

SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE OF SSE: SOCIAL NORMS AND VOLATILITY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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Abstract

This paper offers theoretical reflection on sustainability challenge associated with the acts of solidarity. The focus is on the role of social norms, beliefs and local ways of life, as central factors mediating the success of cooperative initiatives, especially where it pertains to heterogeneous groups and interfaces. Based on an experiential account of informal street trade sector in a city of India, the paper first argues that Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) framework with its expanded notion including voice and agency, has much appeal for managing the urban street trade. However, it also observes that operationalisation of SSE framework – with its spirit of democracy, equality and participation - lays considerable demand on public policy to engage with citizens, as also on administrative capacity and social circumstances. Since SSE framework is value driven, role of norms and beliefs automatically become important in it. As such, manifestation of favourable circumstances – beliefs and practices – is envisaged not only for evolution but more so for sustainability of cooperative behaviour.

Key words: *social, solidarity, norms, informal, street trade, cooperation*

Introduction

An argument frequently confronted by the notion of social and solidarity economy (SSE) is what is new about it? Indeed, people have come together in past to form associations or cooperative organizations to act and/or to produce in groups. While associational activities do have roots in history, the renewed surge of interest in solidarity economy needs to be explained partly by situating it in contemporary 'institutional context' shaped by neo-liberal policy agenda and partly, by gauging the scale of reorganization of activities that mainstream movements expect from this alternate form of economy. Increasing economic disparity,

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exclusion and informalisation of workforce has triggered the quest for an alternate form of economy resilient amidst neo - liberal policies and practices. SSE is neither a representative of state sponsored welfarism, nor is indicative of a mere cooperative of small, informal workers or micro entrepreneurs (UNRISD 2012). Solidarity economy is far broader than the notion of cooperative production or voluntary and associational pressure groups. Of course, the latter could be a sub-set of the SSE. This expanded notion of SSE poses significant demands on institutional growth as well as on participants of the social economy – both significantly influenced by social norms, practices and individual values. Again, this demand varies considerably depending upon the nature and structure of activities, the attract cooperation initiatives. Where the activity is purely of business nature, act of cooperation or of solidarity could be easier relative to the one where stakeholders from entirely different walks of society are at constant interface and where conflict of interests is very likely. Informalisation of labour force and crisis of the ‘commons’ – are two issues particularly attached to neo - liberalism – that involve significant clash of interests but that must be addressed for reasons of sustainability and equality of access.

SSE - as a form of production and exchange, offers a strategic and inclusive contour to engage with notions of democratic decision making, justice, resilience, capability expansion and cohesion (ILO 2011, UNRISD 2012). It therefore, has a potential for dealing with issues of informal sector often overlapping with issues of commons – whether natural resources, social activities or public space. However, the way various contours of SSE are operationalised on ground is likely to be influenced by prevailing institutional structure, social norms and way of life. This in all possibilities is indicative of a potentially vicious circle, wherein what needs to be transformed during the evolution of SSE, itself mediates the process of evolution (Lavelli et al, 2008). Consequently, sustainability of SSE approach as a sustainable answer to the quest for alternate system itself may become volatile. This paper reflects on some of these challenges that emerge precisely from the context specific role of social norms, practices and values permeating across institutions – formal and informal. With reference to the complex case of urban street trade in

India – where the issue of informality and crisis of the ‘commons’ tend to converge, this paper intends to traverse the road to SSE in its ideal form - democratic, just, resilient, transformative and cohesive. The issue is almost uniformly relevant across the developing world but for the purpose of this analysis, the paper makes reference to a case study done in city of Patna in India.

