



DECENT WORK AND SSE – 110th INTERNATIONAL LABOUR CONFERENCE – TALK WITH SIMEL ESIM, ILO

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BACKGROUND:

We talked with Simel Esim who leads the ILO’s portfolio on cooperatives and the wider social and solidarity economy for the past decade. Simel will also be the lead expert from the ILO for the general discussion on “Decent work and the social and solidarity economy” that will take place at the 110th International Labour Conference.

A Turkish-American political economist with over 30 years of experience in international development Simel has engaged in research, policy advocacy, capacity development and development cooperation work in close to 50 countries. Her work has provided her with opportunities to collaborate with social and solidarity economy units whether she was working on gender equality and women economic empowerment, informal economy or migration issues.

Before joining ILO COOP in 2012 during the UN International Year of Cooperatives, Simel was based in the ILO’s Regional Office for Arab States for eight years as a Senior Regional Specialist on Gender Equality at Work and Women Workers’ Rights. Prior to joining the ILO, she worked in Washington, DC as a researcher in a number of institutions, including the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing Organizing (WIEGO) among others for more than a dozen years.

Simel holds a Ph.D. in Economics, an MA in International Economics and a BA in Political Science. She speaks Turkish and English. She also has working knowledge of Arabic, Italian and French.

Q1. Could you tell us about the background of the “Decent work and the social and solidarity economy” report? Why did the International Labour Office prepare this report?

Before responding to your question, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share the work of the ILO on this portfolio with you. The ILO and CASES have an excellent collaboration that go back many years. Most recently in 2021, the ILO and its International Training Center in Turin collaborated with CASES in organizing the [12th session of the Social and Solidarity Economy Academy](#). The [SSE Academies](#) provide an interregional policy dialogue and learning opportunity bringing together researchers, practitioners and policymakers from around the world, to share their experiences, good practices and challenges working in the SSE.

Coming back to your question, in March 2021, the 341st Governing Body decided to place on the agenda of the [110th Session of the International Labour Conference](#) in 2022 an item related to decent work and the social and solidarity economy (SSE), for general discussion. The general discussion will be the first comprehensive discussion on the SSE at the ILO, and also the first high-level debate in the UN system around the development potential of the SSE.

The [Report](#) has been prepared by the Office to inform ILO constituents, and SSE partners ahead of the discussion. To date it is available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Mongolian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. A presentation on the Office Report is available in [English](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#). Region specific presentations of the Office Report on “Decent work and the Social and Solidarity Economy” are available for [Africa](#), [Asia and the Pacific](#), the [Americas](#), [Arab States](#), and [Europe and Central Asia](#).

The Office Report is organized into five chapters, as follows:

- Chapter 1 delineates the contours of the SSE around the world, elaborates on the building blocks of the concept and proposes a definition for discussion. It also presents regional overviews of the SSE.
- Chapter 2 provides evidence of the contributions of the SSE to the global development priorities defined by the Decent Work Agenda and the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda).
- Chapter 3 discusses the relationship of the ILO’s tripartite constituents with the SSE, using examples from around the world.
- Chapter 4 describes the Office’s work on the SSE, with a specific focus on historical background, current programmes, development cooperation policy and partnerships and capacity-development activities.

- Chapter 5 discusses the way forward in terms of strengthening the contribution of the SSE to decent work and sustainable development. It stresses the importance of promoting a conducive environment for the SSE, discusses the linkages between the SSE and the future of work and proposes avenues for future Office work on the SSE.

Q2. In many countries the SSE is not used as a framework in policy deliberations. Instead the discussions are centered on individual units such as cooperatives, and social enterprises. What do you think about the importance of using the SSE term?

There is not yet a universal recognition of the term SSE. Other terms closely associated with the SSE are used in different parts of the world: "social economy", "third sector", "social enterprise", "non-profit sector", "solidarity economy", "alternative economy" and "popular economy". The different terms reflect the diversity of traditions. Depending on the context, they may be interchangeable with the term "social and solidarity economy" or differ to various extents in their referents and connotations.

Although the term "social and solidarity economy" and its variants may not have universal acceptance, around the globe solidarity and mutualism based self-help initiatives have existed across time. Some regions, notably Latin America, Southern Europe and West Africa have a rich and diverse history of the SSE, where solidarity-based practices date back to a period before the establishment of the modern State.

