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CONFERENCE LETTER

CIRIEC World Conference in Latin America: Social and Solidarity Economy as an Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Development Model in a Post-COVID-19 World

KEY-WORDS

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Most Latin American countries bring the theme of regional integration into their respective Constitutions, keeping Simon Bolívar's dream of *Pátria Grande* alive. This dream, considering the complex geopolitical and geoeconomic relations of today, results in a series of economic, social and political challenges for the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Several initiatives have been carried out over the decades, however, to a large extent, they have been frustrated or incomplete, turning Latin American integration into an open challenge.

It is in this context that the Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy CIRIEC-Brasil, with the support of CIRIEC-International, held the CIRIEC World Conference in Latin America, with the theme: "Social and solidarity economy as an inclusive, sustainable and resilient development model in a post-COVID-19 world".

One of the major objectives of the conference (held in digital format) was to reflect on some questions, such as e.g.: What will be the role of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) in this scenario?

What is the role of the SSE in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals across different territories? What is the response of the SSE to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19? Is there a possibility that the new technological instruments will be used within SSE ventures?

It is worth remembering that CIRIEC-International¹ is a non-profit organization founded in 1947 by Professor Edgard Milhaud, whose headquarters are currently located Belgium. As an organization with an international scope, CIRIEC seeks, through the structuring, production, dissemination and exchange of research and scientific studies, to develop academic works in support of public policy, focused on public services as well as SSE and cooperativism. In addition, as an effort to disseminate information, CIRIEC, in conjunction with the University of Liège, has structured a Documentation Centre, which is open to all CIRIEC members, as well as to researchers, teachers and students.

Coming back to the international conference organized by CIRIEC-Brasil in April 2021, it should be noted that, in the four days of the event, 12 conferences, 18 working groups and 138 presentations were held. The conference was attended by 110 participants, their origin ranging from Brazil and beyond, i.e. Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, France, Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Spain, Switzerland and Uruguay. Overall, 44 Brazilian and 18 foreign universities participated.

Poverty and socioeconomic inequality are structural characteristics of LAC that have followed since the colonial period. After the COVID-19 pandemic, this scenario is bound to worsen. According to data released by ECLAC in 2021, the biggest regional economic contraction of the last 120 years is currently being experienced, with a 7.7% drop in the GDP of the LAC region. Consequently, there will be negative impacts on the labour market with regard to the increase in unemployment and informal employment, which already have high rates. Another issue refers to the increase in poverty and extreme poverty, which affect, respectively, 33.7% and 12.5% of the LAC population, which is equivalent to respectively 209 million and 78 million people (CEPAL, 2021)².

In this scenario, it is largely acknowledged that one of the ways to address and combat misery and poverty is through what can be called “social and solidarity economy”. SSE is an innovative alternative in the generation of work and social inclusion, in the form of a virtuous chain that integrates who produces, who sells, who transforms and who buys. Its solid principles are, in summary: self-management, democracy, solidarity, cooperation, respect for nature, fair trade and solidary consumption (Contipelli and Mezenes, 2018). The enterprises created from cooperation and solidarity allow, through the reorganization of work based on new principles and values, the economic insertion of economically marginalized citizens to occur (Morais and Menezes, 2019). SSE entities in LAC may adopt different legal and organizational forms, including cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations, NGOs, community banks, exchange clubs, social

¹ <http://www.ciriec.uliege.be/en/>

² https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/publication/files/46696/S2100124_en.pdf

enterprises (Morais and Bacic, 2020).

Other aspects reinforce the relevance and pertinence of the SSE, such as those mentioned by Borzaga, Salvatori and Bodini (2017), and supported by several studies. These include the following: (a) given its community origin, it is less likely to transfer its production activities elsewhere; (b) it plays a fundamental role in the creation and preservation of jobs and income; (c) it has a counter-cyclical nature that is well documented in its ability to maintain its activities and those of its members and workers in times of economic crisis; (d) SSE organizations enable broad collective decision-making through their participatory and democratic governance; (e) it is based on a strong presence of women, including, assuming leadership positions, which contributes to the reduction of gender gaps; (f) it strongly assists the socio-labour insertion of disadvantaged groups.

In light of the above, the SSE has become a geopolitical strategy to address the increased marginalization caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further increased poverty and extreme poverty not only in Latin America, but worldwide. This is the main concern of the world for the coming years according to the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE, 2021a).

Moreover, it is acknowledged that the SSE can contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are several experiences—in different countries and sectors—that base the territorial development of their regions on the three dimensions of the SDGs (namely, the economic, the social and the environmental dimensions). Such recognition is currently found in the scope of the United Nations, which understands the SSE as one of the auxiliary paths that can assist in the implementation of the SDGs of the Agenda 2030 (Utting, 2018; UNTFSSSE, 2021b).

In LAC, the SSE takes on a plurality of forms, reflecting the history and socioeconomic specificities of the region. In fact, there is a growing body of literature addressing the existence and relevance of the SSE in LAC, as well as its various practical actions. More recently, part of the literature has drawn the attention to the role that the SSE has been acquiring in government policies as a mechanism to tackle unemployment, poverty, social exclusion and inequality, which are structural characteristics of the region. In other words, it is recognized that, in LAC, experiences related to the SSE are associated with the response to the social and employment crisis, as well as with the fact that they serve as an instrument for social transformation (Chiariello, Fonseca and Morais, 2021). However, these experiences are marked by the challenges associated with the *modus operandi* in the SSE space, which in many cases makes their continuity or development difficult or impossible. Thus, it is urgent to think of mechanisms to strengthen the ecosystem for the SSE, in order to reduce the intrinsic weaknesses—structural and conjunctural—found in its various organizations and constituent entities.

The event facilitated the identification of the potential of the SSE and the challenges it faces in LAC, which in turn allowed for the idea of constructing a regional agenda, based on global guidelines and respecting local characteristics. Among the strengths of the event, it is worth to mention the structuring of a national and regional network of researchers and SSE stakeholders, as well as the record of the existence of an international SSE agenda under construction, built by

several international organizations, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

However, an important challenge that emerged was the need to strengthen regional ties, in terms of dialogue and interaction between the different actors that make up the Latin American and Caribbean ecosystem of the SSE. The lack of regional integration prevents the expansion of organizations belonging to the SSE, weakening its relevant role as an inducer of territorial socioeconomic development, especially at the present time, where socioeconomic inequality is intensifying due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the future challenge for CIRIEC-Brasil, together with the other regional and international CIRIECs: integrating the region through the SSE bias as a tool for economic recovery, preferably under new avenues and for the reduction of intensified socioeconomic inequalities after COVID-19.

This integration is based on the construction of a “new” concept of SSE incorporating to the key elements of the SSE (collective wealth management, self-management, etc.), elements of the historical, economic, social and political specificities of the region in favour of an emancipating and integrating project.

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