Implementing the SDGs in all localities and for all communities

The ambitious vision for transformation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its core principle of leaving no one behind can be realized only if the economic, social and political structures and relations generating injustice are corrected at multiple levels of governance. With a wide range of political, economic, social and environmental problems—as well as opportunities for progress—to be found at the local level, translating this global agenda into national as well as local solutions in urban, peri-urban and rural areas is key to achieving the SDGs.

While attempts were made to “localize” the Millennium Development Goals, progress towards their achievement was mainly assessed in terms of national averages, which obscured the fact that multidimensional inequalities were increasing within and between urban and rural areas in both developed and developing countries. Acknowledging the importance of implementing the SDGs in all localities and for all communities, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the role of local authorities and communities in strengthening sustainable ecosystems, promoting local culture and products, fostering community cohesion and personal security, and stimulating innovation and employment. SDG 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) is a manifestation of the importance of localizing the SDGs.

Linking the guiding principles of SSE with transformative localization

Social and solidarity economy—economic activities guided by principles of cooperation, solidarity and democratic self-management, and which prioritize social and, often, environmental objectives beyond the profit motive—has a strong local component as well as characteristics which can foster transformative change. As such it has great potential to contribute to the transformative localization of the SDGs.

SSE can address multiple objectives of sustainable development in an inclusive, democratic and sustainable manner. Through localized circuits of production, exchange and consumption, SSE is conducive not only to basic needs provisioning but also to local economic development more generally. It can enhance the capacity of local producers and communities to increase value-added, and stimulate demand for locally produced goods and services. SSE can also contribute to retaining a greater share of income and generating tax revenues for the local area.
Solidarity, social cohesion and collective action, which are key characteristics of SSE, can facilitate cooperation among local actors to improve basic infrastructure and social services, as well as promote the economic, social and political empowerment of vulnerable or otherwise excluded groups, particularly women.

SSE operating principles also include internalizing rather than externalizing environmental and social costs, and correcting unsustainable patterns of consumption. On this basis, SSE actors can agree on rules to use common resources in a sustainable way more easily than conventional for-profit businesses. As key players in the local political economy, SSE enterprises and organizations also have a significant role in ensuring the accountability and people-centred responsiveness of policy makers to local needs and demands. As such, SSE can enhance the inclusiveness of policies.

How can these attributes of SSE contribute to localizing the SDGs in ways that generate transformative change? What institutions, policies, platforms and tools are needed? What are the challenges and limitations of SSE when it comes to the transformative localization of the SDGs?

**SSE can help avoid pitfalls when localizing the SDGs**

Although development discourse and practice consistently emphasize the importance of localizing international and national development strategies and goals, results thus far have been less than satisfactory. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, which is built upon the principle of leaving no one behind, localizing the SDGs is essential for realizing the vision of transformation everywhere for everyone.

Policy makers and practitioners seeking a holistic approach and comprehensive set of measures for localizing the SDGs must overcome numerous challenges. Below we explore three common pitfalls, and the role that SSE can play in addressing them.

### PITFALL 1: Adopting national strategies that ignore local specificity

Fixing national goals, targets and indicators without considering local conditions runs the risk of ignoring locally relevant solutions and, consequently, causing uneven development. National development goals and targets are often the result of national-level political competition and compromise, and do not necessarily reflect diverse local conditions and needs. Localizing the SDGs requires its own local democratic governance mechanisms that engage multiple stakeholders. This is also essential for achieving the SDG targets of establishing effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels (Target 16.6) and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (Target 16.7).

### PITFALL 2: Establishing institutions and policies; neglecting empowerment and participation

Strengthening formal institutions, including through legislation and regulation, is necessary but not sufficient for realizing the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda. Without broad-based social mobilization as well, including of poor and otherwise excluded people, these formal institutions can still be subject to the overriding influence of, or outright capture by, powerful local elites. Elite capture can be found, for example, in local areas of newly democratized countries: when institutions of “good governance” are designed in a top-down manner or parachuted in, they may end up entrenching underlying unequal power relations. Informal and formal linkages between business and political elites can also unduly influence development strategy, constraining the ability of all population groups to be active agents of change and hindering...
achievement of the SDGs. For example, they may prevent the economy from diversifying into productive industries associated with decent work and environmentally friendly practices.

