

State of the art: “social and solidarity economy as a driver of sustainability”**Estado del arte: “economía social y solidaria como agente de sostenibilidad”**

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Abstract

The article presents a comprehensive analysis of the current state of convergence between Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and sustainability, covering the period from 2009 to 2023. SSE, with its principles of cooperation, equity, and citizen participation, is considered a key tool for addressing inequality and promoting decent employment, while sustainability focuses on improving living conditions without compromising the future. The article argues that SSE promotes sustainable economic practices aligned with the 2030 Agenda. The proposed methodology combines heuristic and hermeneutic approaches, allowing for a thorough and up-to-date review of the literature on SSE and sustainability. The application of SSE in various regions is illustrated through case studies that encompass areas such as urban agriculture, circular economy, recycling cooperatives, and socio-economic development projects. Overall, it is emphasized that the combination of SSE and sustainability offers a promising approach to addressing socio-environmental challenges, highlighting cooperation, inclusion, and the pursuit of a sustainable and equitable future.

Social and solidarity economy, Sustainability, cooperation

Resumen

El artículo presenta un análisis exhaustivo del estado actual de la convergencia entre la Economía Social y Solidaria (ESS) y la sostenibilidad, abarcando el periodo 2009-2023. La ESS, con sus principios de cooperación, equidad y participación ciudadana, se considera una herramienta clave para abordar la desigualdad y promover empleo digno, mientras que la sostenibilidad se enfoca en mejorar las condiciones de vida sin comprometer el futuro. El artículo argumenta que la ESS promueve prácticas económicas sostenibles alineadas con la Agenda 2030. La metodología propuesta combina enfoques heurísticos y hermenéuticos, lo que permite realizar una revisión exhaustiva y actualizada de la literatura sobre ESS y sostenibilidad. Se ilustra la aplicación de la ESS en diversas regiones mediante estudios de casos que abarcan áreas como la agricultura urbana, economía circular, cooperativas de reciclaje y proyectos de desarrollo socioeconómico. En conjunto, se enfatiza que la combinación de la ESS y la sostenibilidad ofrece un enfoque prometedor para abordar los desafíos socioambientales, destacando la cooperación, inclusión y la búsqueda de un futuro sostenible y equitativo.

Economía social y solidaria, Sostenibilidad, Cooperación

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Introduction

The intersection between the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and sustainability has become an area of growing research and action as it seeks to address contemporary challenges in both social and environmental terms (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Gutberlet, 2009; Lee, 2019; Pérez Villa et al., 2022; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020).

SSE, which focuses on equity, cooperation and citizen participation, has the potential to generate a positive impact on reducing inequality, creating quality employment and promoting inclusive communities (Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono, 2020; Villalba-Eguiluz and Pérez-De-Mendiguren, 2019). For its part, sustainability has become an essential priority to address issues such as climate change, environmental degradation and resource scarcity (Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between SSE and sustainability, using previous research, case studies and theoretical approaches, it seeks to identify patterns, trends and lessons learned that can guide future research and practice in this area (George-Reyes, 2019; Molina-Montoya, 2005).

Correspondingly, this state of the art will contribute to a deeper and more complete understanding of how SSE can favor the improvement of sustainability and how these practices can be leveraged to maximize their positive impact on society and the environment.

The importance of these themes lies in their ability to catalyze concrete actions that promote sustainability. By understanding how the SSE can address socio-environmental challenges in an integrated manner, more effective strategies and policies can be designed that promote economic equity and environmental protection.

So this knowledge can influence decision making at government, community and business levels, driving the adoption of more sustainable and collaborative practices. Ultimately, understanding how SSE can contribute to improved sustainability has the potential to lead to the creation of societies that are more just, inclusive, and in harmony with the natural environment (Cheng and Xu, 2021 2019; Leipold et al., 2021).

