

5 Urban agriculture as embedded in the social and solidarity economy Basel

Developing sustainable communities

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Introduction

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) can be understood as a kind of counter-culture, counter-economy, and expanded democracy. It challenges the conventional societal and economic system. It is rooted in democratically run companies and NGOs, and creates a totally novel understanding of the social bond and connectedness in our society. The organizational basis for it can be conceived as a cooperative, democratic network of businesses and civil society organizations interested in and willing to pursue local, socially and ecologically sustainable development.

Operationally, such a network has to deal with the following type of questions:

- 1 How is it possible to stop the outflow of resources from the network?
- 2 How is it possible to increase the inflow of resources from outside the network?
- 3 How can the network grow through internal growth, e.g., by organizing a certain credit volume within the federation?
- 4 How can economic and socio-cultural integration be encouraged for the federation to attract outsiders to join?

Of course, various courses of action can answer the above questions, depending on the SSE's point of departure and the social and political setting within which it is embedded.

Basically, the SSE approach can be summarized as follows:

- It does not aspire to keep pace with growth driven “industrialism” of multinationals; it rather seeks to move away from it. It will seek more qualitative over quantitative growth.
- It is more labor intensive and pays lower wages; it aims at building communities making individuals independent of those with concentrated privately owned capital.

- It does not seek to abolish the market economy, but rather to find relative protection from it and build resilience against its blackmail and extortions.
- It emphasizes resources – not deficits – people have, particularly in those who have been labeled as lacking resources by traditional labor markets.
- It does not seek to divide up communities but to expand them by pooling resources for mutual use.
- It aims not for a short-term, but for a long-term synergetically derived existential security for an ever increasing number of people.

Social integration for growth

One way to generate social integration is for the federation to issue its own hour-based currency which facilitates exchanges between individuals within the SSE network. With very few resources, the federation can implement an exchange and trading center for its and outside actors. A simple market web page or paper can for all participants list supply and demand and, thus, summarize all exchange possibilities. All members of the exchange and trading circle start at no cost to them with a certain number of hours to begin exchanging. Thus, adults and children can provide services to each other, pay for them in hours, and even move on to paying for goods in hours if they so wish. In such exchange circles all have a greater range of exchanges available than would otherwise be the case without the exchange circle. Finally, it takes time and some skill to participate in such exchange circles. This is a labor time not capital-based approach to enhance both SSE growth and cohesion.

For the same purpose, currency-backed alternative local money may be issued by the federation. Alternative money is bought with “official” money – and can, under certain rules, be exchanged back into “official” money. Using alternative money can be made more or less compulsory for firms and individuals within the federation. If desired, individuals and firms outside the federation may also be encouraged to participate. Participation may also be promoted by selling the alternative currency at a discount given certain conditions are met. As alternative money circulates, some of the “official” money with which alternative money was bought can be invested in the SSE network and, thus, is a form of credit. In this sense, all who purchase and use alternative money also promote the SSE at no cost to them. As with the hour-based currency, the “official money” backed currency, too, contributes to SSE cohesion and growth.

The Social Economy Basel: an example of practice

An example of such an effort is the Social Economy Basel: www.sozialeoekonomie.org. It saw its beginning with the Social Economy Association (SEA) founded in 1996. With its membership and a one member one vote system the association strives to build a prototype of SSE. The idea is similar to that of “biotopes” which represent attempts to preserve biodiversity amidst and

against the odds of industrial society and agriculture damaging biodiversity. The SEA Basel mission is to contribute to social, local and ecological sustainability on a local and regional level. Its growth is kept at an “organic” level so as not to depend on top-down outside funding. Human resources and funding needed for administrative tasks and growth emanate in grassroots fashion bottom up from “the movements.”

The Institute for Social Economy

The SEA Basel – being the first of its kind in Switzerland – immediately began to cooperate with other similar attempts and likeminded organizations in Germany, France and Luxembourg in starting the Institute for Social Economy. Some activities were joint efforts, for others the SEA Basel was acting alone. The purpose was to:

- inform the public about social economy and its potential in handling present and future problems of development;
- offer public courses and conferences on issues pertaining to SSE; and
- give interviews and offer statements on SSE to mass media, and to encourage research and publications concerned with SSE and its development.