The role of SSE

SSE organizations, and cooperatives in particular, which are often intertwined with broader social struggles to promote the interests of the most vulnerable, can play a key role in preventing elite capture and empowering disenfranchised or voiceless groups through their bargaining power, by forming alliances and by transforming nominal participatory democracy mechanisms into effective ones.

SSE, however, can also be instrumentalized by local elites when there is heavy external pressure to perform well economically. Fierce competition and limited access to resources may force SSE to shift its focus from core values such as democracy, equity, cooperation and solidarity to economic viability. In extreme cases, one specific SSE organization or sector may monopolize subsidies, exert influence over entry by new rivals or fix prices as happened, for example, in sugar cooperatives in Maharashtra, India. These practices may undermine the capacity of local actors, including other SSE actors, to correct inefficient and inequitable markets, and consequently obstruct the transformative localization of the SDGs.

PITFALL 3: Subsidiarity without solidarity

Local governments, as the first point of contact for citizens and residents, are best placed to understand local-level needs. But taking steps to address local needs without considering the broad principle of solidarity, or other localities’ needs, can be contradictory for the process of attaining the SDGs for all. Rejecting migrants in response to perceived local interests, for example, seriously undermines the principle of leaving no one behind, and can ultimately violate human rights. When a local administration implements environmental regulations, the unintended result may be to push dirty industries to other underdeveloped areas. Another example is race-to-the-bottom behaviour of local governments through deregulation or loose regulation and tax cuts to attract new outside investment. In addition to the unsustainable pattern of development that this can create locally, such investment tends to result in a skewed flow of capital and income from local communities, often towards major cities or abroad.

A steering and coordination mechanism to strengthen subsidiarity based on solidarity across local areas is necessary to prevent geographical externalization of environmental and social costs, and skewed geographical resource flows. Central to such a coordination mechanism is interactive governance involving multiple actors, at the same or different levels of governance. Interactive governance can strengthen horizontal, vertical and diagonal networks within and between actors at local, national, regional and global levels.

Supporting SSE as a transformative means of implementation

Realizing the transformative vision of the SDGs demands equally transformative means of implementation, which aim to change not only the outcomes but also the underpinnings of social injustice. SSE has the potential to contribute to localizing the SDGs in a transformative way. Like other means of implementation, however, SSE organizations are not homogeneous in their principles, values and practices.

The discussion above indicates six strategic ways to strengthen the institutions and actors of SSE, and other sectors, to help localize the SDGs.

1. SSE organizations and enterprises will gain strength by staying true to their core values and principles. While undertaking activities that are economically viable, they also need to work to break down the structures of inequality that underpin social exclusion, vulnerability and unsustainable development in the local context.

2. Local democratic mechanisms, which allow multiple stakeholders with diverse ideas, including SSE enterprises and organizations, to contest and negotiate policy solutions reflecting local conditions.
need to be established where they don’t exist, and strengthened where they do.

Interactive governance involving vertical, horizontal and diagonal networks with multiple actors at different levels needs to be strengthened by including SSE organizations and enterprises which reassert social control, democratic practices and the place of ethics in the economy in and beyond the locality.

Local politics needs to be reconfigured to provide an enabling environment for SSE to scale up in ways that respect its core values, which are critical for transformative localization of the SDGs.

While collaboration with government can maximize impact in terms of localizing the SDGs, SSE needs to avoid the risk of being instrumentalized by government for narrow political and policy objectives.

Local control of production and consumption circuits through economically and politically empowered SSE actors needs to be strengthened to prevent the outflow of income and assets from local areas, and the unjust distribution of environmental and social costs and income through value chains and market mechanisms.

Sources and further reading

4. UCLG. 2017. Local and Regional Governments’ Report to the 2017 HLPF: National and Sub-national Governments on the Way towards the Localization of the SDGs. Barcelona: UCLG.