

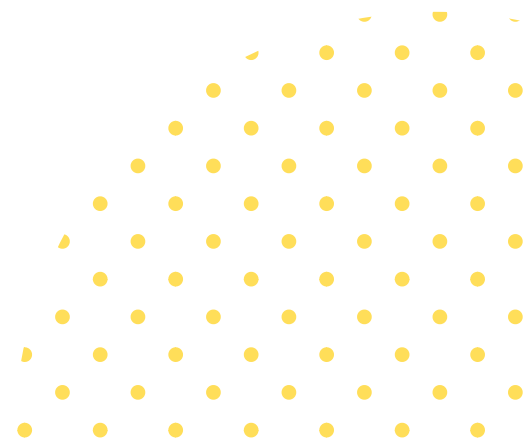
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ECONOMY IN SUSTAINING PEACE

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Theme: Social Economy and Peace

Subtopic: Impact of social economy in sustaining peace.

Abstract:

This article seeks to explore the role that social economy can play in sustaining the establishment of more peaceful societies. It draws the connection between the efforts of supporting the promotion of a more sustainable economic model that creates inclusion, social justice and fair participation with the goal to prevent conflicts and restore peace. It is conceived as a first step in the process, drawing from the notions from peace studies and international concepts related to the work of the United Nations, and social and solidarity economy values, approaches and practices, to consolidate the basic understanding of the ways social enterprises can contribute to the elimination of the drivers of conflict, foster social and intercommunity dialogue and create peace.

Key words: social and solidarity economy, sustaining peace, society rehabilitation, social justice, peacebuilding, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

The primary lesson that can be drawn from recent international events is that future challenges are increasingly interconnected: climate change, economic instability, and its relation to the escalation from violent discourse to violent practice, the emerging need to promote the digital transition in a sustainable and inclusive manner, only to name a few. It is a priority to multiply the actors and sectors involved in facing these challenges and facilitate cross-sector cooperation to ensure that suitable and sustainable solutions are identified.

In Europe, social economy is experiencing a momentum of expansion and recognition marked by the adoption of the Social Economy Action Plan by the European Commission, in December 2021. With the action plan, the EU takes a commitment to unfold the transformative potential of the social economy, and reaffirms its contribution to building more inclusive, sustainable, and just societies.

In Europe, it comprises over 2.8 million entities¹, offering concrete and innovative solutions to key social challenges, creating, and retaining quality jobs, contributing to social and labour-market inclusion, and offering equal opportunities to disadvantaged and fragile groups. Social economy business models bring value to local communities and economies by fostering their inclusiveness, resilience, and sustainability, and effectively support the advancement of the European welfare system.

There is no formal link that bridges social economy and the promotion and restoration of peaceful societies. Most of the already existing research² reflects on the role of specific cooperatives or like-minded organisations in conflict prevention, mitigation, and post-conflict rehabilitation

¹ European Economic and Social Committee, Recent Evolutions of Social Economy - Study, 2017, ISBN: 978-92-830-3837-5.

² Miklian J. (2019) The role of business in sustainable development and peacebuilding: Observing interaction effects, *Business and Politics* 2019; Issue 21, Vol. 4: 569–60.

contexts, or builds on the link between economic growth and the establishment of peaceful societies.

The objective of this article is to investigate the role Social Economy has in the creation of peaceful societies, start the conversation about the transformative potential of highlighting this connection, and widen the knowledge and awareness about the impact of social economy practices.

HIGHLIGHTING THE CONNECTION

The concept of peace

In the framework of this article, peace is conceived as a complex, multifaceted and multidimensional objective. Its definition is derived from Galtung's distinction³ between negative and positive peace:

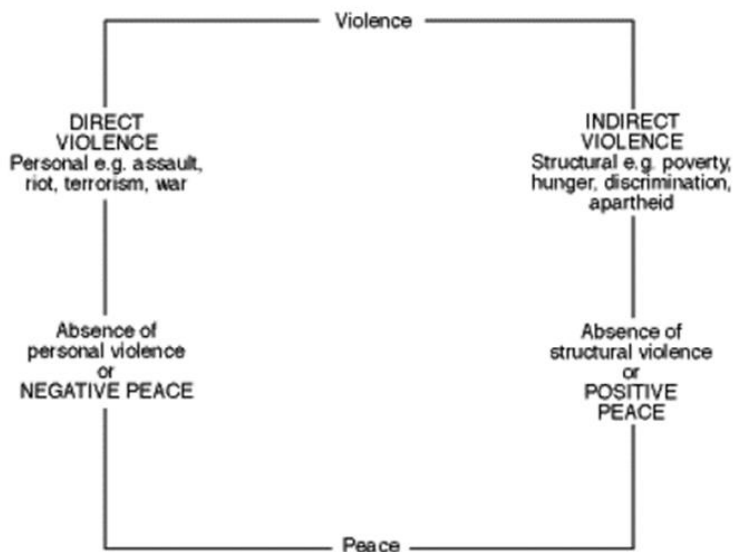


Image: Herath, 2016

On the one hand, negative peace is understood as the absence of open, direct violence, a society with no war. This definition, however, leaves unaddressed the societal dynamics, inequalities, and injustices that led to conflict in the first place, which risks providing fuel to the cycle of violence

