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HOW THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY CAN PROMOTE (THE RIGHT TO) SOCIAL PROTECTION

REPORT

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Abstract

Drawing from a review of academic and grey literature as well as practice-based knowledge from organisations engaged in or collaborating with the social and solidarity economy (SSE), this report provides an overview of the various roles the SSE can play in promoting social protection, while also highlighting its strengths and challenges. The findings show that the SSE can contribute to different aspects of social protection through diverse mechanisms and over different time horizons. In the short term, the SSE can address gaps in formal systems as a service provider and by facilitating access to existing systems, particularly benefiting informal economy workers. Over the medium term, the SSE can strengthen people's capacities for participation in (formal) contributory social protection schemes by promoting secure livelihoods, resilience, and mutual support within communities. In the long run, the SSE can promote worker organization, innovation and collective action and as such contribute towards the transformation of social and economic systems. The report underscores the importance of public policies, partnerships, and alliances—particularly with trade unions and (local) governments—for scaling the SSE's contributions while maintaining its values. However, challenges such as resource constraints, tensions between stakeholders, and risks to SSE autonomy require careful navigation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite significant progress in many parts of the world, most of the world's population can count on very limited social protection. According to the ILO's World Social Protection report 2024-26, only 52,4% of the global population was covered by at least one social protection benefit in 2024 (ILO, 2024). Important challenges in realising the right to social protection for all are ongoing globalisation, labour market flexibilization and increasing non-standard forms of employment, increasing wealth and market power concentration, the growth of the digitally mediated gig economy, and the urgent need for a just green transition (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). In particular, several of these trends are giving rise to more informal employment as well as new types of informal or highly precarious work globally (ILO, 2021); (Kilhoffer et al., 2019); (Alfers et al., 2017). The recent Covid-19 crisis further pushed many workers – in particular informal economy workers – into greater income insecurity and into sectors characterised by precarious, hazardous, unprotected, and low-paid conditions, including domestic and care work, waste picking and street vending (Pérez et al., 2022). At the same time many workers, especially informal economy and own account workers, face myriad difficulties in accessing social protection systems and services, and in organising and engaging in collective action to address these barriers to social protection.

The SSE is increasingly promoted as a viable complement or even alternative development model to the current crisis-riddled paradigm, with high potential to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives and to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (e.g. (Utting, 2018); (ILO, 2022b); (ILO, 2017); (Wanyama et al., 2008)). The SSE also has a long track record of organising workers in addition to or in complement to trade unionism (Defourny and Develtere, 2008).

Research and practice suggest that the SSE can play an important role in promoting the right to social protection in the face of challenging trends in the world of work of today and tomorrow. However, available knowledge about the role of the SSE in promoting social protection is spread across many different research strands and topics. There are few systematic overviews of how the SSE can promote the right to social protection for different dimensions, systems, and forms of social protection (see (ILO, 2022a) for a review focused on national social protection systems). This report aims to address this knowledge gap by providing an overview of the different roles of the SSE in promoting social protection, as well as its strengths and challenges. We bring together available academic and grey literature with practice-based knowledge from organisations working in or with the SSE towards better social protection in different contexts.

This report starts from a transformative approach to social protection. In this approach, the scope of social protection goes beyond an ex-post redistribution of resources through social assistance or preventive social insurance, and includes social protection measures or systems that contribute to fulfilling economic, social and cultural rights (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). The objective of social protection thus extends to identifying and addressing the social or structural causes of poverty and vulnerability – among others by addressing ex-ante disadvantages or inequalities in opportunities and outcomes (Devereux and McGregor, 2014); (Plagerson and Ulriksen, 2016). Given the importance of informal support networks and safety nets in many contexts, we consider a broad set of social protection systems and services in the public and

private domain, but also interpersonal and community-level sources of social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004).

Our research methodology involved a literature review on the link between SSE and social protection, and explorations of what this link looks like in practice, through group interviews with SSE organisations, their partner or network organisations, and key informants across three countries. The SSE organisations interviewed are the FMP (Front des Mouvements Populaires) in Rwanda, which works to support cooperatives and their development; the savings and credit cooperative MUFEDE in Burkina Faso which promotes financial inclusion through micro-credit; and the Centre for the Promotion of Women Gregoria Apaza, which promotes women's political and economic empowerment among others by supporting them in developing SSE initiatives (see Box 1.1. Group interviews also involved or were supplemented by interviews with key informants from partner organisations (e.g. We Social Movements (WSM)) or key informants from the national INSP!R networks around the right to social protection, in which all three SSE actors are a member.

Box 1.1 SSE organisations interviewed during the research

- **Gregoria Apaza** is an NGO that has been founded in 1983 and works in the municipality of El Alto on the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of women. They aim to transform existing gender relations that are characterized by inequality in order to empower women. WSM supports the work of Gregoria Apaza around solidarity economy which involves for example the establishment of women associations, access to commercialization, micro-credits and activities in the informal economy including professional and technical training.
- **FMP** is an umbrella organisation of 5 organisations with nearly 39,000 members. Its mission is to defend and promote the socio-economic rights and interests of rural and informal sector workers. It develops training, awareness-raising and information activities throughout the country, as well as support for the socio-economic initiatives of grassroots groups. The FMP works to increase the incomes of over 150 groups (more than 1,850 individuals and households) through training in agro-breeding and beekeeping, as well as technical and financial support. It also helps its members to improve their incomes by granting and supervising micro-credits from their own funds.
- **MUFEDE** is a savings and credit cooperative run mainly by women. It was founded in 1996 and has over 50,000 members. Its mission is to support the emergence and socio-economic development of its members by supporting the creation of income-generating activities, promoting entrepreneurship and women's leadership, through appropriate micro-credit and savings products.

2 THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY (SSE)

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) involves people, organisations, and other entities engaged in activities to serve the collective or general interest, based on the principles of voluntary cooperation, mutual aid and solidarity, democratic and participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and societal needs over capital and profits (ILO, 2022b: 2). Table 2.1 summarises the key values and principles of the SSE. The forms of production, exchange, and consumption in the SSE tend to integrate some combination of economic, social, environmental and cultural objectives (Utting, 2015a). SSE entities can take a variety of organisational forms, including cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises,[1] self-help groups and other entities operating in accordance with the values and principles of the SSE (ILO, 2022b: 2). SSE entities can be found in most sectors of the formal and informal economy – from health and agriculture to finance and recycling – and range from small non-profit organisations with local outreach to large enterprises operating in the international economy (OECD, 2020). As such, SSE activity is connected in many different ways to other types of economic activity linked to the private and public sector, as well as to civil society agency in the political realm (Utting, 2015a).

The SSE has long been regarded as a fringe phenomenon, existing in the margins of the conventional economy. Although its size is still limited in the global economy, the importance of the SSE varies greatly across countries and sectors. The SSE for instance makes up a significant part of plural economies in territories such as Quebec and Kerala (Utting, 2015a). In Kenya, savings and credit cooperatives provide financial services to over 4 million Kenyans and frequently offer services that cannot be found elsewhere (ILO, 2022b); see also case 3). In Argentina, mutuals provide health services to over 2.5 million people – with 7,000 mutuals providing 40 per cent of private health services (ILO, 2022d). The SSE in Tunisia represents 1 per cent of the country's gross domestic product and 0.6 per cent of its labour force; in Turkey involves 16 million members in cooperatives, associations, and foundations; and in Costa Rica 21 percent of the population is member of a cooperative (ILO, 2022b). Millions of self-help groups in India connect an estimated 50 million households to the DAY-NRLM poverty reduction programme (ILO, 2022d).