Informal street trade and the call for solidarity

Informalisation of labour force – especially of a magnitude, where majority of employment is concentrated in unorganized sector [e.g. 93% in India], is a salient contribution of neo-liberal policies, wherein a vast majority remains excluded from the global process of capital accumulation (see Rodríguez - Garavito 2006). Informal street trade, being the most visible form of largely precarious informal employment, particularly attracts attention from SSE perspective. Street trade, despite being institutionally excluded, has wielded much significance as an economic force built upon the convergent market needs of both the consumers and the suppliers. Growing labour-force and lagged growth in employment in India, have resulted in a mass of workforce finding recourse in informal street trade. Thus, even after recurrent victimisation from urban administration (Anjaria 2006; Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009), street trade continues to grow. As Rodríguez - Garavito (2006, p. 45) notes, “social exclusion does not proceed without encountering resistance. The excluded confront it through multifarious individual and collective actions” - the street trade sector in India has gradually acquired voice and agency through large scale associational activities. More than 300000 street vendors across India are affiliated to the National Alliance of Urban Street Vendors in India (NASVI)¹². The legislation of the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors 2009 is a corollary of an organized action on the part of street traders mobilized by the civil society. Consequently, street trade while continues to shelter primarily the poor and socially insecure, it has grown adequately

¹² *Source:* Annual Report 2009-10, National Alliance of Street Vendors in India, <http://nasvinet.org>

influential, to resist any attempt of marginalization and to use informal agency to sustain its day-to-day business. As such, informal street trade - sustaining on strategies of bargaining and negotiations, can no longer be reduced to an issue of market or society alone. Strengthened voice of informal traders and advocacy for legislation to protect their interests, has made informal street trade sector as much a political issue in India. Economic advancement is most successful when intertwined with the political struggle for social rights and citizenships (Rodríguez Garavito 2006, p. 53). SSE framework by its very nature provides room for political and rights based initiatives.

Further, within the informal economy, informal street trade has the most direct and constant interface with largest number of stakeholders. The interaction of street traders is particularly direct and reciprocal with local bureaucracy, local police, local political representatives, civil society, buyers and other users of public space. A close study of the sector with support from a Non Government Organization Nidan [affiliated to NASVI] in the Indian state of Bihar, reveals that in the absence of a regulatory framework, all these stakeholders have worked out informal mechanisms to sustain mutual interest. While there is growing emphasis on responding to needs of street trade sector, the field based dynamics also indicates a sense of cluelessness within the administration as to how to go about it. The large magnitude and undocumented character of informal economy, constraints a consistent engagement between the trader and the administration. Only voluntary appreciation of rules and standard guidelines by various stakeholders, particularly street traders can sustain reforms. This in turn is possible only if the intervention is led by the street traders based on their own conviction and perception of it as directly gainful for their business.

Clearly, the SSE approach appears to have much appeal for the urban informal sector, particularly the street vending sector dwelling constantly on volatile premises of violence and insecurity despite. However, any optimism on potential of SSE for organized action in street trade sector needs to note that, what constitutes informal sector is embedded in formal labour market policies and does not manifest

exogenously (De Haan 2010). Expecting the public policy - first to create situations of vulnerability and then to take incremental steps to compensate for it, is inherently contradictory. Then the case study from India reveals that a radical effort towards organizing street traders within SSE framework is as challenging as it is appealing. In fact, a cooperative approach to improve the livelihoods of informal worker including street vendors has been attempted earlier (e.g. ILO's SYNDICOOP programme in South Africa) but it failed to show desired results. Moreover, for a sustainable gain, it is important to understand the structure of challenges a SSE approach may eventually have to face during the process of its operationalisation.

Of norms, customs and practices: from theory to operationalisation of SSE

It is fairly recent that role of norms behind economic actions of individuals has begun to gain attention, especially by economists¹³. Despite all sorts of incentives, individuals do not necessarily display compatibility to incentives of performance, questioning the basic premises of rational individual adopted in economic analyses (see Basu, 2008). Much of the lack of incentive within governance structure of developing societies, to perform can be attributed to innate ways of life. Social policies or new approaches such as SSE are likely to be challenged by issues of identity, interests and interaction between formal and informal sphere, which mediate the functioning of social system as well as other institutions (De Haan 2010).