Although the SSE and the organizational forms that are subsumed under it are not new, its policy importance and visibility have grown significantly since the turn of the century. The SSE has gained further recognition for its role in creating and sustaining jobs and providing services for members, users, and communities during the global COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when calls for new ways of doing business are growing, the SSE can provide a basis for a model of enterprise that fosters inclusiveness, sustainability, and resilience. Hence the importance of this report and the upcoming general discussion on decent work and the social and solidarity economy.

A conducive environment is needed for economic units, like cooperatives, mutual associations, social enterprises that are based on values and principles to thrive. The elements of such an enabling environment include appropriate legislation, policies, programmes and support institutions that can provide financing, legal advisory and referral services, and business incubators. Having a more systemic approach to these value and principle driven initiatives, through a social and solidarity

economy framework would help enhance their role in building resilience in local communities, and advancing decent work and sustainable development.

Q3. There is a need for a universal definition of the SSE. How does the report address this issue?

Although a universally agreed-on definition may not fully capture the diversity of the SSE around the world, its absence impedes the adequate representation of the SSE in international development policies and strategies. It also impedes the compilation of comprehensive, reliable and internationally comparable SSE statistics.

As noted in the Office Report, since the turn of the 21st century, legislation on the SSE has been adopted in at least 20 countries at the national and local levels. National legislation on the SSE has been developed in Bolivia, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, Djibouti, Ecuador, France, Greece, Honduras, Luxembourg, Mexico, Portugal, Romania, Senegal, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Uruguay and Venezuela. Other countries, such as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the Republic of Korea and South Africa, are currently preparing national SSE policies. Certain countries, including Argentina (Entre Rios, Mendoza and Rio Negro), Belgium (Brussels and Wallonia), Brazil (Minas Gerais, among others), Canada (Quebec) and Italy (Emilia Romagna, among others) have adopted SSE legislation at the subnational level.

A close and careful review of the above-mentioned legislation point toward the key building blocks for a universal definition of the social and solidarity economy. The legislation from these countries specify who does what, how and why (in other words, its agents, activities, principles and values). A shared understanding of the SSE can emerge from the development of legislation and statistical frameworks on the SSE. While there may be a convergence emerging on the values and principles of the SSE, but there is no universal agreement on the organizational forms that are subsumed under it.

The proposed definition in the report is based on an analysis of the adopted SSE legislation from around the world. It builds on the values, principles and organizational forms outlined in the legislation. It is only a proposed definition for discussion at the International Labour Conference by the tripartite Constituents, namely governments, workers' and employers' organizations from 187 countries. A legal compendium that provides a background to the different SSE legislation used to arrive at the definition has also been prepared by the office. The [social and solidarity economy](#) is

also now available as a subject in the ILO's database of national labour, social security and related human rights legislation ([NATLEX](#)) featuring texts of adopted policies and legislation.

Q4. What does ILO do to advance the SSE? What are the short-term plans or initiatives?

The ILO is the only UN agency with a dedicated organizational unit working on the SSE ([Cooperatives Unit](#)). This Unit, which is responsible for ILO activities on the SSE, was established in 1920 by a unanimous decision of the Governing Body at its third session. Since then, the Unit's scope, size, name and organizational position has evolved in response to changing realities and approaches. One constant, however, has been the reference to cooperatives and cooperation in its name over time. The Unit was originally established to carry out research and to provide information and legal advisory services related to cooperatives. In the 1960s, when many developing countries gained their independence, the unit embarked on an ambitious development cooperation programme. By the end of the 1960s, it held the Office's third largest extrabudgetary portfolio and remained so until the 1980s. During this period cooperatives were seen as key development actors, and hence many ILO initiatives were aimed at directly setting up cooperatives in developing countries.

During the 1990s, with the changing role of the State in socio-economic development in favour of for-profit private enterprises, resources allocated to cooperative development declined sharply. In this period the Office focused on establishing a conducive environment for cooperative development, working mostly at the macro and the meso levels through larger, interregional programmes. ILO's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation No. 193 adopted in 2002 sparked renewed interest in cooperatives as agents for poverty alleviation and development.

