
The solidarity economy can free workers to take command of their lives

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This article argues that the solidarity economy can empower self-employed workers in the informal part of the economy, many of whom are women, who have been pushed out of the mainstream labour market. It has the capacity to provide not only alternative means of securing a livelihood but does so in the context of workers' shared values and in a way that is rooted in people's local conditions.

Many workers in South Africa's informal economy, especially Black women,¹ lost their jobs during the national shutdown due to the Coronavirus epidemic. For example,

according to Michael Rogan and Caroline Skinner, "32% of self-employed women and 36% of women in informal wage employment did not work in April."² Studies on the informal economy focus on, inter alia, the structural drivers of informality,³ the size of the informal labour market, the nature of informal employment, and the government's response to the informal economy.⁴

The informal economy literature sheds light on the economic activities of Black working class people, especially Black women, who were pushed out of the mainstream labour market by racial and gendered neoliberal capitalism. The debate on the informal economy, however, ignores collective forms of work that fall outside the purview of paid labour. In contrast, the solidarity economy embodies disparate collective livelihood strategies that liberate the meaning of work, and that challenge the fictitious boundary between production and reproduction.

The feminist and socialist philosopher, Grace Lee Boggs, argues

that jobs in a capitalist economy are characterised by fragmentation and dehumanisation.⁵ The Turkish academic, Aslihan Aykac, draws a distinction between work and labour. She suggests that, in the context of the solidarity economy, work is a liberating space in which the worker exercises control over her/his/their time and social activities, whereas labour in accordance with capitalist values subordinates human beings to the dictates of capital.⁶ The solidarity economy provides a platform for creating "forms of work that create community; that expand our humanity".⁷ According to a survey on cooperatives in Sao Paulo, cooperativists will not give up their work in cooperatives for jobs in the labour market.⁸

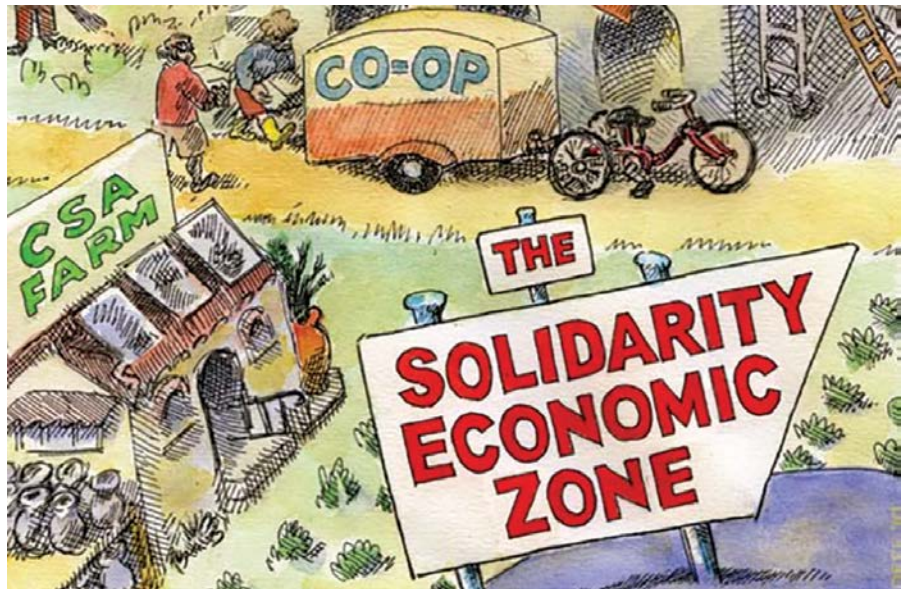
Moreover, the solidarity economy injects social and political content into the meaning of work, and it challenges the culture of racial and gendered neoliberal capitalism. There are many local and international examples of collective livelihood efforts that are

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grounded in communities. These are undergirded by shared values of solidarity and reciprocity that provided social support to communities during the coronavirus epidemic. For example, members of a vegetable garden cooperative in Khenana informal settlement in Durban used money from the savings of the cooperative to buy masks and sanitisers for the whole community.⁹ In the solidarity economy of Ecuador, indigenous farmers made food baskets that were delivered to all households.¹⁰ In Canada, cooperatives provided food and income support to working class communities.¹¹

Between 2013 and 2016, under the aegis of a non-governmental organisation (NGO), I managed two women’s cooperatives projects which developed 12 worker cooperatives anchored to the values of the solidarity economy. These projects – in South Africa, Lesotho and Eswatini – show that a solidarity economy approach to livelihoods can produce relationships of cooperation and solidarity among those who operate at the periphery of the capitalist economy, especially Black working class women. In addition, as the Colombian sociologist, Cesar Rodriguez Garavito, points out solidarity economy enterprises such as worker cooperatives can increase the livelihood outcomes of poor, self-employed workers as incomes in cooperatives are generally higher than



those workers generate when working alone.¹² The projects also threw into sharp relief the transformative effects of informal learning processes in the solidarity economy.