Though there are examples of successful cooperation initiatives such as the Grameen Bank micro credit programme in Bangladesh and Self Employed Women's association (SEWA) in India, yet operationalising SSE approach in informal street trade sector, is likely to be rather challenging. In fact, it has never been easy and despite all its collective efforts, SEWA – the global model for organized action - had to struggle hard even for its registration, which materialized only recently. Then the street trade sector has a distinct position in urban informal economy due to its simultaneous and often conflictual interfaces with all

¹³ See Basu (2008), for a brief but seminar presentation on role of norms, pp 229-233

stakeholders of urban civic life. These interfaces are more informal than formal and are mediated by locally entrenched social norms, which are also major influences over the way, whole system works.

Norms as administrative barrier

Forms of service delivery interact with social norms (De Haan 2010, p. 214), which reflects that the whole governance structure interacts with such norms in different ways. At a broader level there is huge gap between policy proclamation and operational commitment. At the same time, “there is also the need to be able to depend on the State;.....a transformed State, but one which has been strengthened, able to govern and act as a partner with civil society initiatives” (Neamtan 2002, p. 6). It is unlikely that without state support the condition for consolidation of cooperation will emerge (Rodríguez Garavito 2006, p. 53). However, in most of the developing world, functioning of the state is observed to be highly formalistic. Such formalism, as a systemic to governance particularly surfaces in case of street trade - an issue of low administrative priority. Formalism in functioning is often reinforced by rigid attitude and limited autonomy and capacity of local administration. Field reflections show that informality continues to be perceived as illegality wherein the informal workers continue to be despised by the administration and their voices are deliberately trivialised. The relationship between local governments and street traders has been conflictual and the former is not obliged to negotiate with the latter in good spirit. Local history of conflicts appears to shape subsequent expectations about collective initiative (Platteau 2008) and this apparent in the present context. Pervasive disconnect across institutions, often results into loss of community trust in government’s intent and consequently into withdrawal of the poor from participatory process (Bekker and Leilde 2003), lack of public pressure towards programme objectives, weakness of social power to influence bureaucratic performance as well as the degree of permissiveness for arbitrary administration (Bhattacharya 1996). Alongside, class mediated norms continue to dominate democratic values and rights of the poor continue to be disregarded. Such ‘cooperative equilibria’ based on power

asymmetries are always unstable (Platteau 2008). Sustainability of SSE amidst such context would be subject to some degree of uncertainty. Reversal of this state of affair is both a prerequisite and a corollary of SSE approach and this simultaneity may be counterproductive.

SSE approach renders central emphasis on equal and democratic decision making by various stakeholders. However, the 'poor' is not a homogeneous lot and access to groups formed within the lot with an aim to invoke participation is actually found to be limited to clientelist politicians and bribe seeking public employees (Groenewald 2012). In fact, foremost among local norms is socially accepted rent seeking practices that street bureaucracy indulge in while tacitly allowing any violation of rules by informal traders. Similarly, when it comes to licensing street traders, elected representatives in municipal wards – smallest administrative unit in municipal areas, are found to secure resources for their kith and kin, which is noted to be customary in certain societies, - as contributions to the welfare of the people in constituencies that elect them (see Myint, 2000). Such practices carrying social endorsement are likely to dethrone any prospect of incentive-compatibility to ensure performance that a SSE like approach seeks.

Policy rhetoric apart, access of informal workers to policy process is found to remain elusive also due to low ability of the poor to participate. As Groenewald (2012, p. 296) cites "the ability of the individuals or communities to participate in formal consultation fora has proved to be particularly constrained by informality". Informal workers are deprived from any essential services and in pursuit of necessities of life, their active participation in public processes and even organized action becomes difficult (Groenewald 2012). Those with some edge ['petty bourgeoisie' in Jan Breman (2012, p. 48) or proximity to public employees or representatives gain place in consultation process, but class or gender related constraints to participation remain intact and instead, such ways of institutions reinforce inequality within the group (De Haan 2010, Groenewald 2012). Given the heterogeneity within the sub-proletariat, there is little probability of class consciousness and hence lesser likelihood of it being converted into political unity or solidarity (Breman 2012).