³ Definition of positive and negative peace available in Herath, O. (2016) A critical analysis of Positive and Negative Peace, University of Kelaniya. ; direct source: Galtung J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, Journal of Peace Research.

and, thus, sparking the conflict again. On the other hand, positive or sustainable peace is a case-by-case process where the attitudes, social institutions and cultural behaviours are holistically and comprehensively addressed, where the elimination of structural violence leads to democratic participation, equality and social justice.

Peace frameworks interlinking with social economy practices

As mentioned above, social economy organisations play a crucial role in confronting daily inequalities and discriminations happening at the cultural and structural level in society, tackling attitudes and behaviours that have a direct impact in preventing conflicts. This interconnection is easily displaced in Johan Galtung’s model of peace and conflict interactions, understanding that social economy would take place at a preventive stage when working on cultural and structural violences, and as a response when working in direct conflict contexts, through specific peace-building activities⁴.

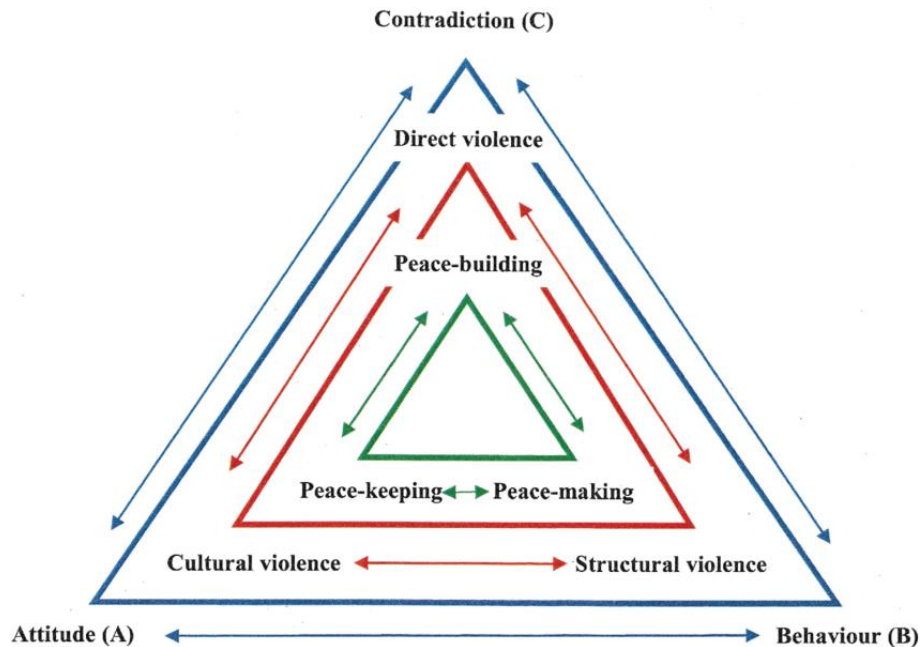


Image: ABC Triangle

⁴ United Nations; World Bank. 2018. Pathways for Peace : Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Washington, DC: World Bank.

In fact, social economy contributes to the creation of more inclusive, resilient and sustainable communities, providing answers to emerging and ever-changing needs and ensuring the participation of marginalised groups. However, its ability to promote peaceful societies is often overlooked. This is an opportunity to start the dialogue on viable links between the work social economy actors do in transforming the society and efforts towards sustaining peace, both in prevention and conflict resolution.

Both fields are oriented towards human security, the approach adopted by the United Nations in the beginning of the 2000s “to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment”⁵. Moving from the awareness that present and future challenges are increasingly complex and interconnected, it envisions a wide range of opportunities to tackle such challenges in an integrated manner. Placing people at the centre, promoting multi-stakeholder cooperation and ensuring a holistic, comprehensive and context specific approach to address challenges, human security ensures freedom from fear, want and indignity.