The Social Economy Network Cooperative

In 1998 SEA founded the Social Economy Network Cooperative starting with already existing worker self-managed firms and civil society movement organizations. Membership is open only for organizations. Each network coop member has one vote irrespective of its size. Organizations with various legal forms are accepted as long as statutes guarantee the one member one vote principle, and that members may decide over employment practices and the use of surpluses. For profit or not for profit organizations may be federation coop members. As a result, the network cooperative is composed of a combination of commercial and civil society. Especially the latter are grounded in new social movements such as the social justice, economic democracy, environmental and the women’s movement. The network cooperative also considers civil society organizations as socially necessary producers of public goods – mostly information, education, politics and culture. In Basel, therefore, they are part and parcel of the SSE even though the value of their production – though real and socially necessary – cannot not be monetized, as is true for other public goods. In terms of growth the Social Economy Basel and its network coop is kept in an organic growth pattern that does not depend on outside funding.

The Social Economy Network Cooperative aims to:

- Enhance the social, economic and political cohesion among network members.

- Build a local platform for moving towards local, social and ecological sustainability, and to politically mobilize social, economic and political forces towards this goal.
- Promote the exchange of goods and services among members of the network.
- Promote the exchange of goods and services between the network and firms, organizations and individuals outside the network.
- Locate new markets and social movement spaces and to establish new businesses and civil society organizations.
- Organize collateral guarantees for bank loans to federation members.
- Make micro loans for federation members, small coop start up businesses and new civil society organizations.
- Engage in sustainability enhancing investments.
- Issue alternative currencies (hour-based or franc-based).

Over the years, the network cooperative and/or the social economy association have provided collateral coverage for network members, grant loans and microloans to them, start small new for profit businesses, and not for profit movement organisations. The latter often have a food policy and urban agriculture focus: www.urbanagriculturebasel.ch. Investments have been made in a neighborhood solar energy plant run by one network member. Social cohesion and SSE development is enhanced by a newsletter, the SSE Fair, time based exchange circles and a Swiss Franc backed alternative currency.

Alternative currencies of the social economy network

To enhance social cohesion and give marginalized individuals an instrument for social integration and fringe income, a LETS type time-based exchange system was started in 2000, then another one in 2005. Both operated well but were dissolved after about two years because too many participants had their life circumstances changed.

In 2002 the Swiss Franc-backed alternative currency BNB (GoodNetwork-Voucher) was launched. In a pilot phase it was first tried only among members of the Social Economy Network Cooperative. Subsequently, it went public in 2005 to include individuals, businesses and NGOs outside the coop network. Some 120 firms and non-profit organisations presently accept the BNB. In so doing they receive free publicity. Participation is free of cost. The BNB is valid for three years, when bills in circulation can be exchanged free of charge for the new series. There is no penalty when BNBs do not circulate within a given time. All circulation is based on ideational movement energy and cooperation. Due to cooperation with the neighboring social economy in Mulhouse (France), the BNB can be exchanged against the French SOL – and inverse – being used in the Alsace social economy network.

The BNB can be bought by anybody with Swiss Francs. Members of the network coop and their membership may purchase the BNB at a discount of

10 percent. The BNB can be exchanged back into Swiss Francs at a small loss to cover expenses. Swiss Francs not needed for liquidity are used for loans to network coop members, or are invested in renewable local energy production. To further stimulate the social economy, loans are/can be made in BNBs or be paid back in BNBs. Loans made are usually interest free.

One goal is to make self-produced energy units backing the BNB and move away from Swiss Francs as the currency backing the BNB. Another goal is to combine the BNB hours exchange system with the Swiss Franc-backed BNB. This would allow for a very low level entry path into the Social Economy Basel exchange system. It would require only time and skills, no financial resources, and provide participants with the option of exchanging BNB hours for Franc-backed BNBs, leading to a wide range of products and services commonly not available for a BNB hours exchange circle.

The surplus value of the alternative currency BNB

Given the Social Economy Basel system as it is conceived and practiced, the BNB has a significant surplus value. The BNB:

- is locally and democratically controlled money;
- does not leave town or the region;
- cannot be used for speculation;
- helps in fighting undesirable global competition;
- connects people interested in promoting local development for sustainability;
- provides identity for those interested in local development towards sustainability, and allows them to display this identity;
- serves as a general symbol for local development and the transition towards sustainability;
- strengthens social movement energy for local development towards sustainability;
- supports local business and NGOs ideationally and commercially as they support local development towards sustainability;
- can consciously be spent in support of Social Economy Basel efforts to bring about sustainability;
- generates funds for loans to federation NGOs and businesses working for local development towards sustainability;
- generates funds for new start up federation NGOs and businesses working for local development towards sustainability;
- generates funds for investments in local renewable federation coop energy production;
- entails and teaches an alternative understanding of the nature and role of money; and
- stands for an economy embedded in society, not for a society dominated by the economy.