In addition, data on both the scale and growth of SSE activity indicate that the SSE has been scaling up significantly during different periods in recent history, and today is a significant economic and social actor in its own right. Recent research estimates that globally the cooperative sector alone accounts for 10% of employment directly or through the activities they support (ICA, 2021a); (ILO, 2022d). In 2015, an estimated 760 000 cooperatives and mutual associations in the world had US$18.8 trillion in assets, US$2.4 trillion in annual revenue, and 813.5 million members (Utting, 2015a). The last decades in particular have seen a boom in SSE initiatives in both numbers, scale, and forms (ILO, 2022b); (OECD, 2020). Credit unions report a membership base of 375 million people in 118 countries, and savings and credit cooperatives have accumulated

1 Social enterprise: An entity that utilises market means but primarily to serve social purposes, such as employing and training disadvantaged individuals (for example, persons with disabilities, the long-term unemployed), producing products of special social value, or serving disadvantaged persons in other ways (ILO 2022b).

US$3.2 trillion in assets (ILO, 2022d). A 2020 study estimates that across 12 African countries, social enterprises could provide about 5.5 million direct jobs in 2030 (ILO, 2022b).

In recent decades, three important dynamics are pushing the SSE to play an increasingly important role in social protection. First, social protection has again risen to the top of the policy agenda, driven by global frameworks such as the SDGs, recurrent crises, and the increasing recognition that uncontrolled globalisation and market liberalisation generate deep-rooted and structural sources of inequality and vulnerability. Second, political and economic forces, such as economic liberalism and the costs of crisis recovery, impose constraints or downward pressure on government social spending. This creates space for non-state actors to step in (Utting, 2015a). Third, the growing importance of the SSE as an economic player, in combination with a large absence of legal and policy frameworks, has sparked considerable debate about its potential value but also about emerging risks for the promotion of social protection (ILO, 2022b). This momentum was boosted recently by the adoption of two international resolutions on the SSE by the ILO (ILO, 2022c) and the UN (UNFSSE, 2023).

TABLE 2.1 Key characteristics of the SSE (based on ILO 2022b)

Ethical, social, environmental and cultural objectives: the SSE puts ethics at the centre of economic activity and social (and often environmental) objectives guide the operations of many SSE organisations.
Equitable enterprises and value chains: the organising principles of SSE organisations, enterprises and value chains (i) are either non-profit or 'less-for-profit', rather than primarily for profit, (ii) involve governance arrangements within the workplace that are more democratic and not structured by shareholder interests; and (iii) promote more equitable patterns of income or profit distribution within their structures.
Collective action and economic empowerment: the SSE generally comprises economic agents and citizens engaged in collective action. Organising collectively in cooperatives and other forms may facilitate access to key resources such as credit and transport, as well as enhance bargaining power in the price system. Organising in groups can also play a key role in women's economic empowerment.
Active citizenship and political empowerment: the SSE is about reinvigorating the role of communities and citizens in both the economy and polity. The SSE and related intermediary organisations and networks mobilise to contest public policy and corporate behaviour and advocate for change. They also engage proactively in policy dialogue. In this sense, the SSE is not only focused on the economic empowerment of workers and producers but also on their political empowerment.
Democratic governance: the rules applicable to SSE entities provide for democratic, participatory, and transparent governance, enabling member control, and active participation in setting policies, making decisions, and holding elected representatives accountable. In primary SSE entities, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote). SSE entities at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.
Voluntary membership: members join and remain in SSE entities voluntarily and freely, without penalty or the threat of a penalty for non-membership. Membership in SSE entities is not forced or compulsory and must involve a significant element of choice. SSE entities may engage in voluntary cooperation and mutual support with other SSE entities.
Autonomy and independence: SSE entities are self-governed. They must enjoy autonomy and independence from public authorities and any other entities outside the SSE, and not be subject to undue interference or control. If they enter into agreements with other SSE entities or public and private sector actors, or raise capital from external sources, they must do so on terms consistent with the SSE values and principles.

3 HOW DOES THE SSE PROMOTE SOCIAL PROTECTION? A DIVERSITY OF MECHANISMS

There is a large body of literature on the SSE, although some forms have received more attention than others. Available research tends to have a broad scope, and has made clear that the SSE is relevant for social protection in many different ways, at different levels. This section brings together academic, grey, and practice-based research on the links between the SSE and social protection, to shed light on the diversity of mechanisms through which the SSE can promote (the right to) social protection.

3.1 Facilitating access to formal social protection schemes

The SSE is a vehicle for workers to access existing formal social protection schemes – whether provided by the state, the private sector, or other SSE entities such as health mutuals. Obtaining access to social protection can even be a key incentive to organise into SSE entities for informal economy workers (e.g. home-based workers, agricultural workers, domestic workers, street vendors) (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (ILO, 2022a); (Pérez et al., 2022).

The SSE can promote access to existing social protection schemes in different ways.

First, SSE entities can **raise awareness** among workers about their social protection rights, existing social protection schemes, and the modalities for accessing these. Gregoria Apaza in Bolivia for instance offers a capacity building programme to their women worker-members, in which they discuss the rights of women workers and the benefits of participating in available social protection schemes. In particular, they worked to encourage their women self-employed workers to participate in the national Universal Health Insurance scheme, by highlighting the benefits in terms of access to health care despite existing challenges (e.g. limited coverage) (interview 16/01/2024).

Second, some SSE entities **systematically register their members** to social protection schemes, for instance through collective registration campaigns or group registration agreements with social protection institutes. In Costa Rica, farmer cooperatives for instance concluded group registration agreements with the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS), facilitating access to social security in rural areas. The farmer cooperatives collect and transfer the contributions of their members to this fund, which simplifies administrative procedures and reduces transaction costs (ILO, 2022a).

Third, SSE entities can **facilitate individual registration**, by systematically referring their members to existing social protection systems (see Box 3.1), offering personal assistance in registration, or more indirectly through knowledge and skills development of their members. Of particular

relevance given the increasing digitalization of social protection, is digital skills development. In South Africa for instance, digital trainings provided in the framework of the development of a platform cooperative for domestic workers by worker organisations increased worker-members' digital literacy, and specifically their ability to access online government social security portals during Covid-19 lockdowns (ILO, 2022e). Personal assistance may be provided – and in some contexts is direly needed – to help overcome administrative and procedural obstacles (e.g. the need for identification documents, bank accounts, or online applications) (see e.g. Agarwal et al., 2022).

Fourth, SSE entities can **support members in claiming entitlements**, for instance by providing legal or judicial assistance in case of issues, or referring their members to partner organisations who can provide these services. Indeed, trade unions and informal worker-led organisations are increasingly collaborating with SSE entities to support worker-members who are not (yet) represented by trade unions in claiming social protection entitlements (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). The Mutual Association of Solidarity Services (AMUSSOL) of the Dominican Republic for instance offers its members judicial services, as well as the possibility to ask affiliated trade unions to mediate when employers (e.g. of domestic workers) do not meet their social protection obligations (Guesquière, 2021).

