

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AS A LEVER FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS FROM A LOCAL POLITICIAN

ANA UMBELINO

Deputy Mayor of the Torres Vedras City Council



CONTEXT

“The EU is committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050. Achieving this goal will require a transformation of European society and economy that will need to be fair, cost-effective and socially balanced.”(1)

The current ecological crisis we are experiencing has precipitated a reflection on the way we inhabit the world, driving a review of the dominant models of socio-economic development.

The European Ecological Pact, a strategic framework that guides public policies and has repercussions at the various levels of governance, emerges against a historical backdrop of upheaval and of blatant and forceful emergency. It is in this context that we question the role of municipalities, the level of governance closest to citizens, and the place of the social economy within a locally based territorial development project that contributes to the desired transformations and regenerative changes, providing and equitably distributing greater well-being to all, reducing asymmetries and inequalities.



THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSON

“Cities cannot be understood without the human person who is their centre and reason for being”(2)

José Tolentino Mendonça

In an exercise in semantic archaeology, José Tolentino Mendonça (2020) reminds us that the Latin etymology of the word city can either derive from *cives*, describing an agglomeration of human dwellings, or it can result from the evolution of the term *civis*, alluding to the condition of citizen. He argues that in both cases, whether we are looking at a description of the city as a physical space or its social and political definition, the human person is, and I quote, its “key”. He highlights that the city cannot be understood without paying attention to the conceptions of life and the world that it shapes and projects. Reflection on the polis calls us together, calling for a new citizenship, because we cannot think about the future of human societies, or the quality of human life, he says, without discussing cities and their origins.

“If there is no love, not only do people's lives become barren, but also that of cities”(3)

Elena Ferrante

Cities are places of exchange, of trading not only of goods and commodities, but also of experiences, affections, memories, knowledge, solidarity, desires, aspirations and dreams. It is not enough to accommodate diversity, to have a cosmopolitan matrix, if they are unable to create encounters.

The encounter is truly the ground for a relational understanding that prepares citizens to deal with difference and otherness in the act of caring for what is common.

“The rediscovery of the common good: the social good that society distributes among its members to foster their integral development”(4)

José Tolentino Mendonça



The common good is the substratum that transforms cities into a collective project based on cooperation. It cannot be reduced to the sum of what each individual perceives as a good, nor to what corporate interests prescribe, but rather to what society distributes among its members in order to foster their full development, safeguarding the conditions essential to their dignity, such as the right to housing, work, education, culture, health, free flow of information, religious freedom, self-determination of gender identities and expressions...guaranteeing, in short, the right to the city.

João Bonifácio Serra (2021)(5) recalls that the “common” stems from a demand for access by all to collective resources, to the sharing of knowledge without which the functioning and governance of communities cannot be exercised rigorously, and endangers the commitment to the long term.

“It is in the community that history begins and is re-launched”(6)

José Tolentino Mendonça

Contemporary cities are marked by growing and insidious fragmentation, disintegration, insularity and loneliness. They urgently need to be transformed into dialogical spaces, supplanting incommunicability and the quartering of identities, affirming them as polyphonic community projects that are led by and call for the responsibility of all men and women.

A NEW HERMENEUTICS OF CITIES

Zygmunt Baumann (2006)(7) described the contemporary city as observatory and stage. Taking this image as a reference (or, if we prefer, a metaphor), we would add the word laboratory to capture the pulse and the dynamics that the present-day city expresses and elicits. Not infrequently, the locale is overemphasized in a reductive way, described only as the stage, environment or setting where certain events take place, and the proximity that the small scale provides and cultivates is understood as a means of guaranteeing the “application” of measures supposedly designed at other levels, but alien to its “inhabitants,” their needs, aspirations and dreams. This translates a univocal,



instrumental, paternalistic and impoverishing vision of the potential that cities contain, we believe. In their plurality of profiles and trajectories, in the diversity of their sociocultural mosaics, cities are laboratories: points of intersection and encounter, spaces of co-creation, of creativity, generators of innovation, of new utopias that set renewed horizons of collective demands.

THE CITY AS A META-SYSTEM OF RELATIONS

We cannot isolate what is interconnected, mask or hide the problems of cities, persist in atomised readings, resort to vulgates and improvise simplifying interpretations that are incapable of capturing the complexity and, at the same time, the richness of human systems. Cities are observatories. It is therefore important to listen to them, to scrutinise them by creating channels that ensure systematic listening and the flourishing of structured dialogue practices capable of supplanting mere episodic consultation. It is necessary to ensure that no one is excluded from participation processes and, therefore, from the construction of the city.