Urban agriculture and the social economy

In 2010, the SEA founded the Urban Agriculture Network Basel Association (UAB), to enhance food production for the SSE and the urban space in general. Urban Agriculture Network Basel is to strengthen the SSE in its focus on local and environmental sustainability. In addition, the intent is to move the city of Basel toward a food policy based on “food sovereignty” as opposed to “food security.”

“Food sovereignty” entails “food security” and is more radical in its approach than food security is. Applied to world populations it postulates that all have the right to control who produces their food – where food comes from, on whose land and under which social and ecological conditions food is produced. Not so with food security which tends to postulate that well functioning global agricultural markets suffice – with adequate income distribution and consumer protection – to feed the world. Urban Agriculture Basel food policy clearly has a different approach. It aims to structure the food supply system not from “the outside in” but from the “inside out.” What can be produced locally for the local population shall be produced first. What can regionally be produced for the regional population shall be next, etc. For this to emerge as a pattern, various new and old contract and land tenure systems must be (re)developed on local, regional, national and international levels. In this, commons, community supported agriculture (CSA), coop farming and distribution, etc. are to play a major role – on local, regional, national and international levels. Food contracts within a food sovereignty approach also promises to be an antidote to land grabbing, corporate agriculture, uncontrolled farm flight, ecological and social abuse and exploitation.

Urban Agriculture – in Basel and elsewhere – is part of the environmental movement focusing on organic food supply, nutrition, health, and quality of habitat in cities. In this sense, it represents an additional differentiation within the environmental movement. Previously, differentiation has occurred with foci on pollution, climate change, biodiversity, organic products, etc. As media attention manifests, urban agriculture has been a very attractive, popular differentiation. Due to its recent emergence, it has not yet become mainstreamed, instrumentalized, or subject to environmental policy and management. Though commercial mainstreaming has begun, Urban Agriculture still remains home to the young (and some “old”) activists – as has been true for most emerging social movements or their differentiation.

Urban Agriculture Basel (UAB) is conceived as a democratic one person one vote non-profit association that facilitates projects and networks them. Most projects are run by a small group of individuals sharing common interests around a particular project focus. UAB membership, however, is not restricted to individuals engaged in projects. Individuals or organizations who wish to support UAB without being engaged in a project may also be members. All projects are held to follow the Swiss organic agriculture guidelines. As can be seen on www.urbanagriculturebasel.ch, UAB consists of some 40 projects.

Some are highly specialized (pyrolysis, permaculture, soil management, etc.). Some focus on food production in the context of social dimensions (community, multicultural interaction, intergenerational interaction, social integration, poverty alleviation, culture, etc.). Others have education in health, nutrition, biology, environmental issues in focus, while others experiment with alternative social organizations. Thus, three or four garden projects adhere to a group approach to “maximize” voluntarism and spontaneity in production. In so doing they well reflect present youth culture in which to be connected has a very high value, while to be “obliged,” “on duty” or “long term committed” does not.

Several projects focus on distribution and consumption. They organize small markets to distribute urban agriculture produced food. Others organize group lunches or dinners around urban agriculture produced food. Another project organizes an explicit market space to purchase urban agriculture produced food with the BNB – the Social Economy Basel alternative currency.

The use of BNBs as an alternative currency also contributes to linking UAB up with other actors in the Social Economy Basel. The BNB, though, is not the only such link. Individual and collective actors from within the Social Economy’s branch concerned with long-term unemployment and poverty also take part in UAB to provide for part of their summer and winter food supply, for spending leisure time, for social integration, and for learning more about health and nutrition. Additionally, some individual actors in the Social Economy find part-time employment in UAB and inverse. Thus, integration of UAB into the larger Social Economy Basel occurs both via the use of alternative money, and the participation and cooperation across organizational boundaries on the part of organizational and individual actors.

The above illustrates the benefits and potential of using networks as an organizing principle. Networks tend to be conducive both to maintaining association and voluntary participation within a democratic culture. Actors may continue in pursuing “their own thing” while communicating and cooperating with other likeminded actors who are “doing other things” helpful in moving towards local, social and ecological sustainability in food and all other matters. All actors, thus, derive synergies for themselves as they voluntarily provide synergies for others. Additionally, both the voluntariness of association and the fact that all actors have one vote as organizations or individuals in the networks and organizations in which they participate seems to be conducive to helping organizations remain “flat” as they grow – and to possibly spare them from succumbing to the “iron law of oligarchy” as they grow to significant size and influence.

