are very pleased that the initial seed of an idea—that had been germinating for a while within UNRISD—grew and blossomed into such a fruitful collaboration: we look forward to a continuing partnership on this issue.

### **Why SSE, why now?**

Recent years have seen a re-emergence, diversification and expansion of activities and organizational forms that are encompassed by some definition of SSE: including (more traditional) cooperatives and mutual associations, social enterprises, self-help groups, fair trade networks, associations of informal sector workers, community currencies... the list can go on.

It seems that fresh attention is being given to this range of activities by social scientists, practitioners and policy makers, and new meanings are being attached to these organizational forms in the current context—a context, as we are all aware, of crisis in our financialized and globalized economic system; of destabilizing levels of inequality; and of shrinking planetary boundaries.

Five years ago, when the world was shocked by financial meltdown, there were some notes of cautious optimism—that the crisis might provide the

necessary impetus to move towards alternative forms of economic organizing, to a “fair globalization” (ILO), refocusing global policy towards inclusion and sustainability, and on issues such as jobs, rights and justice. Overall—at a global level—steps in this direction have been hesitant or stumbling; instead we now see austerity policies imposed not just in the crisis-affected European economies but even—somewhat perversely—in growing economies in the South.

What we do see however, from the ground up (both in North and South, developed or developing economies—though all these distinctions are increasingly blurred and less relevant), are a revival and diversification of “other” forms of economic organizing: cooperatives and mutual associations—some of which weathered the financial crisis better than other financial institutions; organizations firmly grounded in the real economy—linking processes of production, accumulation, exchange, consumption and distribution; with a greater concern for the nature of economic activities as socially embedded, fostering solidaristic relations, of inclusion and justice; possibly with attention to social reproduction and gender roles and relations, and in some cases also prioritizing sustainable environmental management.

Such diverse forms of economic organization were visible last year at Rio+20, particularly at the People’s Summit. Yet, despite 2012 also being the International Year of Cooperatives, we do not see much attention given to such forms across the UN system. As the international community focuses efforts on defining global sustainability goals for the post-2015 period, it seems timely to draw attention to these activities; to attempt to better understand the diverse practices on the ground; to explore what drives them; and to ask what are their potential and limits as an economic form that can contribute to more equitable and sustainable development.

### **What do we hope for from the conference?**

First, many of us are here as social scientists from different disciplines, perspectives or regions with a shared interest in a set of empirical phenomena, from which we might be able to draw lessons, generalizations, even to theorize—in ways that we hope will ultimately have policy relevance. We are not here to present an idealized or romanticized view of these phenomena: but I imagine that many of us share some normative principles that lead us to ask whether we can draw lessons from these experiences for alternative forms of economic arrangements and policies that can be more equitable, sustainable and inclusive.

In learning about these diverse experiences, we hope to come away with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what drives, sustains or constrains these practices: are we, for example, examining forms of coping

and response to crisis that are essentially involutory, with little scope for accumulation and sustainability; do we see solidaristic forms of redistribution—perhaps a form of social protection, or are there opportunities for generating sustainable economic activity? Key questions may relate to how these social or solidarity enterprises or activities interact with other forms of capitalist accumulation and market relations on a national, regional or global scale—through value chains, trade networks, finance and credit institutions. And relatedly, what does this mean for policy—either directly in relation to these institutions, or in shaping the broader policy context that could facilitate their activities and expansion? And with such support, what might be the impact of growth or “scaling-up”, perhaps implying integration into a national and global economy organized on different principles, on the underlying solidaristic values of these organizations?

We are thus pleased to have this opportunity to engage with researchers, policy makers and practitioners to explore the possible role for policy at the global as well as national level.

Beyond these substantive discussions which we are confident will be rich and fruitful, UNRISD also values the act of convening such an event, and the creation of spaces within the UN system for the presentation of often critical research findings and challenging ideas. One of the recognized strengths of UNRISD over its 50 years—and I will note here that this event is one of our major 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary activities—has been its convening capacity: we believe in the importance of connecting researchers from different countries and regions, providing a platform for bringing together diverse viewpoints, critical research, and often marginalized voices; connecting with policy makers and with the international policy community, particularly within the UN system; and—we hope—fostering or strengthening epistemic communities on often neglected issues.