Conceptualization of ESS

The SSE (see Figure 1) is represented by an economic and social approach that stands out for its emphasis on cooperation, equity and democratic participation in the planning and management of economic activities (Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono, 2020). Thus, this paradigm encompasses a wide range of organizations, enterprises and practices with the fundamental objective of fostering the wellbeing of people and communities, in addition to promoting environmental sustainability (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Sahakian and Dunand, 2015).

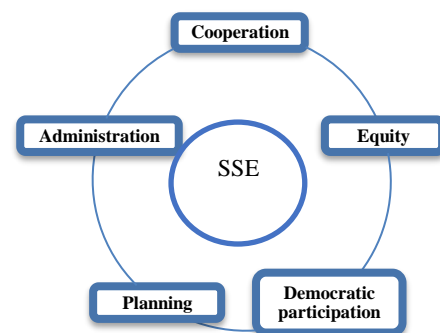


Figure 1 SSE construct

Source: Own elaboration with information from Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono (2020)

It should be emphasized that SSE works on the study of various entities such as cooperatives, mutual associations, social enterprises and other organizational models, which share common values such as solidarity, inclusion and social responsibility (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Sahakian and Dunand, 2015). These concepts have historically developed along experiences in which "partnerships" were created in order to organize and protect communities, emphasizing cooperation and exchange as fundamental principles.

In contrast to conventional economic approaches focused on maximizing individual profit, SSE emphasizes collective well-being, equity, environmental sustainability and the strengthening of local communities (Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono, 2020; García-Lorenzo et al., 2021-; Pérez Villa et al., 2022; Sotto, 2021).

Likewise, its components seek to harmonize economic objectives with social and community values, promoting participatory management, collective ownership, cooperation and solidarity as guiding principles.

Sustainability in the SSE

SSE plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability by prioritizing economic practices that respect natural resource limits and avoid resource depletion. Through its focus on cooperation and community, SSE tends to generate economic activities rooted in local contexts, responding to real needs of people and contributing to the creation of more resilient economic systems in the face of potential global crises (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017).

Therefore, sustainability within the context of SSE encompasses the ability to preserve and enrich current economic conditions, without undermining the social capacities of future generations to meet their own demands and requirements (Lee, 2019). Likewise, sustainability implies the search for economic and social solutions that not only address present needs, such as poverty reduction and social exclusion, but also consider the long-term impact on the environment and society as a whole (Leipold et al., 2021; Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017). Therefore, sustainability implies a balance between economic development, social justice and the conservation of natural resources to ensure a viable and equitable future (Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono, 2020).

Intersections between SSE and sustainability

The SSE contributes to this utopia of sustainable development, aligning itself especially with the United Nations 2030 Agenda (Laville, 2003). In this context, education and complementary strategies are essential for the promotion of sustainability values and principles.

Thus, SSE highlights its role in waste management and circular economy as a way to address environmental and social aspects of sustainability (Do Nascimento et al., 2020; Gutberlet and Carenzo, 2020; Leipold et al., 2021).

In this sense, SSE recognizes the contribution of recycling workers in conserving resources and promoting social inclusion. In agroecological projects and other contexts, the SSE provides a framework for strengthening economic, social, ecological and political sustainability (Gutberlet, 2009; Gutberlet and Carenzo, 2020).

Methodology

The methodology used for the design of the present state of the art is based on heuristic and hermeneutic techniques, following the works of Alexis and Torres (2020); George-Reyes (2019); Molina-Montoya, (2005). The steps that make up this methodology are detailed below:

1. Heuristic phase of the state of the art

Figure 2 shows the heuristic phase. To this end, a search for documents was carried out in the digital databases Scopus, Web of Science (WoS) and Scielo during the year 2023. The keywords used were: "social and solidarity economy" and "sustainability". The document inclusion criteria focused on articles and books. A total of 96 publications were found, which were then filtered by relevance, year of publication and contribution. In this state of the art, the most relevant ones are analyzed as follows.