The projects assisted 282 self-employed women to develop worker cooperatives anchored to the values of the solidarity economy. The project participants included street traders, informal cross-border traders and home-based garment workers. The ages of the participants ranged between 24 and 60 years. Most of them were poor, and they had low literacy skills.¹³ The cooperatives were registered between 2013 and 2014 in the different countries. Their economic activities included poultry farming, sewing, catering, beadwork and waste picking. Many of the women who participated in the projects were the sole breadwinners in their households.

WHAT IS THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY?

The solidarity economy has historically been an integral part of the struggle for Black liberation as reflected by the principle of self-determination. For example, the plethora of socioeconomic initiatives of the Black community programmes, which were an organisational component of

the Black Consciousness Movement between 1971 and 1977, were spaces for cultivating collective empowerment and resilience in Black communities ravaged by legalised structural racism and racial and gendered capitalism. In the context of the United States of America, Sacajawea Hall observes, “Black people would not have survived the brutality of chattel slavery and Jim Crow apartheid without practicing solidarity and cooperation in organized formal ways”.¹⁴

Definitions of the solidarity economy abound. Scholars and activists agree that the values of the solidarity economy – social solidarity, self-reliance, reciprocity, autonomy and collective ownership – subvert the culture of capitalism. Kali Akuno defines the solidarity economy as “a process of promoting cooperative economics that promote social solidarity, mutual aid, reciprocity, and generosity”.¹⁵ Definitional differences, however, exist in terms of the solidarity economy’s relationship with the capitalist economy and the state.

The Brazilian philosopher and educator, Euclides Mance, views the solidarity economy as an evolving alternative economic system that will eventually replace the capitalist economy.¹⁶ This is not the view of ➤

the centrist International Labour Organisation (ILO), which has used the term “social and solidarity economy” (SSE) to refer to entities such as cooperatives and social enterprises whose values are aligned with the solidarity economy, even though they may exist within the capitalist economy.¹⁷ Carlo Borzaga, Gianluca Salvatori and Riccardo Bodini, in an ILO paper on the SSE, describe the SSE as a shock absorber in the wake of the automation of production and services. The authors argue that the SSE is a source of employment in the social sector, as this sector includes “social and emotional” tasks that cannot be automated.¹⁸ While recognising that these are primarily non-standard forms of employment characterised by low wages and precarious working conditions, the authors nevertheless feel that the “care economy” is an avenue for creating decent work for the inclusion of women into the labour market, and for the incorporation of informal enterprises into the mainstream of the capitalist economy.¹⁹

The problem with this position on the solidarity economy, as Mondli Hlatshwayo explains in relation to poorly paid community healthcare workers in South Africa, is that labour in the social sector is reflective of the way the neoliberal state externalises social services on to non-state actors without assuming any responsibility for the exploitation experienced by workers, especially Black women.²⁰ What is generally ignored is the way employment practices in the social sector are shaped by patriarchy and racism. Moreover, as Jean-Marc Fontan and Eric Shragge observe in their study of community economic development organisations in Montreal, social enterprises that are funded by government risk being assimilated into capitalist economic agendas.²¹

In the South African context, protagonists of the solidarity economy draw a distinction between the social



[S]olidarity economies ... create “maneuvering space” within the belly of the beast by challenging the culture and ideology of capitalism.

economy and the solidarity economy. For example, Michelle Williams argues, “[t]he social economy is about social inclusion, while the solidarity economy is about social transformation”.²² Williams and others who are aligned to this position, consider the solidarity economy as an alternative to the capitalist economy. They argue that by linking cooperatives to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) the government is exposing them to competition and corruption, which undermine democracy and autonomy in cooperatives.²³

Regarding the solidarity economy’s relationship with the state, Aslihan Aykac suggests that solidarity economy actors prioritise autonomy and self-reliance over relations with the state. Some scholars argue that the state should not play a role in the solidarity economy as it is not “a source of change”. They argue that change and transformation can only come from the autonomous capacities of solidarity economy actors to build social power.²⁴