This approach is in line with the conflict sensitivity approach, which specifically refers to the need to reflect on the ability of each actor to positively and/or negatively impact a conflict when operating in its environment. This reflection should also be extended to the activities that enterprises, and social enterprises particularly, do within conflict-ridden communities, as it improves their social impact and supports the sustainable development of the society.

Shared goals and approaches

Civil society organisations and international organisations are the first to react to urgent and open conflict, providing humanitarian aid, shelter and emergency response. Their presence should

⁵ Sekwat, A. (2010) Human security in theory and practice: Application of the Human Security Concept and the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, United Nations, Human Security Unit - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

remain fundamental to tackle the needs of those suffering from the consequences of conflicts, their expertise being indispensable and incomparable.

From the 1990s, within the peacebuilding field, there is a growing consensus regarding the need to put in place, alongside the emergency response, long term strategies to properly address the underlying causes of conflicts and identify shared, sustainable solutions that can favour systemic change⁶. This developing approach is in line with the idea that the underlying causes of conflicts are interconnected, often deeply rooted within societal dynamics, and dependable on the behaviours of international and national institutions, local actors and individuals.

This tendency well fits the goals and characteristics of social entrepreneurs and the social and solidarity economy, which is moved by the objective of changing the systemic rules of an unsustainable economic model that contribute to the creation and increase of inequalities, social injustices, and ultimately conflict: Its purpose, in conflict resolution terms, is not the mitigation or the alleviation of violence, rather the end of the system that perpetuates it⁷.

Another point of contact is the long-term perspective embraced by both approaches: sustainable economic changes are gradual, require deep reflections and considerate actions, and involve the different levels and actors in the process; similarly, peacebuilding is often a lengthy transformation, that engages with long-term programs and is dependent on the ability of the parts to overcome differences and cooperate.

Mark Gerzon, one of the key founders of the global leadership fields and facilitator in high conflicts zones, highlights the role of social innovators: “Unlike the traditional 'Manager', whose approach to problem-solving is defined by the boundaries he chooses to operate in (organisational boundaries, ethnic boundaries, national boundaries), the Mediator is someone who actively

⁶ IPI (2017) “Sustaining Peace: What Does It Mean in Practice?” Issue Brief.

⁷ Roshan Paul, What is Social entrepreneurship in peacebuilding? 30 December 2011, originally published on the Ashoka Peace Blog, available at: <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/what-is-social-entrepreneurship-in-peacebuilding/?location=&theme=development>

crosses boundaries, bridging divides and unleashing collective energy to find solutions.”⁸ This description is well suited for both social entrepreneurs and peacebuilders.

To further understand the role social economy can play in building peace, it is necessary to look at its principles and approaches, and see whether there is potential to further explore their impact in peacebuilding. Social Economy adopts a human-centred approach, placing its social mission before profits, particularly them most relevant aspects are:

- **Democratic principles:** direct and democratic participation of members within social economy enterprises works directly in promoting peace culture, as their perspectives and voices are valued and integrated in the social and economic strategy. Moreover, addressing and including vulnerable communities and underrepresented groups⁹ has an impact on preventing elitisation, marginalisation and social conflicts; those practices characterise cooperatives and buyout firms but also assambleary decision-making processes within social economy enterprises, increasing the transparency and accountability of the organisation and preventing corruption, labour abuses and exploitation. These small-scale democratic practices, provide the basis for democratic civil society to develop and for people to become more aware of their agency, in effect creating “the building blocks of what could become a democratic economy on a society-wide scale”¹⁰.
- **Human-centred approach:** putting the person at the centre is a direct response to the “leave no one behind principle”¹¹, integrating human rights and fair labour conditions. At

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Deepa Narayan & Patti Petesch, 2002. "Voices of the Poor : From Many Lands," World Bank Publications - Books, The World Bank Group, number 14053, December.

¹⁰ Caspary, W (2007) Coops, Democracy, Conflict Resolution, & Peace: Theoretical Resources. In: Macpherson, I. & Emmanuel, J. (eds.) Cooperatives and the pursuit of peace: Cooperatives & peace series Volume 1. New Rochdale Press, Victoria.

¹¹ UNDP (2018) What does it mean to leave no one behind? A UNDP discussion paper and framework for implementation.

the same time, it makes use of a gender intersectional perspective by taking into account various forms of discrimination; cultural, geographic, governance, socio-economic and other fragile contexts. This approach addresses the power dynamics that characterise modern societies, fights inequalities and social injustice - the underlying causes of conflicts.