Finally, the SSE is sometimes used as a **framework for targeting** specific social protection programs and benefits. This is the case for instance under Ecuador's 'People's and Solidarity Economy' approach, which directs specific social spending to community sectors, associations, and cooperatives (Nehring, 2012).

Box 3.1 Structural partnership between MUFEDE and the National Social Security Fund in Burkina Faso

One of the key objectives of the savings and credit cooperative MUFEDE in Burkina Faso is to promote members' access to social protection, by integrating different systems – in particular linking up with health mutuals. A key target group is informal economy workers in both urban and rural areas.

MUFEDE relies on several mechanisms to promote access to social protection, including extensive sensitization and awareness raising about existing social protection schemes. In particular, MUFEDE has a structural partnership with the National Social Security Fund (CNSS) – a contributory social security scheme to which informal workers can now voluntarily participate. Through periodic payments to the fund, workers can build a personal safety net (for retirement, in case of work disability, …). MUFEDE systematically refers its members to the CNSS, receiving a commission for each new affiliation. It also structurally collaborates with the CNSS to raise awareness about the fund and the benefits of affiliation –among the members of MUFEDE, but also among other workers in the areas in which MUFEDE operates. CNSS for instance provides MUFEDE with fact sheets and information folders, with simulations of the fees to be paid, and supported MUFEDE in the development of a prospectus on sensitizing the public. CNSS also actively participates in general assemblies and other awareness raising activities of MUFEDE to provide information on the scheme. Although MUFEDE runs into common challenges related to the promotion of contributory schemes in precarious contexts (e.g. instable nature of members' revenues, see also Section 5 Challenges), they see this strategic collaboration with CNSS to promote affiliation as a good practice that can be further scaled up.

Source: interview 15/02/2024

3.2 Providing social protection services

SSE entities can take up an active role in the provision of social protection services, both for their members and for the wider communities in which they are embedded (see e.g. Hermanson et al., 2021). The objective often is to cover particular groups that are otherwise excluded, or to address needs that are not being met by available systems.

In some contexts, **SSE service providers are linked to public social protection** – typically in the sector of health care, social services, or housing (ILO, 2022b); (ILO, 2022a). In Belgium and France for instance, SSE entities have long been fully integrated in the national social protection system. In Rwanda and Ethiopia, community-based health insurance schemes are being rolled out at a large scale as key partners of the national social protection system – in Rwanda these schemes were reaching 86 percent of the targeted population by 2021 (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019); (ILO, 2022d).

In other cases, SSE entities offer **social protection services independently from the state** – frequently addressing the needs of informal economy workers. AMUSSOL for instance offers health insurance to informal economy workers in the Dominican Republic. It has among others created the '*plan viajero'* (travellers' plan) for workers in the transport sector (e.g. mini-bus owners, drivers, conductors, travellers) (Fonteneau et al., 2012). Many SSE entities, in particular those in the Global South, deliver care services to communities and ensure access of its members to food, childcare, or education services (ILO, 2022b); (Yi et al., 2023). More generally, the role of the SSE as a social protection service provider is gaining traction globally with the growing importance of the care economy (Pasi and Misuraca, 2020).

Finally, the SSE has a long history of **organising support and relief services for** their members and communities **in times of crisis** – including during economic downturns, public health epidemics, natural disasters, and in post-conflict settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SSE in this way played a vital role in setting up rapid-response relief and health protection services for their members and communities (OECD, 2020); (ILO, 2020); see also Section 3.4). The SEWA federation in India for instance organised large-scale distributions of food and face masks (SEWA, 2020).

3.3 Taking on specific administrative functions of social protection systems

In some contexts, **public social security systems delegate selected functions**, including social mobilization, affiliation, and contribution collection, to community-based SSE entities (especially mutuals and cooperatives). A key strength of the SSE in this sense is its ability to reach groups that are hard to reach, such as workers in rural or remote areas. Other possible advantages are simplified and thus more accessible administrative procedures, and lower transaction costs (e.g. of collecting contributions) (ILO, 2022a). AMUSSOL for instance takes on a role of intermediary or 'stand-in employer' for its members by collecting contributions to the National Social Security Treasury – either directly or through its various affiliated trade unions. Member-workers, including micro-entrepreneurs and street vendors, are thereby integrated into the national social security system and can access services such as family health insurance, occupational accident insurance, and access to the pension fund.

In certain cases one type of SSE actor may also **take on specific administrative functions for other SSE entities** providing social protection services. MUFEDE in Burkina Faso for instance works closely together with health mutuals. It sensitizes its members about the benefits of mutual health insurance, and acts as a financial intermediary between health mutuals and its own members. MUFEDE collects the health mutual contributions of its members, and transfers these to the accounts of the mutuals (held by MUFEDE). Similarly other organisations – higher education institutions, social enterprises, private sector businesses or health centres – transfer the health mutual contributions for their affiliated employees or members to the account of their health mutual at MUFEDE (interview 15/02/2024).

3.4 Providing informal safety nets and mutual support mechanisms

The SSE critically contributes to informal social protection by fostering mutual support and providing safety nets in everyday life as well as in times of emergency or crises**. Concrete interpersonal support** between members is fostered by the SSE values of mutual aid and solidarity. In a recent study of Peruvian cooperatives, 46% of surveyed members reported that they "*relied on other cooperative members more than any other source*" during difficult times (Hermanson et al., 2021b).

Many SSE entities also set up **social funds through collectively generated resources** that members can access when in need of financial support (Pérez et al., 2022); (Hermanson et al., 2021b). The Moroccan Taitmatine Cooperative for instance provides a social fund financed by the activities of the cooperative, to cover medical costs of their members (through a partnership with a local pharmacy) and to financially support members during major life-events (e.g. funerals, births) (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019). In Rwanda, surpluses from cooperatives were redistributed to members to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis (interview 24/01/2024).

For some categories of SSE entities, such as self-help groups, mutual aid societies (e.g. funeral/burial societies), savings and credit cooperatives, micro-finance organisations, and other community-based risk sharing schemes (e.g. tontines in Senegal), **mutual support or risk sharing is a core objective** and happens in an organised or semi-formalised manner (Bhattamishra and Barrett, 2010). In Kenya the Nairobi Informal Sector Confederation set up a savings and credit cooperative (SACCO) that provided a revolving fund to street vendor members, to cover expenses which they could not finance through bank loans (ILO, 2022e).

3.5 Creating and sustaining decent work and livelihood opportunities

A widely recognized added value of the SSE lies in its ability to **create and sustain employment and livelihood opportunities** (Develtere et al., 2008); (ICA, 2021a); (ILO COOP, 2014); (ILO, 2022b); (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019). In Rwanda, organisations supporting cooperatives affirm that cooperatives, being worker-owned and community-embedded, tend to invest more in preserving employment than the conventional private sector when faced with difficulties (interview 16/01/2024). Overall, the SSE has "*by and large demonstrated a remarkable capacity as employ-*

ers to maintain and create jobs in times of crises where the government and the market failed, including throughout the COVID-19 period" (Yi et al., 2023: 1); (OECD, 2020).