Turning antagonists into allies: norms as barrier between state and civil society

The political space occupied by the new social economy clearly reveals the growing importance of civil society initiatives in the economic sphere (Laville et al 2008). Solidarity economy as an alternate form of organization is dependent upon mobilization of the people and therefore its operationalisation entails a partnership between the state and the civil society to explore ways to community outreach as well as to ensure cooperation from stakeholders. However, this has its own challenges. In past one decade, as the informal street trade sector has moved under civil society network in India, thereby assuming ability to negotiate with the state, the civil society has been seen as an antagonistic element by the state. In such a context where civil society resorted to activism to mobilize informal workers, its relationship with state has become one of absolute mistrust. Local administration perceives street trade associations as anti social. Partnership attempts with such attitude are likely to remain only partially successful and less productive. At the same time, civil society cannot ensure citizenship rights to informal workers without state intervention or strong institutional structure. Neither can it eliminate the centrality of political authority; it itself sustains under conditions of effective rule, and not in an environment where mobilization is strong and local government institution is weak (Moolakkattu and Chathukulam 2012). Another challenge emerges out of, as Skinner (2008) points out, the fact that many traders (in the state) are still beyond organized network. Despite growing voice and agency of informal workers, a large segment remains out of organized network and associations, which goes against the fundamental prerequisite of solidarity economy.

Norms of community behaviour and problems of managing the common

Growing pressure on urban infrastructure and competing land usages has made street traders easy victims of any decongestion moves.

'The tension between the use of public space.....as a catalyst for private investment or as a stage for "informal survivalism" ...has created situations in which many of the latent conflicts between various social and political groups are played out and given form in the built environment' (Donovan 2008, p. 30). It has been argued that the right to use the land may solve some of the conflicts that arise at public places being 'public goods' and that the poor condition of public spaces is just another case of 'tragedy of commons' (De Soto 1989, Peron 2002). Thus, even a limited right to use the land, while would liberate the street traders from the fear of evictions, the consequent sense of ownership would encourage them for better space and environment management. It has been shown elsewhere how accommodating the informal sector both in physical and economic terms contributes to sustainable urban development (Perera 1994). The SSE framework offers ample scope to accommodate street traders' right to urban land, which can solve part of the crisis of public space – as urban commons. However, there are two critical preludes to this proposal – one, amidst conflicting usage of public places, who will spare land for street traders? And two- how compatible the behaviour of informal worker community is likely to be to the incentives provided by state in the form of property rights?

Street trade has been subject to incessant criticism for growing urban chaos, filth and congestion across urban areas (Bhowmik 2005, Anjaria 2006, Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009). Apparently, the multiplying vehicular traffic in urban areas is a bigger threat to sustainability of urban environment than street trade; yet the neo – liberal imagination of modern cities, has overplayed the menace of street vending (Kusakabe 2006, Uddin 2009, Joseph 2011). With low employment growth in other sectors and with growing population, land as a source of existency for the urban poor, will be under pressure and people are likely to fall back on familiar social mechanisms and norms to exert influence and promote their own interests (Bremen 2012). Particularistic values dominate government's land policy under corporate-government nexus forged under neo-liberalism. In fact, neo- elitism becomes conspicuous when it comes to organizing spatial territory of marketplace and the interests of street vendors are compromised before the corporatist agenda that has

captured the state (see White 2010, Turner and Schoenberger 2012). Given that access to public places is key physical asset in livelihood strategies, (Skinner 2008, Musyoka et al 2010), competing for land has been major issue of conflict between street traders and real estate builders at many places in world (COPAC¹⁴ 2009). A prerequisite of SSE for street trade is pro-poor and innovative urban spatial planning, which would involve confronting vested interests. This in turn may also contradict notion of cities that fit into neo liberal agenda adopted by the state. To what extent the state is deviate from this agenda to protect informal traders' interest is in all ways, dubious.