- ***Mission before profits***: social economy activities are built around a social issue, adapted to the local context and promote a sustainable economic development. Most of the profits or surplus of social enterprises are reinvested to directly benefit the communities they operate in, contributing to build resilience and an alternative economic model that contrasts with the traditional capitalist approach, which is built on and favours different types of exclusion, systemic discrimination and marginalisation¹².

In this understanding, the core principles of social economy and social enterprises place them in a central position to address the regeneration of fragile, marginalised or conflict-ridden communities, positively impacting peace in their local contexts.

Finally, in a context of expansion of globalisation, global challenges are impacting the local contexts more than ever, for instance, climate change being one of the major threats of today due to the pressing concerns related to its potential to exacerbate and fuel conflicts¹³. In this sense, the effects of climate change are already felt globally in frequent droughts and severe disasters, increasing temperatures, and changing rainfall. At the same time, these altering conditions are identified to be a direct cause of environmental, social and civil conflicts, amplifying existing risks

¹² Caspary, W (2007) Coops, Democracy, Conflict Resolution, & Peace: Theoretical Resources. In: Macpherson, I. & Emmanuel, J. (eds.) Cooperatives and the pursuit of peace: Cooperatives & peace series Volume 1. New Rochdale Press, Victoria.

¹³ Access to information: <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/climate-related-peace-and-security-risks-in-africa/>

to peace, security and development by obstructing access to water, food, health and housing¹⁴, among others.

In fact, climate change is perceived as one of the main threats to human security, integrating also the downsides of digital technology, violent conflict, horizontal inequalities, and evolving challenges to healthcare systems. This is why taking a perspective of interconnectedness across global threats helps us place peacebuilding in a more systemic vision requiring a variety of actors and sectors to interact and work together.

Case examples on conflict-management under the Social Economy

[Peace Basket](#) is a Rwandan cooperative, established in July 1997, after the genocide. The president of Peace Basket was a widow of Tutsi kinship, known as “mother” among locals, the vice president was from a Hutu kinship. This social enterprise was established as a means of income generation for villagers living in conditions of extreme poverty and to create a venue for inter-community dialogue, in a moment when groups acted with fear, anger, suspicion, and hatred, while contact was unavoidable, communication was scornful or insulting. The Peace Basket members started weaving, a centuries-long tradition in Rwanda, passed on from one generation to the next. The weaving of baskets was therefore a link to their ancestral traditions, a means of bonding on the grounds of their shared history. It provided a meeting place with the common interests of generating income to provide for their basic needs and brought the people together.

¹⁴ Information available at: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/climate-action-holds-key-tackling-global-conflict#:~:text=Climate%20change%20as%20a%20risk%20multiplier&text=Although%20climate%20change%20may%20not,%2C%20food%2C%20health%20and%20housing>.

Cyprus has been divided between a Turkish-Cypriot north and a Greek-Cypriot south for over four decades. Failed peace talks have left young Cypriots uncertain about the future of their country, where conflict between rival communities still exists. [CyprusInno](#), a non-profit startup, social venture and think tank, was created by a young Greek-Cypriot and a Turkish-Cypriot team, to challenge the status quo by developing a bi-zonal, inter-communal business ecosystem where entrepreneurs can cooperate, grow, succeed, and build trust. Their strategy is to revert the impact of conflict through entrepreneurship as a driver of economic development and as instrumental for peace-building mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This article reflects on the value of Social Economy as a mechanism to work towards sustainable and positive peace, understood as not only the absence of direct conflict, but as the attitudes, institutions and structures that, when strengthened, lead to peaceful societies. Social Economy is based on a human centred approach, promotes democratic, social and environmental principles which are fundamental in addressing and subverting the dynamics that characterise unequal, unjust and divided societies, while ensuring sustainable economic empowerment.

Here lies the potential for bridging these two practices: if current global challenges are increasingly complex, it is fundamental to enhance the cooperation among sectors and bridge the actors involved in the long-term systemic change that is envisioned as the end goal for both social economy and peacebuilding.

This primary awareness leaves space for further reflection and gathering of experiences from the field: how can we consolidate the contribution of the social economy to peacebuilding, and what are the lessons learnt so far? Are there specific practices, already being implemented, that could facilitate the process of orienting both fields' strategies and increase cooperation?

The potential implications for this bridging are several: social economy/peacebuilding practices could be implemented to increase resilience and mitigate the effects of climate change, increase the responses to favour migrants' inclusion and integration, provide further conflict resolutions mechanisms, ensure sustainable economic empowerment while securing inter-community dialogue and cooperation - only to name a few.

The main takeaway from this article is that there is space and value in this intersectoral cooperation, the avenues, implications, and possibilities are only to be discovered.

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