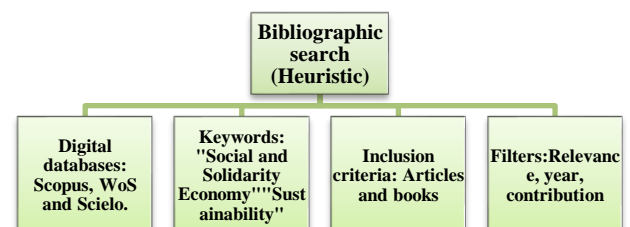


Figure 2 Heuristic phase

Source: Own elaboration with information from Patiño (2016)

2. Hermeneutical phase of the state of the art

Figure 3 shows the hermeneutic phase of the state of the art. In this phase, as Patiño (2016) points out, the objectives, methods, variables, theories and contributions of each document were examined with an objective critique, this with the aim of obtaining new technical knowledge. In addition, a registration table was designed to organize the database, with a constructivist approach. Subsequently, a critical reading of the selected documents was carried out, identifying trends and lines of research in development. A hermeneutic perspective was adopted to understand the meaning of the documents and their relationship with the research topic.

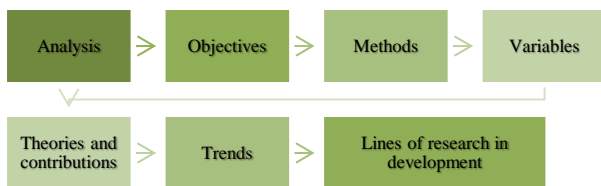


Figure 3 Hermeneutic phase

Source: Own elaboration with information from George-Reyes (2019) and Molina-Montoya (2005)

The methodology used integrates both heuristic and hermeneutic approaches, which allows for an exhaustive and updated review of the literature related to SSE and sustainability.

Results

Case studies mentioned in databases such as Scopus, WoS and Scielo, address the connection between SSE and sustainability in diverse contexts (See Table 1). These include research such as that of Lee (2019) in South Korea, which highlights the benefits of SSE in urban agriculture and the circular economy to reduce poverty and mitigate climate change. Recycling cooperatives are also explored as in Gutberlet's (2009) study in São Paulo and Buenos Aires, cities that alleviate poverty through waste management, as well as initiatives in Europe and Spain that promote SSE to create employment and address socioeconomic challenges (Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono, 2020).

In addition, the relationship between SSE and the 2030 Agenda, and how community-based fisheries organizations in Europe and Asia contribute to sustainable development is examined (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021). These studies demonstrate how SSE can be an effective vehicle for addressing specific socio-environmental challenges, promoting cooperation, social inclusion and transformation towards a more sustainable future.

Giro	Example of a cooperative	ESS and Sustainability Connection	Challenges Addressed	Name of study/author/year.
Urban Agriculture Cooperatives in Brazil and Argentina	Red de Agroecología de la Zona Oeste de São Paulo (RAZOSP) in Brazil, and Huerta Niño Comunidad in Buenos Aires, Argentina.	They prioritize cooperation and democratic participation while focusing on environmental sustainability and food security.	Access to fresh and healthy food in urban areas, food security, loss of agricultural land and environmental awareness.	"Social and solidarity economy and agroecology in family farming cooperatives in Brazil as a form of sustainable agriculture development" (Do Nascimento et al., 2020)..
Fair Trade and Responsible Consumption Networks	Fair Trade Network in several countries	Promote cooperation between producers and consumers to achieve a positive impact on the local and global economy.	Inequalities in international trade, unfair and exploitative working conditions in goods production.	"¿Necesitamos una "sociedad circular"? Narrativas contrapuestas de la economía circular en el sector alimentario francés". (Leipold et al., 2021).
Renewable Energy Social Enterprises in Europe	Som Energia in Spain and Enercoop in France	It aims to reduce carbon emissions and promote the transition to cleaner and more sustainable energy sources.	Fossil fuel dependency, climate change and lack of citizen control over energy.	"Transformative Policies for the Social and Solidarity Economy: The New Generation of Public Policies for the Promotion of the Social Economy for the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The European and Spanish Cases". (Chaves-Avila and Gallego-Bono, 2020).
Recycling and Waste Management Initiatives in Latin America	Recycling Cooperative "Los Cartoneros" in Argentina	These initiatives are dedicated to the collection and recycling of materials, reducing waste and promoting the circular economy.	Pollution, lack of recycling infrastructure, marginalization of recycling workers, etc.	"Políticas locales de Economía Social y Solidaria: aportes para el análisis de las iniciativas desarrolladas por la Municipalidad de Santa Fe entre los años 2011-2019." (Sotto, 2021)