In addition, many SSE entities have the specific objective of **improving incomes and working conditions** for their members. Worker ownership or participatory governance itself also increases the likelihood of SSE employers paying adequate wages and benefits (Yi et al., 2023). Stable income from SSE activities in turn strengthens members' capacities to participate in contributory social protection systems, and more generally to access social services and private social protection services such as crop insurance (interview 24/01/2024); (Hermanson et al., 2021b). For certain types of SSE entities (e.g. cooperatives or social enterprises) stable employment and income is often a prime incentive for workers to join (Hermanson et al., 2021); (Hermanson et al., 2021a). In Rwanda for instance, the Front Mouvements Populaires supports the organisation of retired workers into cooperatives to enable them to supplement their limited public pensions with additional income (interview 24/01/2024).

Part of the SSE focuses specifically on generating stable employment and income opportunities **for categories of workers vulnerable to precarious employment or unemployment**. The SSE has for instance played a critical role in promoting decent work and livelihoods for certain categories of informal economy workers that are typically less well organised and subject to instable incomes, such as waste pickers, domestic workers, or agricultural workers (Pérez et al., 2022); (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (ILO COOP, 2014); (ILO, 2019). As a credit and savings cooperative, MUFEDE in Burkina Faso provides micro-finance to groups of people who individually face large barriers in accessing credit and financial support. The objective is to promote the financial inclusion of disadvantaged groups, so as to empower them to develop stable and decent livelihoods for themselves (interview 15/02/2024).

The focus may also lie on **supporting population groups that face specific barriers** to decent employment, such as migrants, women, or youth. The Front Mouvements Populaires (FMP) in Rwanda supports the organisation of young people into cooperatives and producer associations, to help them transition from education and training into stable and decent livelihoods. Through collective action and mutual support, FMP finds that young people are better placed to gain access to financing (through e.g. micro-credit) and other means of production. In so-called 'farm schools', FMP for instance provides young people with technical training and education on agri-livestock farming, and knowledge and skills development on SSE organisation and the benefits thereof (interview 24/01/2024). Gregoria Apaza in Bolivia offers women entrepreneurs an 'entrepreneurship incubator' that supports them in setting up SSE initiatives. The incubator involves a capacity building package, including knowledge and skills development on the SSE and women workers' rights, and targeted professional trainings. The objective is to offer women the possibility to develop an independent and decent source of income, and more generally to contribute to women's economic and political empowerment (interview 16/01/2024, see also Box Y).

3.6 Supporting worker organisation, identity building, and empowerment towards formalisation

The SSE has been a **key arena for the organisation of workers next to the trade union movement** – in particular for groups of workers who historically have faced barriers to accessing trade unions (e.g. informal economy workers, women workers, migrant workers). The characteristics and

values of the SSE make it a powerful vehicle for building collective worker identity and solidarity, increasing the visibility of workers and the recognition of their work, and fostering worker empowerment (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (ICA, 2021b); (ILO COOP, 2014); see also Box 3.2). This often requires "skilling up in a new mode of work" centred around the SSE's principles of cooperation, solidarity, and participatory or democratic governance – especially for groups of workers who are used to working independently and seeing other workers as competition rather than sources of support (Pérez et al., 2022: 103).

Box 3.2 Organising women around care work in Bolivia

In Bolivia, social norms and values around gender and motherhood place the responsibility for care work with women. This includes paid care work (e.g. domestic work, childcare, elderly care), which is characterised by very poor working conditions and wages, and care work in the household, for which women receive neither wages nor benefits such as social protection. Due to these same social norms and values, many women are not willing to outsource their personal care duties. Combining these care duties with formal employment however is a great challenge, and limits women's ability to generate their own income, achieve economic independence, and have access to formal social protection (especially at old age).

The 'entrepreneurship incubator' organised by Gregoria Apaza supports women in developing their own income generating activities through cooperatives and other collectives. Participants of the 'entrepreneurship incubator' are also integrated in a network of women entrepreneurs that facilitates exchange, organisation, and collective action, where the topic of care work is at the centre of debates and reflections on the right of women to decent and dignified work, and the right of all to receive quality care throughout their lives – which is intimately related to the right to social protection. The SSE thus not only supports women in organising and collectively developing their own livelihoods and incomes, but also creates space for alternative perspectives on social and economic systems, and the organisation of work (cf. Section 3.8). Both of these combined, enable women to find a better balance between the time they have to dedicate to care work, and the time they can invest in their SSE activities.

Nevertheless, Gregoria Apaza also works to address the structural causes of women's double burden of paid work and unpaid care work, and the resulting constraints on women's economic independence and empowerment (see also (Utting, 2015a)). Addressing this has been a primary demand of their entrepreneur-members. An important arena for this work is the national platform on care, through which Gregoria Apaza and other member organisations discuss the social and public co-responsibility of care, new forms of care, and the development of public policies related to care. A priority in terms of advocacy work is the recognition of care as work – both informal care work in the household, and paid care work. To this end, Gregoria Apaza conducts research and raises awareness about the need to change gendered social norms and cultural views about care work, as well as the need for women to organise so as to deal with this issue collectively.

Source: interview 16/01/2024

Many SSE entities also **promote trade union membership** among their members, by actively raising awareness about the benefits of trade unionism, or in the absence of unions supporting their members in starting up union-like structures (Guesquière, 2021); (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). FMP in Rwanda for instance leverages their active role as a service provider to cooperatives to raise awareness about the benefits and importance of trade union membership among cooperative members (interview 24/01/2024). SSE entities have at times also transformed

into formally recognised trade unions, such as the union of home-based manufacturers Ev-Eksen in Turkey (BIA News Network, 2020).

Aside from this, organising into SSE initiatives such as cooperatives or social enterprises can in itself be a way of **directly formalising work**, depending on the possibilities offered by existing SSE regulatory frameworks (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Agarwal et al., 2022). Trade union members for instance created the worker-owned Solid Waste Collection and Handling cooperative (SWaCH) in India in 2007, which became the sole provider of door-to-door waste collection for their local municipality. Although challenges remained in terms of realising labour and social protection rights, this offered cooperative members a rarely seen level of protection through entry in contracts, higher incomes, and improved working conditions (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). Similarly, in Bogotá, Colombia, the Asociación Cooperativa de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) has successfully managed to get the city to authorise a payment system for at-source waste picking (Agarwal and Kothiwal, 2023). In other cases, own-account workers organise into SSE entities such as labour cooperatives to formalise their work and gain access to social protection (Admin, 2021); (ILO, 2021); (Vandaele, 2020); (Guest, 2021). In spite of the need for caution about possible misuse of the SSE to establish disguised employment relationships (see e.g. (Murphy and Dayan, 2021)), this model can offer several advantages compared to conventional private sector intermediaries – including lower fees and greater worker ownership or participatory governance (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Charles et al., 2020); (ILO COOP, 2014).