Secondly, human beings are innately socialized creatures with a sense of social norms and integrity (Basu 2008). Encouraging them to conform to norms of usage of public space or to imbibe norms of equality and democracy is difficult just because they have been socialized to survive otherwise. Such values – as integral they are to SSE framework, are likely to be beyond consideration of street traders unless constant effort with perseverance is made to transform them. Experience from present context in India, on the contrary, shows that irrespective of their increased participation in associational activities, creating awareness on tenets of SSE is likely to be challenging. Even if resource is not a constraint, it is not easy to bridge the bureaucracy-citizen/worker gap required to enhance community outreach. Conceptualizing street trade sector into SSE form, expects it to assume a strategic role as a source of transformation (Wainwright 2009). Street traders as key actors of the sector would need to look beyond short term gains and immediate livelihood issues, which is difficult. In fact, it has been learnt from similar initiative in Pretoria that it is not possible to involve workers in activities unless they are directly related to their work and income generation (COPAC 2009). SSE as an innovative approach would put greater onus on the traders to act as agents of change and abide by rules and regulations. Barkin and Lemus (2013, p. 5) aptly note, "...building the foundations of a solidarity society entails much more than undertaking specific activities or establishing appropriate institutions for governance or management..". The solidarity society requires personal commitments

¹⁴ Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre, Johhanesberg

from each member to assume responsibility for the well-being of others and for limiting individual claims for where traders' organizations exist, they focus mostly on lobbying, finances and advocacy.

Lack of personal commitment and non conformity to rules and regulation do not have social stigma attached to them in developing societies such as India. It is always difficult to exclude the free riders in management of commons. Hence, appreciation of values of SSE by informal workers would not automatically emerge and would be difficult to be monitored by the formal system. Such behaviour has to be regulated by social stigma, which is internalized and self monitored (see Basu 2008). Social internalisation of new values and practices however may take years before they become 'social norms'.

Summing up

One of the doubts, raised during mainstream debate on social and solidarity economy is; what new or radical does this utopian emphasis on social economy has to offer? After all, societies have always worked in groups and origin of cooperatives is not recent either. These qualms are not trivial and in fact are indicative of the need to introspect on limited success of cooperatives till date and the challenges it represents for future initiatives of social economy.

Even when badly needed cooperation may fail to arise if the social and political structure at local level is not conducive to collective action and if appropriate beliefs and expectations have not come to prevail (Platteau 2008). This paper has attempted to delve into challenges associated with the operationalisation of the SSE framework with reference to informal sector, particularly informal street trade sector in an Indian city. The central focus has been on role of social norms, beliefs and local ways of life, as determining for success of social initiatives in general and solidarity economy in particular. It is observed that operationalisation of SSE approach – with its notion of democracy, equality and participation - lays considerable demand on policy ability to engage with citizens, administrative capacity and surrounding social system. Since the value, norms and practices of social system in less developing contexts such as in India still reels under feudal and

particularistic tendencies, class relation remains highly asymmetric and rights and identity of individuals within the poor community hardly gets a consideration from those with whom they are supposed to enter into partnerships. At the same time, skewness in power relation is socially accepted and use of informal influences for self interest serving does not attract social criticism. In such circumstances, participation of the subordinate in democratic processes is less likely to be more than tokenism. Then there is also class segregation within the community called 'poor' or 'informal worker', due to which enforcement of participatory exercise ends up accentuating unequal power relations.

This is not to sound pessimistic on the role of solidarity economy. Instead, the intent is to underscore the criticality of assessing and dealing with challenges that may constraint realization of the potential of SSE in its ideal form. Since SSE framework is value driven, role of norms and beliefs automatically become important in it. Unless favourable circumstances for cooperative behaviour prevail, very strong external attempt is envisaged to evolve the same, even if it may take years. Here, it is worthwhile to mention Parnell and Edgar's (2010) contention on the indispensability of a radical programme of sub-national state construction that includes pro-poor administrative systems design within the bureaucracy for realizing socio economic and individual rights of street traders.

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