Table 1 Relevant case studies on SSE and sustainability

Source: Own elaboration with information from Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono (2020); Do Nascimento et al. (2020); Leipold et al. (2021); Sotto (2021).

After analyzing the documents, it was determined that the SSE has a direct influence on the dimensions that make up sustainability (see Figure 3).

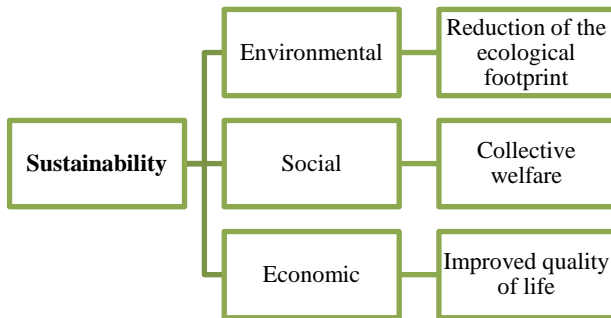


Figure 3 ESS in sustainability

Source: Own elaboration with information from Chaves-Ávila and Gallego-Bono (2020); García-Lorenzo et al. (2021); Gutberlet (2009); Gutberlet and Careno, (2020); Lee (2019); Sahakian and Dunand (2015); Villalba-Eguiluz et al. (2020); Villalba-Eguiluz and Pérez-De-Mendiguren (2019)

Socio-economic and environmental impact of SSE on sustainability

SSE practices have proven to have a significant impact in the social, economic and environmental spheres, playing an essential role in improving the quality of life of communities and reducing the ecological footprint (Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017; Sahakian and Dunand, 2015). These practices go beyond the exclusive pursuit of individual benefits and focus on collective well-being, equity and sustainability, resulting in a number of positive outcomes in different aspects (Do Nascimento et al., 2020; Sahakian and Dunand, 2015).

Social impact of the SSE on sustainability

SSE stands out for its ability to generate transformative social impact. By prioritizing cooperation and democratic participation in decision-making and management, SSE practices empower local communities by giving them greater control over their own economic and social development (Lee, 2019; Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017).

In addition, cooperatives, nonprofits, and social enterprises created under SSE principles foster social inclusion by providing employment and income-generating opportunities for segments of the population that are often marginalized or excluded from the conventional labor market.

This contributes to reducing inequality and poverty, while strengthening social cohesion and solidarity in communities (Do Nascimento et al., 2020).

Economic impact of SSE on sustainability

From an economic perspective, SSE generates positive outcomes by promoting the creation and development of enterprises and organizations based on social and community values (Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017). Cooperatives and social enterprises operate under models of participatory management and collective ownership, resulting in a more equitable distribution of benefits and shared decision-making (Gutberlet, 2009; Lee, 2019).

These sustainable economic practices contribute to the self-management and autonomy of communities, allowing them to be more resilient in the face of economic fluctuations and external challenges. In addition, SSE initiatives often have a local focus, fostering economic revival at the community and regional levels (Sahakian and Dunand, 2015; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020).

Environmental impact of SSE on sustainability

One of the most notable aspects of SSE is its commitment to environmental sustainability (Do Nascimento et al., 2020; Gutberlet, 2009; Gutberlet and Careno, 2020). Many of these practices are designed to address environmental challenges, such as overexploitation of natural resources and waste accumulation. A clear example is recycling cooperatives and circular economy projects contribute to waste management and recycling, reducing the amount of waste that ends up in landfills and reducing pollution.