3.7 Advocating for stronger public social protection

The SSE has increasingly become an active player, and in certain contexts a strategic ally of trade unions, in advocating for more extensive public social protection systems. In some cases, this happens through formal participation of the SSE in 'social dialogue plus' mechanisms alongside workers' and employers' organisations[2] (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Pérez et al., 2022). Advocacy efforts can involve advocating for **greater vertical coverage** of existing schemes, **greater horizontal coverage** of public social protection, and advocacy for the creation of **new schemes** and forms of redistribution – especially in times of crisis. The SEWA Federation in India for instance successfully advocated for income support for their members during the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2020). Similarly in Brazil a strong alliance between the SSE umbrella organisation UNISOL and trade union partners managed to set up social assistance measures through lobbying and a public solidarity campaign (Dias et al., 2022).

The SSE as such performs an important function in advocating for access to social protection **on behalf of informal economy workers**, who are often hard to reach for the trade union movement (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Pérez et al., 2022); (interview 16/01/2024). In response to demands of their agricultural worker-members for instance, MUFEDE in Burkina Faso successfully advocated for universal access to the National Social Security Fund (CNSS), which used to be accessible only to public and private employees. After several campaigns, today any citizen who generates an income can participate in the contributory social protection scheme provided by the

2 Examples of such 'social dialogue plus' or 'institutionalised dialogue' mechanisms include the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) involving community organizations alongside government, workers, and employers, the Commission Nationale de Dialogue Social (CNDS) in Niger where cooperatives join employers and workers. In Mali, the SSE has a formal role in the Economic, Social and Cultural Council as "other stakeholders," and in Colombia, a forum overseeing the ILO Domestic Workers Convention 189 involves the Ministry of Labour, trade unions, and smaller SSE entities focused on domestic work (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023).

CNSS (interview 15/02/2024). In Brazil, the SSE-trade union alliance recently secured the National Solid Waste Policy, which offers increased social security coverage for waste pickers (ILO, 2022e).

The SSE also has a strong track record in advocating for the **legal recognition of informal economy workers** as workers – often in partnership with trade unions (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); see also Box Y). This importantly facilitates both access to public social protection in the short run, and access to trade union membership towards stronger representation in the long run. In the Republic of Korea for instance, the South Korean Home Managers Cooperative works closely with trade unions to call for social recognition and legal protection for domestic workers, including through the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention 189 (ILO COOP, 2014).

4 GOOD PRACTICES AND STRENGTHS OF THE SSE IN PROMOTING SOCIAL PROTECTION

The SSE has various intrinsic characteristics that make it an important actor for promoting (the right to) social protection (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019); (ILO, 2022b); (OECD, 2020). First, the SSE tends to be **locally anchored and embedded in communities**, which in combination with democratic governance allows it to be well in touch with local realities and needs. Services provided by the community for the community can be of significantly higher quality than those generated by the public or private sector. This local embeddedness and ownership also generates a strong **capacity to rapidly mobilise multiple** (financial and non-financial) **resources** from different sources (public sector, businesses, community organisations, individuals, etc.). Second, because of the primacy of people and social purpose, the SSE tends to be **(more) accessible to groups that are being left behind** in social protection, and often addresses societal needs that are not (sufficiently) covered by the conventional economy or government action. Third, democratic governance, local embeddedness, and the ability to rapidly mobilise a range of resources, result in a **high level of resilience of the SSE** and a strong ability to adapt and overcome difficulties – again evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis (ILO, 2020); (OECD, 2020); (Yi et al., 2023). This in turn is linked to a fourth characteristic: a **high capacity for social innovation**. The SSE designs, experiments with, and implements innovative ways for organising economic activity – often with a focus on making economic and social systems more inclusive and sustainable. As such, the SSE is not only resilient itself, but has a strong capacity to increase economic and social resilience in society (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1 Leveraging the strengths of the SSE to maintain services in highly challenging contexts

MUFEDE in Burkina Faso has been facing fierce challenges in their work given a high level of insecurity, political instability, a resulting economic downturn, and massive internal displacement. To the extent possible, MUFEDE tracks their members during displacement and encourages them to remain in the same area. In a few areas, service provision has become impossible and has been put on hold until the situation allows for continuation. In other areas, MUFEDE finds out what organisations or actors are present on the ground and sets up collaborations to keep extending micro-credit, health insurance, and training and education services to their members at their new location. To deal with the surge in unpaid micro-credit lines, MUFEDE has mobilised local saving surpluses as an ad-hoc solution. As for more structural solutions, the organisation has engaged in talks with the government about the possibility of the state covering part of the unpaid micro-credit lines – to allow continued support for the development of livelihoods especially for the vast group of internally displaced persons.

MUFEDE's experience with 'hybrid working' across different types of services and activities, and with establishing close partnerships with other types of actors, contributed importantly to their ability to adapt to these challenges.

Source: interview 15/02/2024

It is also well documented in the literature that the SSE is well placed to tend to multiple, multi-dimensional social protection needs of diverse and hard-to-reach groups in innovative ways. In particular, both the available literature and interviews clearly indicate that the **SSE is of vital importance for promoting social protection for workers in the informal economy**, including workers in rural areas, migrant and seasonal workers, less visible and organised workers (e.g. in the domestic work or waste picking sector), and persons displaced due to climate change or conflict (see also Boxes X and Z) (Agarwal et al., 2022); (Briones Alonso & Vlaminck, 2023); (ILO, 2022a); (ILO COOP, 2014); (ILO, 2019).

Under certain conditions the set of characteristics of the SSE also allows it to **provide services at lower costs or of higher quality** than private for-profit alternatives – for instance by only charging membership fees to cover operational and administrative costs, rather than larger commissions (Guesquière, 2021); (ILO COOP, 2014); (OECD, 2020); (Yi et al., 2023). FMP and its partners in Rwanda affirm this and relate it to the community character of service delivery in the SSE (by communities, for communities) where these control the process of design and delivery from start to finish: "*they will do everything they can to ensure that their services be of the best quality and that they endure*" (interview 24/01/2024). Community-embedded SSE entities in their view design services that are well adapted to local contexts and effectively respond to needs as defined by target groups; they know how to engage the right expertise; and they can iteratively adapt and improve these services (interview 24/01/2024). It is important to acknowledge, however, that questions are also raised about the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of replicating specific models that have emerged historically in certain countries (e.g. national-level mutual health insurance) in other contexts (ILO, 2022a). The local embeddedness and context-specificity of the SSE also means that careful reflection is needed, as well as strong engagement with local actors, when translating good practices and successful models to other contexts.

An emerging phenomenon globally and in particular in the Global South is an **increasing hybridization of the SSE** (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Pasi and Misuraca, 2020). This hybridization seems to be a response to the specific needs and contexts of SSE entities and their members, as well as a growing integration of the SSE sector in broader social movements centred around specific identities (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). In addition, it may facilitates the type of multi-purpose and flexible way of working that allows SSE entities to promote social protection (especially in highly precarious contexts) by integrating various (formal, informal, public, private, community-level) social protection systems and services (Alfers et al., 2023); (Dafuleya, 2023). MUFEDE for instance promotes mutual health insurance among its members not only to strengthen this type of social protection, but also because it observed that many of its members had difficulties in repaying their micro-credit loans because of health care expenditures. Mutual health insurance thus also supports or reinforces the effective and sustainable provision of microfinance. MUFEDE sees this integrated service delivery as a successful practice that is appropriate for upscaling (interview 15/02/2024). Similarly, both the Bolivian and Rwandan cases highlight the importance of integrating knowledge and skills development into the services they provide to support livelihood development through the SSE. Key areas are not only professional and technical training in the economic sectors of the cooperatives (e.g. agri-livestock farming in Rwanda, the transport sector in Bolivia), but also importantly how to set up and govern successful SSE entities. For FMP, this includes very practical training on administrative processes and requirements for formalisation, or finance management and bookkeeping (interview 24/01/2024).