Ethan Miller is a US-based academic and activist. His work on the solidarity economy offers a more nuanced perspective on its relationship with the capitalist economy. He describes the solidarity economy as a process involving different relationships, practices and strategies for the maintenance of livelihoods that are

linked together by shared values and that are rooted in people’s local conditions.²⁵ He argues that the solidarity economy is “an empty signifier” whose content is determined by people’s livelihood practices in different local contexts.²⁶

Miller uses the term “householding economies” to highlight that the social productive work of women contributes towards the maintenance of livelihoods, and, thus, should be considered an economic practice linked to the solidarity economy.²⁷ The term is useful for making visible the economic and social value of social reproduction, and for collapsing the fictitious dichotomy between production and reproduction. For example, Asanda Benya observes that “in the absence of wages”, after the mass arrest of workers at the former Lonmin mine, women in Marikana tapped into stokvels to attend to the household needs of their families.²⁸ She observes that even when the wages were available stokvels continued to be a source of livelihood.²⁹ The benefit of belonging to a stokvel exceeds the monetary gain, as it serves as a platform to build stocks of social capital – solidarity, trust and social networks – within a community.

Miller argues that purist positions on the solidarity economy obscure the ways in which forces that are not explicitly anti-capitalist may contribute towards constructing an alternative economic order. He contends that solidarity economy actors are constructing alternative economic relationships from within the capitalist system.³⁰ The widely studied Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in Spain is an example of the complexity of the solidarity economy. While the cooperation is embedded in the capitalist economy, its activities are undergirded by the values of the solidarity economy.³¹ Aslihan Aykac argues that solidarity economies operate as a countervailing force within the capitalist economy. They create



“maneuvering space” within the belly of the beast by challenging the culture and ideology of capitalism.³²

Moreover, international experiences of the solidarity economy suggest the need for developing tactical approaches towards the state that help to build and sustain the solidarity economy, and that assist in subverting the hegemony of the capitalist political economy. For example, shortly after the election of Lula da Silva as Brazil’s 35th president, social movements engaged with the government on the creation of institutional infrastructure for the solidarity economy, including the establishment of a solidarity economy National Secretariat in the Ministry of Labour and Employment. In Ecuador, indigenous governor, Yaku Perez, is using his political power to support the solidarity economy. In the context of the solidarity economy in Jackson, Mississippi, Kali Akuno observes, “[w]e have learned through our own experiences and our own extensive study of the experiences of others that we cannot afford to ignore the power of the state”.³³

In South Africa, as Mazibuko Jara argues,³⁴ a solidarity economy approach to land justice is a transformative strategy for democratising land policy, and for developing an alternative framework for resolving the land question that centres the land needs of rural and urban Black working class communities through effective systematic support for cooperatives that are not assimilated into neoliberalism. In addition, the solidarity economy is an effective organising platform for building a grassroots movement for land justice and food sovereignty.

TRANSFORMATIVE INFORMAL LEARNING IN THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

Workers’ education is generally considered in relation to traditional trade unions, and the focus on education in the informal economy

tends to be on structured education. For example, Chris Bonner makes a compelling case for collaboration on workers’ education for informal workers between traditional trade unions and informal worker organisations, based on several international examples of structured educational activities that make use of participatory methods. She argues, “[t]he sheer size and reach of the informal workforce in developing countries ... indicate that organizing and workers’ education in the informal economy is something that will assume even greater importance in the future, especially for traditional trade unions”.³⁵ Bonner admits that most informal worker organisations are struggling to sustain structured educational initiatives, mainly due to a lack of financial resources.³⁶ However, she does not take into account the general lack of political will and capacity within most traditional trade unions to organise informal workers. As Aykac points out, the failure of traditional unions to move beyond employment, which is the concrete location of capital-labour relations, is reflective of the dearth of capacious perspectives of the working class within the trade union movement. In addition, workers’ education in traditional trade unions is often hierarchically structured, which increases the risk of exclusion in the learning process.

