

Reflections on the Term Social Economy

A presentation to “Mobilizing Knowledge and Action”

**Session #5: Conceptualizing the SE: What’s in a
Definition?**

by

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Stakeholders in this Debate

- Individuals and their families – you and I!
- Communities (geographic and other)
- SE practitioners
- Researchers and activists
- Governments
- Policy shapers
- Other ...



What is the Social Economy?

- Contested term – lots of disagreement on its precise definition, as we have seen
- Nevertheless, a very important part of any society
- Using the term encourages us to consider the economy as a social institution, one we create to serve our needs. We were not created to serve the economy!



The Case for Precision and Ambiguity

Food for thought:

- 1) a certain amount of precision is at times useful, even imperative
- 2) Ambiguity is inevitable and, indeed, has its merits



Two Ways of Using the Term

- a) the SE as an arena of activity in our society (as a sector?)

- b) the SE as comprised of particular types of associations / organizations (SEOs)



Speaking of Icebergs ...

- “...the economy can be likened to an iceberg primarily composed of diverse economic activities and processes hidden below the surface” (Jenny Cameron, 2003 – The Community Economies Collective)



The Social Economy is about People –about meeting the needs of people and their communities

Toolbox of types of organizations and informal relations

SE has Instrumental and Expressive value embodied in & through organizations, their networks & activities

Platform for advocacy & mobilization – insertion of the social, democratization of the economy, social innovation



Toolbox

- Social economy is an inclusive term that challenges us to enter a discourse about the ways we meet our needs – opening up to new ways of thinking, of valuing, of building our communities and societies.
- A well-stocked toolbox! A big tent for all to fit under, to learn from one another, to coalesce as allies, to challenge our narrow views and bridge silos – voluntary associations, co-operatives, mutuals, non-profits, social enterprises ...



SE Concept has Instrumental Value

- a) Offers a “place” from which to gain visibility and legitimacy, influence policy, shape opinion
- b) Access to opportunities, funding, wide array of high quality potential employees and volunteers
- c) Attract like-minded potential partnerships, access to networks



SE Concept has Expressive Value

- Recognition that organizations are value laden, whether explicitly so or not
- Assertive re the values expressed in the SE
- SE as a place where identities are characterized by a belief in community control, social justice, democracy, and an economy that integrates social objectives as priorities



Platform for Advocacy, Mobilization and Social Innovation

- Advocacy around policy, public education, new areas of research ... contribute to framing the role of the State
- Advocacy on behalf of inclusion, empowerment
- Mobilization both for advocacy and for mutual self help – taking charge
- Demonstrate, and promote opportunities for, social innovation, valuing people's creativity and inventiveness (e.g. food security continuum of action)



To Recap

Thinking in terms of the Social Economy allows us:

- To identify and use a variety of tools/instruments
- To recognize both instrumental and expressive values
- To see the continuum of residual, reformist, and transformative thinking, acting, and innovating
- To discard polarized thinking in favour of nuanced thinking
- To assert the importance of engagement in policy processes & shaping the role of the state