As many SSE entities understand well the importance of trade unions, both for their members and for strengthening their own advocacy work and policy influence (see also Sections 3.6 and 3.7), there is also **increasing successful engagement and alliance building between the SSE and trade unions** – both at the level of service delivery and higher-level political work (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Pérez et al., 2022) (see also Section 5). A well-known example is the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, which has a trade union branch and SSE branch that work together intensively and mutually reinforce each other's service delivery and political work (ILO, 2022e). Trade union-SSE partnerships are also identified as effective practices towards greater synergy in service delivery and advocacy work by both the Rwanda and Burkina Faso case study.

Beyond the trade union movement, it seems that SSE entities can often **promote access to social protection more effectively through partnerships** with public social protection institutes, the private sector, and other civil society actors. The role of partnerships and network building for greater synergies in service delivery and political work, including across the SSE and trade union movements, is the central question discussed more extensively in the third report of this research chair series. In any case, it may be useful to see the SSE not as a completely separate or insulated sector, but rather as part of broader socio-economic movements and coalitions around the right to social protection.

Part of the attractiveness of the SSE as sites for collective action and worker organisation seems to be the ability to **combine concrete service delivery** that meets practical, daily needs, **with longer-run value-based goals** related to alternative ways of working, associating, and generating 'well-being' (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019). In certain contexts – especially highly precarious contexts – service delivery may be emphasized or prioritised "*to ensure immediate, visible returns to participation and provide space to consider longer-term goals"* (Pérez et al., 2022: 98) – although this can also create challenges in terms of protecting social protection rights (cf. Section 5). Nevertheless, this ability to provide localised and concrete services may be one of the reasons why in some contexts SSE membership is expanding more rapidly than trade union membership, as is the case for instance for MUFEDE in Burkina Faso (interview 15/02/2024). Indeed, an effective practice in MUFEDE's efforts to promote trade union membership has been to emphasize that trade unions can also support members in developing their livelihoods. All interviews indicated that the creation of stable and decent incomes is a prime incentive for people to organise into SSE entities, and a successful practice in the broader promotion of social protection in their contexts. Also in this regard, greater alliance building between the SSE and trade union movements, or the facilitation of more hybrid working and organising, can prove useful to leverage this strength of the SSE while protecting core social protection rights.

Finally, all three cases affirm a common finding in available research on the SSE: a core strength of the SSE in promoting social protection is **its transformative power**. This includes the transformation of how work is organised, how workers see themselves and each other, and how broader social and economic systems should be organised. Pérez et al. (2022: 99) observe that "*the process of developing collective structures and ways of working often emphasises principles of equality and democratic management, for example through cooperatives dispensing with the capitalist logic of competition and focusing instead on mutual help and equality of opportunity*". Our interviews confirm this. Both MUFEDE and FMP emphasize the importance of the power of the SSE to promote mutual support and solidarity among its members: "*because in cooperatives, in association, the members see themselves as a unit(y)*" (interview 24/01/2004). Gregoria Apaza in Bolivia

sees the greatest value of the SSE in the possibility of an alternative perspective on all aspects of their work, from concrete actions to sensitization campaigns and advocacy work. They see the SSE as a system that allows women to exercise their (economic) rights within the system by generating and using their income independently, but to do so in a way that goes beyond just the productive and commercial, beyond individual wealth accumulation, and empowers them to build strong supportive ties with other women and generate collective wellbeing. In particular, it allows Gregoria Apaza to build a strategic line of work around the right to decent work, care, and social protection from an alternative feminist perspective that promotes income generation without "*the exploitation of others, of our lands, nor of women's bodies*" (interview 16/01/2024).

5 CHALLENGES FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL PROTECTION THROUGH THE SSE

Despite its valuable strengths, the SSE as a sector is not without its challenges. Overall, much of the sector and especially new initiatives **struggle to achieve durability in operations and a higher scale of impact** (Utting, 2015b). "*while the SSE has considerable potential in relation to sustainable, inclusive and rights-based development, the scope for realising this potential is heavily constrained by structural contexts, relations with external actors and institutions, trade-offs between different objectives, and internal dynamics within SSE organisations, enterprises and networks*" (Utting, 2015a: 5). In particular, a lack of clear policy and regulatory frameworks remains an obstacle to accessing markets, financing, and other resources, including government support measures - although recent years have seen considerable progress in this regard (ILO, 2022b, see Box 5.1).

Box 5.1 The challenge of developing and implementing comprehensive legal frameworks for the SSE

The development and implementation of a conducive and comprehensive legal framework for the social economy faces various challenges. One category of challenges relates to the political context, for example in cases where the arrival of more conservative and neoliberal governments have led to a rollback of the progressive policies that previously supported the social economy or instances where conducive legislation is available but neither implemented nor enforced and not provided with the necessary financial means. Another category of challenges relates to the diverse nature of the social economy, encompassing a wide array of institutional entities, the absence of a clear, unified definition as well as significant regional differences in the social economy landscape. As a result, regulation of the social economy tends to be fragmented across different types of legislation that apply to different entities (e.g. cooperatives, social enterprises, mutual health organisations, …). In recent decades however, various countries have taken steps to create comprehensive and inclusive national legislation for the social economy as a whole (see ILO, 2022b and Hiez 2021).[3] Such legal frameworks typically define the social economy by outlining its main functions, core values, and organizational structures, along with its interactions with both the state and the private sector. Governing bodies may also be established, such as the National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy (SENAES) under the Ministry of Labour and Employment in Brazil, or the National Centre for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy in Mali (Hiez, 2021; Cotera 2019, Briones Alonso & Vlaminck, 2023). In different countries actors from the social economy and other civil society actors have advocated actively towards the development and implementation of conducive legislation. For example, in the Dominican Republic REDESOL (Network of Social and Solidarity Economy Organisations) and the national network of social protection (INSPIR) advocated successfully for the inclusion of SSE principles in the National Development Strategy 2030 (IDEAC, 2022).[4]

3 The ILO 2022b report refers to various examples of initiatives in different countries to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive legal framework for the SSE. Examples include Bolivia (2012), Ecuador (2011), Mexico (2012), Colombia (1998), or Uruguay (2020), Cameroon (2019) and Tunisia (2020). In some countries, such as Bolivia the SSE and/or its entities are recognised by constitutions, national development plans, and other laws and policies (Cotera, 2019, Briones Alonso).

4 IDEAC (2022) Basic Study on the State of the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) in the Dominican Republic. SSE as a strategy to overcome economic and social inequalities and exclusions. INSP!R Dominican Republic.