The focus on structured education obfuscates informal learning processes in informal workplace settings such as worker cooperatives. Very little is known about the transformation potential of informal learning in worker cooperatives, especially in cooperatives that are anchored to the values of the solidarity economy. Critical adult educational scholar, Daniel Schugurensky, draws a distinction between formal education, non-formal education and informal learning. Formal education refers to the formal education system and non-formal education includes the educational programmes

of NGOs, trade unions and other civil society organisations. Schugurensky argues that both formal and non-formal education are institutionalised and structured. In contrast, informal learning does not require experts; it is grounded in practice, and it extends beyond the workplace.³⁷

Marcelo Vieta used Schugurensky’s conception of informal learning in his empirical study of worker cooperatives in Argentina, and while his research does not specifically focus on the solidarity economy, the findings resonate powerfully with the outcomes of the two projects on solidarity economy cooperatives with which I have been involved. Vieta refers to the cooperatives that were formed by employees to take over the running of failed businesses as “sites of transformative learning”.³⁸ Not only did the former employees require new skills to manage the cooperatives, they had to transition from being employees to being cooperativists, in other words, from being individual workers to being collective owners of the business organisation.³⁹

Similarly, the self-employed women who participated in the two projects I was associated with required new skills, values and attitudes to operate the cooperatives in accordance with the principles and values of the solidarity economy. The projects combined non-formal education with informal learning. Learning took place in the educational activities organised by the NGO that supported the women’s cooperatives, in the cooperatives and in the interactions between different cooperatives. Informal learning in the women’s cooperatives was both collective and collaborative.

Vieta found that informal learning processes in the worker cooperatives produced transformation at different levels. At a personal level, the workers learned skills and values that resulted in them seeing each other as cooperativists and comrades.⁴⁰ At an interpersonal >>

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level, they developed decision-making skills that horizontalised “the workplace from the bottom-up”.⁴¹ At a community-level, the cooperatives started educational, health and art initiatives that addressed the “social, cultural, and economic needs” of the communities in which the cooperatives operated.⁴²

Participatory skills training, political education and on the job learning in the women’s cooperatives produced several important transformative outcomes. In the day-to-day running of the cooperatives, the women workers

learned solidarity, collective ownership, and collective responsibility. For example, in Lesotho, *Selailai-sea-Titima* bought cattle and equipment for poultry farming that were collectively owned by the 10 members of the cooperative. One member of the cooperative, Lucia Konyana, said, “[w]e are now working as a group. There are others who want to join our cooperative, so that they will be part of our cooperative.”⁴³

Learning to work in a cooperative that is anchored to the values of the solidarity economy transformed the meaning of work for informal workers who participated in the projects. They expressed views that subverted the individualistic values of capitalism embodied in entrepreneurialism. They saw social solidarity and collective empowerment as an important part of their work in the cooperatives. For example, Jasmine Page from the Women of Good Taste Cooperative said, “[t]he catering cooperative has played a meaningful role in the upliftment of the socio economic conditions of our members ... the cooperative has given us the opportunities to raise our incomes and empower us to own our own solutions. ... We own Women of Good Taste Catering Cooperative, [and] control and benefit from the business.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, informal political learning in the cooperatives cultivated new social consciousness, resulting in the development of a strong bond of sisterhood among women in the different cooperatives. For example, Nomsa Motza from *Akuhlali Kunje* said: “In Swaziland, we live in a patriarchal society, which always perceives women as second class citizens, and this has caused women to lose confidence in their potential to succeed. Hearing that there are other women doing the same thing, and are successful really changed our mind set of believing that men should always take a lead.”⁴⁵ The cooperatives created safe spaces for women workers to reflect on the intersecting forms of oppression and

discrimination that they experience in their homes and society. As a result, in Lesotho and Eswatini, the women’s cooperatives resisted attempts by men leaders of informal worker organisations to sabotage the projects. Considering that in these two countries women are generally marginalised in informal worker organisations, this response could not have been anticipated prior to the formation of the solidarity economy cooperatives.

However, as Vieta observes, learning in worker cooperatives, like in other organisations or structures, is a process that is fraught with contradictions. For example, some participants had difficulty internalising the values of the solidarity economy. They struggled to take up a cooperative identity. The situation was compounded by the lack of financial support for production in the cooperatives. This means that learning in solidarity economy enterprises is shaped by the conditions under which the enterprises are built and developed.

Notwithstanding the contradictions and challenges, the solidarity economy is a meaningful and effective strategy for maintaining livelihoods. It avoids disadvantages that can accompany the full incorporation of informal workers into the capitalist economy. Moreover, as I indicate above, solidarity economy organisers need to critically consider the ways in which the state can contribute towards the survival of cooperatives. As Garavito argues, local authorities should develop specific plans to support cooperatives in working class and poor communities. Cooperatives that are socialised into the values of the solidarity economy should be able to exercise vigilance against dependency, cooptation and the bureaucratisation of cooperatives without rejecting state intervention out of hand. Finally, it is vitally important that solidarity economy actors such as cooperatives build networks for collaboration and mutual support.⁴⁶



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