The network approach in organizing a platform of transition towards local, social and ecological sustainability – like the one in the Social Economy Basel and its Urban Agriculture unit in particular – is bound to also be a decentralized approach. One metaphor image may be that of Olympic rings that overlap as they also are independent. Not only is the network approach conducive to protecting democratic culture and the voluntariness of association and

participation – as mentioned above – it is also a useful strategy to mobilize, synchronize and strengthen forces for the sustainability movement. Given the increasing trend to differentiation in the “anti-globalization” social and ecology movements, networks possibly are the only “space” in which they all – who pursue the same overall sustainability goal – can find a home. Furthermore, new initiatives can be stimulated by networks themselves, and newly started initiatives may find in networks the support they so urgently need to last through the startup phase. To the extent that movement initiatives may be associated with “movement entrepreneurial behaviour,” networks allow such “entrepreneurs” (groups or individuals) to connect with and present themselves to “the world,” to live their narcissism, to develop their identity, their personality, and their status or professional “careers.” Networks such as the ones illustrated above can, thus, be seen as incubators, facilitators and guarantors for movement energy and initiatives.

Given the Social Economy and Urban Agriculture Basel approach to transition towards sustainability on the local and regional level, a NGO in Bratislava (Zivica) with the same goal has asked for consulting support for a Social Economy and Urban Agriculture startup in Bratislava and Zvolen (Slovakia). The project is funded through an EU project to promote cooperation between Eastern and Western European countries. Switzerland participates as an associate. The two-year project ends in 2015. Recently, a NGO from Bucharest filed a similar application for a startup of Urban Agriculture in two Romanian cities.

While it is good to share experience and consult abroad, much work remains to be done in the metropolitan area of Basel. Thus, an initial discourse has been launched among major stakeholders on how to restructure agriculture around Basel over the next 20 years. The goal is to arrive at a policy to bring agriculture to directly produce for the urban agglomeration as opposed to for a more abstract Swiss or international food market. Such policy may involve (ecology and wage) subsidies and the (re)building of infrastructure for direct marketing, the (re)building of regional producer–consumer marketing coops for dairy and meat products, or the promotion of eatable produce (vegetables, grains) over monoculture grass and feed grains for milk, egg and meat production. The Social Economy and Urban Agriculture Basel tandem have been part in building a pilot CSA producer–consumer coop for cheese manufactured with solar power and from milk produced on land that can be used for nothing but grazing.

Basel, like so many European cities has a phenomenal untapped urban agriculture resource in the form of some 5,000 garden plots owned by the commons of Basel and leased to inhabitants – mostly families. These gardens are a remnant of industrialization, unsanitary and overcrowded city living, poverty and the working class movement. Tenants tend to over proportionally represent lower socioeconomic income and migrant groups. Leased plots must be maintained according to certain rules. However, while many produce food on them, there is no requirement to do so. Furthermore, produce may not be

sold. Each garden plot area is managed (in the name of the commons) by the tenants association. These rarely are part of the urban agriculture, food or sustainability movement and observe Urban Agriculture Basel with some skepticism from a distance though UAB has coalitioned with them in fending off political attempts to privatize garden commons or to make them available for housing and other development. UAB's strategy is to include them in the urban food sovereignty strategy. Thus, UAB is beginning to send its members to family garden gardening courses. At the same time, UAB is beginning to set up non-family group gardens on family garden terrain. Lastly, UAB is working with family garden associations to break through the "no selling of produce rule" insofar as surplus produce may be sold based on the observation that when "tomatoes are ripe, all have too many of them for self-use."

Concluding remarks

Not all political systems have civil society well developed. As a result, it can be expected that new social movements, too, are not as prevalent in such societies. Equally, the coop movement and tradition may not have had much traction in some societies and economies. Furthermore, sustainable local development may be an objective for rural areas – not for a "small" urban space as is the case for the Social Economy and its Urban Agriculture Basel unit. Typically, new social movements have a lower density in rural compared to urban spaces. Alternatively, cities might be huge metropolitan spaces. In such situations, SSE might follow a "Plan-B," a modified local chamber of commerce approach with much emphasis on food production, marketing and food preserving giving rise to many micro business activities alike "micro breweries." Under "Plan-B," a network coop could nevertheless be envisioned for various small local businesses and NGOs intent to move towards sustainable social and ecological development on the local or regional level. The same could also be conceived as a possibility for a segment or sector of a metropolitan area (somewhat like the neighborhood housing construction and habitat coops in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European cities). Nationally or internationally mobile companies would be excluded from membership in the network cooperative for reasons articulated above. Many SSE guidelines and strategies outlined above would still hold, however. Their operationalization and application would follow a similar pattern, though some different outcomes, uncertainties or risks might have to be considered. However, be it under "Plan-A" or "Plan-B," Urban Agriculture can play a significant role in substituting for food imports to an urban space and, thus, in contributing to food sovereignty and local, social and ecological development that is sustainable.