Likewise, social enterprises and renewable energy projects promote the transition to clean energy sources, reducing dependence on fossil fuels and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions (Espelt, 2020; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020). SSE is also associated with the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices, thus contributing to biodiversity conservation and ecosystem health (Gutberlet, 2009; Gutberlet and Careno, 2020; Lee, 2019; Sahakian and Dunand, 2015).

Improved quality of life and reduction of ecological footprint

SSE practices have a holistic impact on improving the quality of life of communities (Sotto, 2021; Villalba-Eguiluz and Pérez-De-Mendiguren, 2019). By addressing social and environmental challenges in an integrated manner, these practices generate solutions that are contextualized and focused on people's real needs.

Thus, the equity and social inclusion inherent to SSE ensure that all members of the community benefit in a fair and equitable manner (Leipold et al., 2021; Pérez Villa et al., 2022). Furthermore, by promoting responsible production and consumption, SSE contributes to the reduction of the ecological footprint of communities and encourages a more sustainable lifestyle.

Hence, the positive results in terms of social, economic and environmental impact, as well as its ability to improve the quality of life of communities and reduce the ecological footprint, highlight the great importance in the quest for a more equitable and sustainable future.

Challenges and barriers in the SSE

Despite the remarkable benefits that the SSE brings, it faces a number of challenges and obstacles that can hinder its quest for sustainability. One of the most prominent challenges lies in competing in an economic environment dominated by conventional businesses, which limits their access to financial resources and markets. Lack of public awareness and recognition can also restrict the reach and visibility of SSE initiatives, affecting their access to resources and support (Pérez Villa et al., 2022; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020).

It should be added that cooperation and democratic decision-making, fundamental to the SSE, can be more complex than in hierarchical approaches. Social exclusion and disempowerment in some communities erode social cohesion in SSE initiatives, while inequalities of power and knowledge in markets make it difficult to balance pre-existing relationships (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Pérez Villa et al., 2022; Sotto, 2021).

Moreover, the implementation of sustainable skills training programmes in SSE requires innovation in teaching. Despite the potential of SSE to contribute to sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), more empirical research is needed. Social injustice and inequality are often overlooked in the public debate on circular economy (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017).

It should be noted that Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) also faces challenges of engagement and cooperation, and the compatibility between economic growth and sustainability is a central dilemma (Do Nascimento et al., 2020; Espelt, 2020).

Overcoming these challenges will require collaborative efforts involving governments, educational institutions and society at large. Despite this, SSE initiatives continue to demonstrate their ability to generate positive impacts in terms of sustainability, social inclusion and equity, underlining the importance of addressing these challenges in order to achieve a more sustainable and equitable future.

Future guidelines

In the context of SSE, there are promising prospects and avenues for exploration that can amplify its influence in terms of sustainability and equity in development. First, SSE is emerging as a crucial vehicle for the achievement of the SDGs, encompassing areas such as poverty eradication, hunger alleviation and climate action (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017). The consolidation of supportive policies at local and national levels stands as an opportunity to cement an enabling environment that fosters the sustainable growth of SSE initiatives (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Pérez Villa et al., 2022; Sotto, 2021).

Similarly, public awareness and synergy between different actors, including governments, academic institutions and society as a whole, can enhance the positive impact of SSE on society and the environment, has the potential to catalyse educational and community development processes, addressing basic needs and human rights in various facets (Do Nascimento et al., 2020; Pérez Villa et al., 2022).

Cultivating new narratives that emphasise the notion of a 'circular society' as opposed to a 'circular economy' could stimulate deeper and more equitable transformations (Gutberlet and Carenzo, 2020; Leipold et al., 2021).

Moreover, the confluence between Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the promotion of professionalisation within the SSE could strengthen its sustainability and foster stronger partnerships. Moreover, engaging marginalised groups, such as informal waste pickers, in dialogues on the circular economy and waste management opens the door to fairer and more remunerative partnerships (Gutberlet, 2009; Gutberlet and Carenzo, 2020). Ensuring coherence between the fundamental principles and concrete applications of the SSE is essential to preserve its transformative and equitable nature. The interaction between SSE and other development approaches, such as the SDGs, needs to be explored to deepen understanding of these constructs and to optimize their effectiveness.