The term "social economy" also appeared occasionally in ILO documents as far back as 1922. Since the adoption of the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization in 2008, ILO constituents have increasingly turned to the Office for assistance and advice related to the SSE. Before then, the ILO had promoted a wide range of SSE units without necessarily labelling them as such. Across the years, the ILO has designed and implemented a number of initiatives with or through SSE units.

In the last decade, the Office has responded to requests by the constituents regarding the SSE through a number of development cooperation projects for instance in Algeria, Tunisia, South Africa and in East and South-East Asia. The ILO has also been at the forefront of the promotion of

cooperatives and the wider SSE within the UN system. In addition to multilateral partnerships, the Office has bilateral partnerships and memoranda of understanding with a range of international organizations of the SSE. These notably include the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and the International Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy (CIRIEC).

Q5. The 110th International Labour Conference has held a general discussion on “Decent work and the social and solidarity economy. What are the outcomes of this General Discussion?”

On June 10, 2022, the International Labour Conference adopted the Resolution and Conclusions of the [General Discussion Committee](#) on decent work and the social and solidarity economy (SSE). During the deliberations, the ILO Constituents recognized that a robust SSE could contribute to balanced, inclusive, resilient and sustainable economies and societies.

This [general discussion](#) was the first comprehensive deliberation on the social and solidarity economy at the International Labour Conference. It is also the first high-level debate in the UN system on the subject. Although the social and solidarity economy is not new, its policy importance and visibility have grown significantly since the turn of the century.

The Report, [Resolutions](#) and [Conclusions](#) from the Committee were a result of 10 days of deliberations that took place in three segments. During the first segment on May 30 and 31, 2022, the delegates concentrated on [four points for discussion](#) based on the [Office Report](#). The [four points](#) were discussed during four sittings across two days and focused on:

- What should be a universal definition of the social and solidarity economy?
- How can the social and solidarity economy contribute to decent work and sustainable development?
- What can governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations do to promote the SSE’s contribution to human-centred recovery?
- What actions can the ILO take to promote the social and solidarity economy?

Based on these two days of deliberations, the Office prepared and submitted tentative conclusions for review and revision by a Drafting Group. Consisting of a smaller segment of delegates, the drafting group deliberated on the tentative conclusions provided by the Office. It developed its draft conclusions during the second segment of the Committee’s work. The Drafting Group proposed to

the Committee a set of [draft conclusions](#) for discussion that reflected the deliberations of the Committee. The draft conclusions of the drafting committee were shared with the full Committee. The full committee delegates provided a set of [amendments](#) on June 4, 2022.

The third segment of the General Discussion Committee started on June 6, 2022, to review the amendments to the draft conclusions. The tripartite delegates deliberated in the true spirit of social dialogue on the amendments and arrived upon a set of Conclusions on June 9, 2022.

Q6. What is included in the conclusions concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy. What are the outcomes of this General Discussion?

The Conclusions reflect the roles that SSE entities can perform. They underline the potential of the social and the solidarity economy to uplift persons facing vulnerable situations, including women, youth and persons with disabilities.

The Conclusions are structured as follows:

- Part I, entitled “Introduction”, recalls the links between the social and solidarity economy and the ILO by directly referencing the ILO Constitution, including the Declaration of Philadelphia, relevant international labour standards and declarations that explicitly recognize the importance of the social and solidarity economy in its various forms, in promoting sustainable development, decent work, productive employment and improved living standards for all.
- Part II provides a clear and comprehensive “Definition of the SSE” based on a set of values and principles. This is the first agreed tripartite definition of the social and solidarity economy at the international level.
- Part III spells out the “Guiding principles to address challenges and opportunities” to promote decent work and the social and solidarity economy for a human-centred future of work.
- Part IV explains “The role of governments and the social partners” in fostering the social and solidarity economy’s economic, social and environmental contributions.
- Part V, entitled “The role of the ILO”, provides recommendations for Office action and key principles that underpin such action.

- An Annex to these Conclusions provides a “Non-exhaustive list of instruments of the International Labour Organization and the United Nations relevant to decent work and the social and solidarity economy”.

The Conclusions provide sufficient guidance to the Constituents and the Office on the promotion of decent work in and through the SSE for years to come. They will be disseminated widely. They will also be turned into a strategy and an Office-wide work plan.

The work of the International Labour Office on the SSE can be followed through a dedicated topical page, [here](#).