

Social and Solidarity Economy organizations as Bioeconomic Systems? Insights from the case study of the ‘Association Sahel Vert’.

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Social Economy, Third Sector and Solidarity Economy are terms used in the literature mostly as synonymous concepts referring to those economic organizations of the civil society that escape from the classic state-market dichotomy. Those organizations reproduce and organize themselves around some common principles such as those related to solidarity and reciprocity (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). Associations, NGOs, grassroots-initiatives, consumer/working cooperatives, social firms, no-profit, voluntary and charity organizations are just some examples of the continuously evolving ecosystem of typology representing a global phenomenon whose actors can be identified as solidarity economy organizations (Kawano, 2016), or Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE).

Scholars agree in saying that organizations of this kind emerged and re-emerge often in reaction to a socially perceived economic crisis embedding clear emancipatory instances both in their objective and in their alternative organizational modes (e.g. Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005; Evers & Laville, 2004). Trying to generalize from this “family of hybrids”, it can be stated that those initiatives rely basically on independent, voluntary and democratic cooperation employing different values and modes of organizations in order to pursue a common scope different from the sole production and distribution of monetary surplus (Kawano, 2016). Third sector **organizations** are also accounted for their important **role as societal innovators** (Matei & Dorobantu, 2015; Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005; Gidron, 2010). However, the high peculiarity of those civil organizations mirrors a major drawback.

In fact, as expressed by Frank Moulaert and Oana Ailenei (2005), one of the biggest concerns about those heterogeneous economic organizations **is to improve the social efficiency and the sustainability of their initiatives**. As every other economic entity, the diverse organizations of the third sector need to know how to efficiently achieve their objective in a more sustainable manner. However, the mentioned civil **purpose-driven enterprises seemed to have special difficulties in finding their proper organized context of analysis**.

Even though third sector organizations are often not in the market and pursue primarily objectives that are different from profit, the neoclassic economic theory remains the fundamental normative framework to adopt in order to understand and develop efficiently every economic system (Dash, 2014; Kawano, 2016). The mentioned **mainstream economic paradigm is clearly a misleading agenda** to judge and guide such organizations, and this is firstly because, by definition, those initiatives are constituted on a plural and unique set of premises opposite to the methodological individualism of the dominant economic paradigm. Again, as Dash clearly stated: “orthodox economy severely constraints our cognitive abilities to imagine economic alternative” (2014, p. 6) calling for an epistemological revolution to sustain SSE as “a science in the making” (2014, p. 9).

Problem statement

Since SSE organizations rely, more or less explicitly, on principles that finally cannot be reduced to the premises of the market-based rationale, a proper economic discourse should develop employing an **alternative epistemology capable of bringing towards a coherent logical analysis** of their key features. Consequently, a proper framework would imply employing their unique principles and assets in order **to sustainably achieve their specific purpose**. In other words, as proposed by Dash, the “challenge is to construct a coherent theoretical framework for SSE with a strong explanatory power to

capture the wide and rich diversity of the scattered experiments and innovations on the ground" (2014, p. 9). This means that, in order to investigate the sustainability of such alternative economic systems, the deeper issue to tackle is, before to be theoretical, epistemological. But this of course poses other methodological and epistemological questions: firstly, how do we do that?

Bioeconomics constitute a central element and the departure point chosen here in order to analyze the sustainability of economic organizations using a different framework. In fact, the Bio-economic thought, initiated by Romanian American economist **Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen** (G-R) in the XX century, **provides an epistemology that observe the actual evolutive complexity of socioeconomic systems**. The Bio-economic paradigm **hires an alternative perspective, vocabulary and logic for studying economic processes profoundly accounting for sustainability issues**. In his (incomplete) attempt to carry an economic theory, the so called Bioeconomics opposed to the neoclassic mainstream, G-R offered an alternative epistemology and an economic rationale that could be here referred as the Bio-economic paradigm. Basically, the latter, placing economics under the unavoidable physical and biological constraints, considers the economic process as evolutive and made of open-system that employ available resources within its organization to jointly strive towards the reproduction of particular (fundamentally immaterial) goals through the proper development of its constitutive systems (Bonaiuti, 2003). Could this epistemology be beneficial to question and develop accordingly the purpose of the mentioned organizations?

Research question

The aim of this research is therefore to **explore how the interpretation of an alternative epistemology and paradigm conduce towards a frame to study qualitatively the SSE organization**. In order to do this, the **case-study of the Association Sahel Vert in Wittenheim, (France)** used. This association practice initiatives, research and education for sustainable integrated development of disadvantaged people. The bioeconomic thought is introduced to advise the construction of a framework for the usefulness of SSE organization'. In this regard, the bioeconomic paradigm here is not reproduced orthodoxically - no attempt to conduce economics analysis to its fundamental material basis would be offered; instead, it will inform one logical **framework to represent and qualitatively analyze how high-specific valued-driven organization could proceed towards their immaterial objective deeply accounting sustainability**.

Therefore, the research intends to answer the following question:

is a bio-economic informed conceptual framework a consistent epistemology to investigate SSE organizations and their sustainability?

Consequently, which benefits can one account from the application of a Bio-economic-inspired framework representing a third sector organization as a hypothetic Bio-economic System?

In order to answer the questions, **the work develops as an attempt to employ the bioeconomic epistemology and its logic within a qualitative research of a case study**. The framework will be employed towards a specific understanding of some fundamental assets of the Sahel Vert Association. The study quests the fundamental assets and activities attempting to assess for their sustainability.

Outline

This thesis is structured as follows:

In the first section a **literature review** is conducted in order to highlight the main feature of the type of organization subject of the study. Special attention is placed on the common elements emphasized differently in the **Third sector, Social and Solidarity Economy** related literature.

The second part of the literature review is meant to **present the epistemology chosen**. In this work, the **bioeconomic thought** is introduced to advise the construction of a framework for the usefulness of SSE organization'. In this regard, the Bioeconomic paradigm here is not reproduced orthodoxically: no attempt to conduce economics analysis to its fundamental material basis would be offered. Instead, Bioeconomics will **inform a logical framework to represent and qualitatively analyze** how high-specific valued-driven organization could proceed towards their immaterial objective deeply accounting sustainability.

Firstly, the elements of the thought of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen relevant for the study are summarized, while secondly, the cornerstones of the consequent Bioeconomic rationale are determined. As conclusion of this part, the theoretical framework is set by presenting the **outline for extension of Bio-economic approaches**.

The **methodologic section** follows explaining the premises as well as the methods that constitute the qualitative research conducted in the mentioned association. A Bio-economic framework for the qualitative analysis of the organization is outlined.

In the fourth chapter, the **case study of the Association Sahel Vert** is presented giving fundamental elements to understand the context of the research.

In the sixth chapter the findings of the research are presented as an attempt to populate the theoretical framework using the qualitative data gathered.

The discussion about how the findings relate with the theoretical framework and the ultimate answer of the research question are in the seventh and eighth chapter.

Insights about the limitations and the opportunity of the bioeconomic paradigm generalization to analyze the universe of the third sector' organizations will be presented as conclusion of the research conducted.

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