Only a mapping of the problems or euphemistically challenges and the illumination of the strengths or assets of each territory, supported by broadly participatory processes, will be able to close a common agenda, capable of bringing out the ethics of responsibility and care.

It is necessary, we stress, to transform cities into spaces of encounter, of creative confrontation and, at the same time, of dialogue. To guarantee the reading and interpretation of the reference frameworks adopted at the European level, trying to relate and dynamically intercept the paths that they point to and the opportunities that they bring with the needs, ambitions and aspirations of common people and the communities in which they are anchored. Only a culture of participation, we reiterate, that promotes the decoding of the dynamics of each territory and of the strategic planning instruments drawn up at various levels, will be able to inscribe change.

SHEDDING LIGHT AND ENHANCING PRE-EXISTING ASSETS

Citizens' literacy regarding the reference frameworks adopted at European level and the principles and values on which they are based and participation in the consultation processes involved in drawing them up can be enhanced by activating pre-existing formal governance structures in the different territories, such as the “Social Network”, making the most of their radiating effect and simultaneously encouraging them to reinvent and reconceptualise them. It is imperative, in this particular case, to safeguard the involvement and participation of under-represented groups that are often marginalized in these processes. This calls for the construction of differentiated methodologies that appeal to creativity and innovation, guaranteeing a multiple and crossed dialogue, avoiding fragmentation and homogenisation.

Making the assets of each micro-territory visible presupposes building a culture of participation, of open sharing of knowledge, itself perceived as a community resource, and, we would add, of valuing history and memory, considering the long time and not only the immediacy of the present. In this sense, we recognize the importance of creating archives, inventories, of studying genealogies, trajectories and expressions that certain phenomena have known over time, capturing their historicity. How have communities organized themselves to respond to the problems of daily life? What strategies, methods and techniques have they co-constructed to manage common resources (commons)? What accumulation of skills have they built up? What instances of mediation and practices of transmitting knowledge and skills have they built up? What types of operations have been set up to resolve concrete everyday problems? What collaborative “technologies” have they tried out in times of crisis?

We believe that shedding light on the practices of sharing, reciprocity and co-responsibility in the management of the common good that are exercised within communities is a fundamental magma for making them viable in the future. In short, we believe that a deeper and denser understanding of the value built by communities requires a long look that respects and captures the historicity of these phenomena and processes.



COMMON HORIZONS: THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AS A KEY IN BUILDING THE FUTURE OF CITIES

Social economy, by placing people at the heart of its action, becomes an essential mechanism for responding to the challenges of the ecological and digital transitions, helping to achieve the goals set out in structuring benchmarks such as the Ecological Pact, the Pillar of Social Rights and the New Skills Agenda for Europe. In a context full of risks (but also opportunities), it is crucial to create favourable conditions for strengthening the social economy at local level, in cities, towns and villages within an integrated territorial development strategy.

COOPERATION, RECIPROCITY, SOLIDARITY AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

In its polymorphism, the social economy is linked to the territory: it is an emanation of the community and an attempt to respond to its problems and aspirations. Therefore, it inescapably carries a ballast of utopia. The framework of principles and values that gives it its identity and distinctiveness reflects a programme affiliated to a collective development project anchored in a specific context.

Social economy organizations have demonstrated their indispensability in building more resilient, egalitarian, solidary, fraternal, creative, participatory and irreverent communities. This last qualification proves to us to be not insignificant because reverence leads to unanimity, intellectual inactivity, creative anomie, and relational impoverishment.

Social economy organisations are meeting places.

The inclusion of practices of cooperation and participatory governance within social economy organisations fosters community roots, a civic commitment backed up by many other forms of public intervention.



Cooperation builds trust, raises common horizons, promotes collective intelligence, creativity, solidarity and resilience.

Social economy organisations appear to be fundamental in the current recovery process, which is not limited to the economic dimension. However, if we do not recover people, we will not recover the economy.

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY IN ALL POLICIES: TRANSVERSALITY

It is necessary to design integrative cross-sectoral policies and actions that strengthen strategic coordination, leverage the joint action of social economy organisations and local authorities and improve the knowledge and capacity building of the local network in conjunction with other levels of governance.