Running certain SSE entities such as cooperatives or social enterprises also requires time, specialized skills in terms of business management, and resources. All of these may not be readily available, especially to workers in precarious employment (ILO COOP, 2014; FMP, interview 24/01/2024). A third key issue, in particular in view of scaling up activities, is access to sustainable sources of finance. FMP sees a clear need to strengthen the SSE's capacity for obtaining sustainable financing, for instance by strengthening financial and entrepreneurship training in young people's education (interview 24/01/2024).

A second type of challenge lies in the **risk of capture of the SSE by other actors**, such as the state, economic or political elites, or the private sector. This can undermine the values of the SSE and divert its social purpose towards other (private) interests (Bhattamishra and Barrett, 2008); (Defourny and Develtere, 2008); (Utting, 2015b). In some contexts for instance, "*historical government capture of the cooperative movement for political reasons meant that membership lost its voluntary character, with cooperative association instead becoming a necessity to gain access to e.g. inputs or markets, thus eroding the concepts of democracy and solidarity*" (Pérez et al., 2022: 104). Research and civil society actors have also highlighted the risk of misuse of the SSE to escape employer obligations towards workers (e.g. by establishing disguised employment relationships where employees are treated as own-account workers) and thereby undermine labour rights of workers, including the right to social protection (cf. Section 3.6) (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (ILO, 2022b); (Perry, 2020).

A third set of challenges relates more directly to **tensions between the SSE as a partner for social protection, and the 'survivalist' character of many SSE entities** (Develtere et al., 2008). The SSE often emerges in highly precarious contexts, where understanding their members' daily concerns, meeting their practical, immediate needs, and building self-awareness and identity as a 'worker' are often the first priority. This means that SSE entities and their members might prioritise the creation of productive employment and livelihoods, putting on hold questions of access to formal social protection for the longer run. Other case studies show that many people join the SSE primarily for economic reasons, even though social benefits materialize and are valued later on (Hermanson et al., 2021b); (Hermanson et al., 2021); (Hermanson et al., 2021a). FMP even identifies aspirations or expectations of short-term income gains as a marked challenge in their efforts to support cooperative development, as it takes time to generate stable revenue streams.

However, this focus of the SSE has at times created **friction with other actors such as the trade union movement**, which tends to emphasise that SSE entities, '*however organised, must ensure the full respect of trade union rights, social dialogue and collective bargaining*' (ETUC, 2021: par. 8).[5] Others have argued that it is important for the SSE to reflect on how certain aspects related to the decent nature of jobs in the SSE could be strengthened (including social protection). It is important that innovations in the world of work within and through the SSE, especially in the growing digital (platform) economy, not result in a "race to the bottom" in terms of social protection (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). Innovation around work and worker status should indeed not contribute to deconstructing existing social security systems, but rather to updating them and reviewing them (Utting, 2015a). Although many SSE entities have shown the willingness and

5 Trade unions have responded to this challenge with two broad strategies: (i) integrating the interests of SSE workers in social dialogue and collective bargaining through the direct inclusion of SSE workers into membership or establishing affiliations or partnerships with SSE entities or umbrella organisations, (ii) by defending the interests of SSE workers through alternative channels beyond social dialogue such as engaging in joint advocacy work, supporting the creation of worker-led SSE entities as a way to open up dialogue spaces (e.g. with public authorities, private sector actors, or local decision-makers such as community leaders or market owners) for workers who can not (yet) be included in union membership (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023).

capacity to attend to questions of social protection internally and advocate for stronger social protection policies once immediate, practical needs are being met, this tension remains a challenge and source of debate in current discussions about how to regulate the SSE (ILO, 2022b); (ILO, 2022c).

An important barrier to scaling up the impact of the SSE at the moment is, according to our case organisations, a **high degree of informality and barriers to formalisation** such as heavy tax burdens even for own-account and micro- and small enterprises. There is a need for supporting and facilitating the formalization of the SSE. This includes providing trainings on the SSE and formalisation, advocating for the recognition of workers and work, and advocating for policy reforms that can facilitate formalisation through favourable conditions. In Rwanda, FMP and partners of the Rwandan INSPIR network for the right to social protection ('Zamuka') played a vital role in securing a 'grace period' policy, which dictates that new economic activities are exempt from paying taxes for two years after starting up. This advocacy campaign came in response to a research study by the network showing that many (SSE) initiatives, including cooperatives supported by FMP, went bankrupt after formalising by having to face an immediate heavy tax burden before being able to realise a stable flow of revenues. Many decided to return to informality because of this (interview 24/01/2024). More policy reforms facilitating formalisation are needed, but run against considerable political resistance in other contexts such as Bolivia (interview 16/01/2024).

The fact that the SSE often operates in (highly) precarious contexts, and often targets workers with limited or highly unstable incomes also creates **specific challenges for promoting contributory social protection systems.** Workers may be reluctant to spend part of their limited income on contributory social protection schemes, especially when benefits do not materialise immediately (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019); (Verbrugge et al., 2018). The required payments can also at times be higher than those paid by formal workers in the absence of the supplementary payments by employers, which can create an additional sense of unfairness (Guesquière, 2021). In all three of our cases, organisations identify this as a clear challenge in promoting access to contributory social protection. In sensitization activities they therefore highlight the benefits of adherence, encouraging workers to see contributions as an investment (in their health, in retirement) rather than just an expense. Another strategy is to strengthen workers' ability to pay fees by adapting contributory schemes to different types of work – for instance through differentiated fees (ILO, 2022a). AMUSSOL in the Dominican Republic for instance uses adapted payment schemes: for transport workers trade unions collect a daily contribution per transport 'unit' and transfer it to AMUSSOL; agricultural workers pay their contributions every three or six months (after harvesting); and other informal economy workers pay monthly contributions (Guesquière, 2021).

A risk of the SSE's increasing involvement in social protection is that it may contribute to **fragmentation of the social protection landscape**, which in turns risks resulting in inconsistencies between the plethora of different initiatives, duplication of efforts, and disparities in service cost or quality due to differences in capacities and resources of the SSE (Pasi and Misuraca, 2020).

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the SSE is no panacea for leaving no one behind in social protection. First, **SSE entities are not always accessible to everyone.** Second, **democratic and participatory decision making** seems to be an important condition for many of the benefits of the SSE (see e.g. (Hermanson et al., 2021b), but **is not guaranteed or easily achieved**. Structures such as cooperatives or community-based risk sharing schemes often make

participation conditional on a certain minimal income level or possession of certain assets to protect economic viability (e.g. land) (Bhattamishra and Barrett, 2010). Social capital may also play a role: the most disadvantaged may be 'socially invisible' and therefore excluded from accessing SSE entities (Bhattamishra and Barrett, 2010). A recent study on cooperatives in the Philippines finds that members of lower socio-economic classes and individuals with weak social capital are less likely to be cooperative members (Hermanson et al., 2021). Balancing objectives of (economic) sustainability of activities and inclusiveness is indeed a critical challenge for many SSE entities. In addition, structural causes of exclusion or marginalisation (e.g. discriminatory social norms) in society may be reproduced in SSE entities. For instance, too often women still face gender-based discrimination in SSE governance and leadership structures (Utting, 2015a); (Montanari and Bergh, 2019). More generally, SSE entities are not necessarily exempt from common challenges to community-level participatory governance (see e.g. Mansuri and Rao, 2004).