In summary, we hope through this conference to raise the profile of discussions and debates about SSE within the UN system and beyond; to take a critical look at the potential and limits of SSE as a development pathway or alternative form of economic organizing; and to provide a space where voices of researchers and practitioners from different regions and disciplines and perspectives can interact with each other, with national policy makers and with UN system.

Here of course our partnership with the ILO is critical. I would like to thank again the Director-General, Guy Ryder; as well as Jürgen Schwettman (Partnerships and Field Support Department) and Simel Esim (Cooperatives Department) both of whom have enthusiastically supported this activity from

the start; and I know there are many more individuals who have contributed to this smooth collaboration.

We are also very pleased to have the participation of representatives from UN sister agencies including FAO, UNWomen, UNDP and UNCTAD. The UN-Non-Governmental Liason Service (NGLS) has been extremely supportive from the outset when we decided to embark on this project.

### **The conference**

At this point I need to make a few announcements about logistics: There are in fact four days of events ahead of us:

The **main conference** (which runs till Wednesday lunch time) has over 40 researchers from 18 countries who will address a number of key themes—both in plenary and in parallel sessions—please refer to the conference brochure for information and locations. There will be slides announcing the sessions and activities; and most excitingly—and helping to make this an almost paperless event—there is an “app” where you can get links to all the papers and other information. A wireless connection is available.

During the conference, there are a number of **side events**, including poster presentations by PhD students; a practitioners’ forum; book launches; films; and of course this evening’s cocktail hosted by the Ville de Genève. Details of all these events can be found in the conference brochure.

I would particularly like to highlight that several doctoral students and practitioners have made a considerable effort to be here. As we all know, these are the individuals who are often closest to the realities on the ground, who have most time to collect valuable primary data and undertake in-depth empirical analysis, from which we all learn. I hope we will all show solidarity with their efforts by attending their side events, which will be held immediately following the afternoon sessions of the conference (and I believe there is a chance to vote on the best poster session).

On Wednesday afternoon, UN-NGLS is organizing a special session on *Alternative Finance and Complementary Currencies*; and this is followed by the ILO’s meeting on *Trade Unions and Cooperatives*.

Finally, before turning to the other speakers to launch us into the substance that lies ahead, I want to thank those whose generous financial support has made this event possible:

The ILO—specifically the Partnerships and Field Support Department, and the Job Creation and Enterprise Department; Hivos; the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Ville de Genève.

On behalf of UNRISD I would also like to acknowledge the generosity of the funders who provide institutional support—Sida, DFID and the government of Finland.

Sincere thanks of course also go to all those who have made this event a reality through many months of extremely hard work:

- For UNRISD, I would like to acknowledge the Deputy Director, Peter Utting, who has driven this process from the start; Nadine van Dijk with whom you must all have been in contact and has demonstrated amazing organizational skills; along with other colleagues, particularly our communications and outreach team.
- I know that Simel Esim, and her colleagues in the ILO have also put a huge amount of effort into organizing this event—I don't know you all yet, but thank you.
- Staff from both UNRISD and ILO will be busy throughout the conference ensuring all goes smoothly and will be available to answer any questions you may have.

I am very pleased to be joined in this opening session by the ILO's Director General, Guy Ryder; Brazil's National Secretary for Social and Solidarity Economy, Paul Singer; and José Luis Corraggio, who heads the Masters Programme at the General Sarmiento National University, Argentina, and the Latin American Network of Researchers on Social and Solidarity Economy (RILESS).

Sadly we have sincere apologies from Benoit Hamon and from Jean-Louis Laville, both of whom very much regret being unable to attend at the last minute. This means the conference will kick off with a decidedly Latin America flavour, but in subsequent sessions we will of course be hearing about experiences from all regions of the world.

I hope that there will be a few minutes at the end of this session for a short round of questions to the speakers, but we will have to see how the time goes.