It is recommended to conduct a meta-analysis of the locally designed strategic planning documents, guided by a set of questions to identify the relational place and role of the social economy at its core: In which documents does it appear? What questions/problems is it called upon to answer? In which sectoral and/or multi or intersectoral response areas? How is the value it generates measured/mapped? This analytical exercise will allow supporting a curatorial work that contributes to create a more crystalline, substantive and assertive roadmap of action in each territory.

ACTION PLAN FOR THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Its effectiveness will depend on the definition of territorialized strategies that support local action. It is necessary to discuss it critically from a polyhedral vision, to deconstruct it, to create dialectics: to understand the alignment of local initiatives with the conceptual model, strategic axes and priority actions that it advocates and how to rehearse new answers that make it reverberate locally.



This is, we believe, the *momentum* to boost the design of local strategies for the promotion of social economy, based on a multilevel approach.

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY, LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND SCHOOLS IN BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM OF PROXIMITY

“(...) three is an eminently dominant number,
in which the unitary self and its dualistic opposite are overcome,
then the collective begins.”(8)
Oskar Schlemmer (1926)

We consider it essential to include the social economy, as an expression of collective entrepreneurship, in formal educational processes and practices. Particularly, under the flexibility of the curriculum, municipalities, together with social economy organisations and schools, can co-construct content that can provide experiential learning opportunities. There is a repertoire of gamified methodologies and tools available that can be used as a resource. This *bottom up* process will hopefully lead in the near future to the inclusion of social economy content in the formal education *curriculum*.

The approach between students from different levels of education and social economy organisations is a practice of reciprocity that proves to be virtuous and will gain greater expression and scope, if supported within the framework of a regular relationship and not episodic or subject to discontinuities. In the case of schools, it may result in gains not only for the students but also have repercussions throughout the organization, creating opportunities for the empowerment of the school community as a whole in the areas of democratic leadership and governance; in the resolution of problems inherent to the school as a system at the interface with other systems, such as the family and the community.



COMMON ROOTS:
SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT
AT THE SERVICE OF A TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT
WHICH PROMOTES THE VALUES OF THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Applying environmental and social clauses makes it possible to use public procurement to create employment opportunities, decent work, foster social and labour inclusion of people with disabilities or from disadvantaged groups. Purchasing goods and services responsibly and ethically can, in fact, create incentives for employers to commit to more responsible and sustainable management of the production process and the hiring of workers. This turns socially responsible public procurement into a strategic tool to boost social and labour policies more effectively, in line with what is advocated in the Pillar of Social Rights.

By favouring environmentally responsible practices such as the development of short supply circuits of local products, public procurement contributes to decarbonisation, in line with the European Green Pact.

It is therefore an essential instrument for bringing about structural change in line with local development projects rooted in European values and promotes the purchase of services and goods from those organisations in the economy which include the same founding principles in their programmes, thus contributing to their sustainability.

CLUSTERS FOR SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL INNOVATION:
AN EMERGING TREND

Since 2014, the municipality of Torres Vedras has been developing the School Feeding Sustainability Programme (*“Programa de Sustentabilidade na Alimentação Escolar”* - PSAE), which covers the entire pre-school and 1st cycle of basic education. This programme is based on a collaborative micro-network that brings together local authorities (Torres Vedras Municipal Council, Parish Councils), local producers, social economy organisations and school groups.



The purchase of food products is made exclusively from small and medium-sized producers and local suppliers, including, since 2019, organic food. This consortium contributes to increasing the turnover of local producers and suppliers, benefiting the net creation of jobs (60 new jobs were created) and the reduction of the carbon footprint associated with transport, through short agri-food chains.

The meals are mostly prepared and distributed by social economy organizations anchored in various communities with a strong rural focus, contributing to the financial balance of these institutions and to the integrated development of low-density areas.

This network, founded on cooperation for the benefit of a territory with multi-polar belonging and generating social and economic value and greater environmental sustainability, stands as an alternative to a previous model resulting from public procurement procedures based on the criterion of lowest price.

THE NEW SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE CALLS FOR INTEGRATED AND JOINT ACTION ON A LOCAL BASIS

The ecological and digital transitions are changing the way we work, learn and intervene in society every day.

The new European skills agenda calls for the testing of territorialised forms of training and retraining of the workforce, promoting sectoral mobility driven by the cyclical impact of the pandemic, which has caused certain sectors of economic activity to decline, while not wasting the experience acquired by citizens who have lost their jobs and, at the same time, ensuring opportunities to acquire new skills in alternative sectors of activity.