These caveats have two implications. The first is the need for **sufficient attention for the capacities of SSE entities to establish good internal governance**. Practical experience points to the value of knowledge and skills development in this regard, with critical areas being worker rights, worker organization, and the establishment of effective participatory or democratic governance (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (ILO, 2022e). Again, exchange or partnerships with trade unions can be a powerful tool to this end. The second is the importance of **protecting and promoting the role of the state as the primary duty bearer** in social protection. This involves the development of social protection systems and policies that address structural causes of exclusion in society, and provide social protection services to groups that fall between the cracks of the SSE and other providers and systems. In particular, the SSE should not become the fallback solution for failures of the state to protect social protection rights (ILO, 2022c).

CONCLUSIONS

The SSE contributes to many different aspects of social protection, through a variety of mechanisms, and on different time horizons. In the short run, the SSE addresses gaps in formal social protection systems as a service provider, and it connects its members to existing systems and services. In this way, it seems to be particularly effective in promoting horizontal social protection coverage and in reaching informal economy workers (Fonteneau and Pollet, 2019); (ILO, 2022b). In particular, the SSE's role as a partner of the state illustrates well the potential for joint value generation across civil society, the state, and the private sector towards better social protection systems and governance (Huyse, 2021).

In the medium term, the SSE support people's capacities to participate in formal (contributory) and informal social protection schemes by supporting the development of more secure, resilient, and decent livelihoods, and by fostering mutual support and solidarity among its members and communities. Key under-researched areas in this sense are the role of informal worker-led social protection schemes in the broader social protection landscape, and how resource flows and systems of support and care at household and community levels work together with public social protection (Patel et al., 2023).

In the long run, the SSE acts as an arena for worker organisation, innovation, and collective action directed at greater worker empowerment, democratic governance, and social protection – and ultimately at the transformation of social and economic systems. A specific and critical strength of the SSE seems to be that it brings together the capacity to address immediate, daily, or very practical needs, and at the same time creates space for alternative ways of working, organising, and being in community that are seen to challenge more structural causes of precarity, disadvantage, and exclusion.

Much has been written in recent years about how public policy can support the development of the SSE at large (European Commission, 2021); (ILO, 2022a); (ILO, 2022d); (ILO, 2022b); (OECD, 2020); (Utting, 2015b). Policy proposals range from developing appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks, to developing favourable fiscal initiatives, involving the SSE in socially responsible procurement, and setting up more extensive and effective systems of solidarity finance for the SSE. A number of areas are of particular relevance for supporting the SSE's ability to contribute to social protection systems and governance.

Research and practice increasingly shows that stronger **partnerships, coordination, and alliance building** between the SSE, the trade union movement, and public and private social protection actors has great potential to not only to maximize the contributions of the SSE to social protection, but also to mitigate several challenges and risks of greater involvement, such as capture of the SSE or increased fragmentation of the social protection landscape (Pasi and Misuraca, 2020); (ILO, 2022a); (ILO, 2022b).

Two types of collaboration deserve specific attention in this regard. First, stronger alliances **between the SSE at the grassroots level and (local) governments** carry significant potential for effectively fulfilling the right to social protection by empowering the SSE to effectively take up different roles – including the SSE supporting public systems as a service provider or by taking up administrative functions, highlighting gaps in social protection coverage, engaging in effective

policy dialogue with (local) governments, and receiving the necessary funding and other types of support (ILO, 2022b). Second, there seems to be ample room for **greater synergies across the SSE and trade unions**. Indeed, the SSE is strongly aligned with the values and objectives of the trade union movement, and both movements have complementary strengths that can mutually reinforce each other's work (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Tattersall, 2020). In many countries in the Global South, formal trade unions and informal worker-led organisations are already increasingly working and organising in more integrated or 'hybrid' ways (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (Guest, 2021); (ILO, 2022e); (ILO, 2021); (Pérez et al., 2022); (Sesan, 2021).

However, greater partnerships and alliance building also comes with challenges. In spite of well aligned values and objectives, there have been tensions between the SSE and trade union movement for different reasons. Among these is the fact that the two movements may represent different categories of workers with differing interests or priorities (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023). In terms of partnerships between the SSE and local governments, a challenge is that ongoing decentralization is transferring responsibilities and administrative authority to local governments, but often without an adequate transfer of resources or fiscal authority. This constrains the ability of local governments to engage in dialogue with, collaborate, and support local social protection actors including the SSE (Briones Alonso and Van Ongevalle, 2023); (Utting, 2015b). In many cases there is a need to strengthen the capacities of local governments to facilitate SSE actors' access to local decision-making, foster equitable partnerships in social service delivery, and connect local- and national-level institutions (Utting, 2015a: 30). Stronger partnerships with the public and private sector at large – for instance as the SSE takes up more and more roles in social protection service delivery – carry the risk of putting too much pressure on the viability of SSE entities or undermining its values and autonomy. Partnerships should leave sufficient space for the SSE's to work towards its own social, economic, or political missions (ILO, 2022a). In particular, the SSE should not be reduced to a subcontracting agent or used as a fallback solution for failures of public social protection policy.

Utting (2015a) refers in this sense to the overarching **challenge of integrative upscaling of the SSE**, i.e. horizontal and vertical upscaling without it losing its core values and objectives. How to manage the constraints and tensions for such integrative upscaling remains an important area for further research: "Much writing on SSE is promotional … the field of inquiry and advocacy related to SSE needs to be more reflexive, i.e. cognisant of the tensions and compromises involved. It also needs to be more analytically prepared, in terms of both understanding the complexities and contradictions of change and building the evidence base needed to be convincing in its arguments about why policy-makers, activists, scholars and others should be taking SSE seriously" (Utting, 2015a: 4-5). What role partnerships and networks can play in this regard, is one of the themes explored more in-depth in the upcoming third report of this research chair series.

In terms of **capacity strengthening**, two areas merit specific attention. The first is strengthening the capacities of SSE entities for internal management and governance, so that they can effectively establish participatory or democratic governance, access sustainable financing, contribute to the transition to formality, and build alliances with organizations of workers and employers (ILO, 2022a). The latter can contribute importantly to efforts to strengthen a second key category of capacities: building a knowledge and exchange base around technical as well as values-oriented training (Utting, 2015a: 29).

Finally, the more general value of **including** civil society **in social protection governance** throughout the policy cycle readily extends to the SSE (Briones Alonso and Van Ongevalle, 2023); (Huyse, 2021). A growing number of practical experiences shows that involving the SSE in social dialogue 'plus' mechanisms can be highly effective in promoting horizontal coverage of social protection. Another strategy is promoting participation of the SSE and its network organisations in public policy design and implementation, both at the local and national level (ILO, 2022a). There are growing calls to enable the SSE to contribute its specialised knowledge and practical experience through the co-creation of policies (Utting, 2015a). To achieve this, more research needs to improve our understanding of how the SSE can further strengthen its advocacy work and policy influence. Based on available studies, coalition and networks building within the SSE and with other actors with strong organizational capacity and political influence is a promising avenue and merits further research (Briones Alonso and Vlaminck, 2023); (ILO, 2022e); (Pérez et al., 2022); (Tattersall, 2020); (The Asia Foundation, 2023).

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