In short, capitalizing on these opportunities and focusing on these future perspectives could further enhance the role of SSE in promoting more equitable, just and sustainable societies. From the governmental level, there is a need to foster cross-sectoral partnerships and further research to realize sustainable development in the context of the SSE.

Discussion

This study provides an enriching and meaningful perspective, contributing key ideas for understanding how SSE practices can influence the search for more equitable and sustainable development (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020). With the analysis of research on SSE and sustainability, the results and effects in terms of social, economic and environmental impact, as well as their role in improving the quality of life of communities and reducing the ecological footprint, were further explored (Gutberlet, 2009; Lee, 2019).

This state of the art allowed the identification of the opportunities presented by the SSE to promote fairer and more sustainable development, aligned with the SDGs (Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020). Studies, such as the case of South Korea, have shown how the SSE can be a key tool for achieving several SDGs, addressing crucial aspects such as poverty reduction, decent work and climate action. This understanding has contributed to strengthening the theoretical and practical basis for addressing global challenges through more inclusive and sustainable approaches (Villalba-Eguiluz and Pérez-De-Mendiguren, 2019).

Furthermore, the analysis of recycling cooperatives in urban contexts, such as the case of São Paulo, has shed light on the capacity of SSE to alleviate poverty and foster social and economic change in marginalized communities (Gutberlet, 2009; Lee, 2019). These studies have highlighted the importance of considering SSE as a key agent in managing resources and promoting sustainable employment, which has enriched knowledge on innovative solutions to urban challenges (Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this state of the art has pointed to challenges and obstacles faced by SSE initiatives on their way to sustainability; barriers ranging from lack of resources to institutional resistance have been identified and analysed in depth. These findings not only contribute to the understanding of the obstacles themselves, but also offer insights to address them more effectively in future research and policy (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Pérez Villa et al., 2022; Sotto, 2021).

In terms of future directions, the state of the art has suggested multiple promising areas of research. These include the need to explore how the SSE can be more transformative and how its relationship with the SDGs can be optimised. In addition, suggestions have been made for improving the quality of sustainability skills training programmes within SSE, highlighting the importance of education and training in achieving sustainable development.

Ultimately, these developments have not only identified opportunities and challenges, but have also inspired future research directions that could continue to transform the way the socio-economic and environmental problems of our time are addressed.

Conclusion

This state of the art sheds significant light on how SSE and sustainability can converge to promote more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. Throughout the studies reviewed, it has been shown that SSE has the potential to generate positive impacts in terms of poverty reduction, job creation, social inclusion and climate change mitigation. These findings highlight the capacity of the SSE to contribute directly to the SDGs set by the United Nations.

One of the key trends that has emerged from the state of the art is the intrinsic connection between the SSE and the SDGs. SSE acts as a catalyst for the achievement of multiple SDGs by addressing social, economic and environmental issues in an integrated manner. Furthermore, the importance of sustainability skills training within SSE has been emphasised as a means to achieve greater alignment with the 2030 Agenda.

However, the state of the art has also highlighted challenges and obstacles that need to be addressed to maximise the sustainability impact of SSE. Competition in an environment dominated by conventional business, lack of public recognition and coordination issues are some of the challenges faced by SSE initiatives. In addition, the need to balance economic growth with sustainability and the adaptation of policies for holistic transformation are critical issues that need to be addressed in the future.

Ultimately, the state of the art underlines the continuing importance of research in this evolving field. The SSE presents itself as a powerful approach to address social and environmental challenges, and its potential has yet to be fully realised. Future research can play a key role in identifying innovative approaches, addressing barriers and generating effective solutions for the creation of more balanced societies.

Finally, the analysis of the current state of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) research and its intersection with sustainability has revealed substantive findings. Research has identified a number of opportunities, such as the significant growth in the number of cooperatives and social enterprises worldwide in recent years, as well as the positive impact that these organisations have in terms of employment and local development.

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