The new European skills agenda provides the framework and context for seeking to (re)integrate inactive segments of the population through programmes that are tailor-made for people, landscapes and local and regional socio-economic and employment realities, i.e. considering the context and the micro-scale. Adding greater flexibility to the available instruments and favouring greater de-institutionalisation in the provision of social services,



avoids wasting the talent of these citizens, often invisible or untapped. Among those who need greater attention and investment are the so-called Neet youth, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities and other citizens and communities in situations of social exclusion, such as the Romani. We believe that if we are able to create the right opportunities, refusing standardisation, these citizens can significantly enrich our societies and there is evidence that the social economy creates various forms of inclusive quality employment with impact precisely on the least represented or most vulnerable groups.

Social economy organisations are key mediators and irreplaceable actors in the *site-specific* transformation processes required.

This moment is also an opportunity for social economy organisations themselves to take a cyclical look at their realities and surrounding ecosystems and draw up maps of needs in terms of the skills to be developed.

THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Scientifically based *ex ante* impact assessments are recommended.

The assessment of the social and environmental benefits and the economic added value of the social economy suffers from a lack of consensus on methods and the nature of the data collected.

One of the challenges refers to the need to hold disaggregated data at the local level that expresses development and simultaneously takes into account the specificities of the social economy such as governance and the use of capital. In addition, measuring the social impact remains a challenge given the intention to capture the broad impact of social economy organisations. The nature of this broad impact (the fact that it considers tangible and intangible effects with relevant social and societal dimensions) makes the assessment complex.



It is necessary to disseminate data on impact assessment and to critically involve the various actors in reflecting on its conceptual model and supporting methodologies.

The Territories of Impact initiative, anchored in several municipalities in our country, is a good example of this.

BUILDING LOCALLY-BASED KNOWLEDGE

The social economy satellite account offers a wealth of fundamental data to inform and evaluate public policies. At the same time, it provides a reference framework for building local-based knowledge without which the reading of the ecosystem of proximity and the directions to be taken will always be more fragile and incipient.

Aware of this need, the municipality of Torres Vedras founded the Centre for Studies for the Social Economy, responsible for the elaboration of the 1st Social Economy Atlas.

The 1st edition of the Social Economy Atlas sought to obtain a general characterisation and mapping of the Social Economy organisations present in the municipality. The 2nd edition, in the process of being finalised, taking place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, seeks to identify and analyse the main effects and transformations that the pandemic crisis produced in the daily lives and plans of these organisations.

The importance of communicating these data and making them intelligible, through mediation, led the municipality of Torres Vedras to design a resource called “pedagogical suitcases” which answers a set of questions, namely: What is the social economy? What is the importance of the social economy? What can people and local communities do to support the social economy? What about the municipality of Torres Vedras? What characteristics does this sector have? Where can I find out more about the Social Economy?



NETWORK OF PORTUGUESE CITIES: SOCIAL ECONOMY CAPITAL

“[Principle of simplicity] Maximum effects with minimum resources, maximum effectiveness with minimum effort, and maximum presence with minimum screaming. “(9)

Angelo de Sousa

A virtuous constellation that united a plethora of municipalities to CASES, creating the foundations for the structuring of a national network of cities committed to the principles and values of the social economy.

Increased visibility, reflection and thought creation that will help to include the social economy in territorial development projects, the definition of a local integrated strategy to promote the social economy, the construction of a governance model that creates regular participation mechanisms, encourages structured dialogue, paves the way and nurtures innovation.

A polycentric network that recognises diversity as an asset, is able to discover multiple and countless affinities and to build bridges with other European and international platforms such as REVES: Réseau Européen des villes et régions de l'économie sociale and to be a voice with the various European institutions.

A network that mediates, interconnects, amplifies, mutualises resources, expands the possibilities for collaboration and co-creation, endogenous empowerment, strengthening of the social economy sector and its relationships with other sectors and the strengthening of local ecosystems.

A network that weaves a new narrative for the social economy and its relationship with local authorities by creating a Common Social Economy Area.



REMARKS

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- (2) MENDONÇA, José Tolentino, “Ao encontro das cidades futuras”, in Congresso Internacional O Futuro da Nossa Cidade, Leiria, 2020.
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- (4) MENDONÇA, José Tolentino, “Ao encontro das cidades futuras”, in Congresso Internacional O Futuro da Nossa Cidade, Leiria, 2020.
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