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Values, Capital, Money, Social Networks and Gender Concerns in SSF

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Gender concerns are an important issue in Social and Solidarity Finance. Financial inclusion must include women on an equal basis, promoting values and principles that focus on their needs and that of their families. To discuss such concerns in their interrelation with social networks, values, capital and money in SSF, I build upon the premise that women are not excluded from “the economy”, in which they in fact play a critical role. However, the nature and scope of their participation tends to be overlooked by a large number of analysts, planners and development practitioners who disregard the value of non-commoditized forms of production and exchange and fail to take into account the contradictions, ambiguities and vulnerabilities of market oriented economies. I believe that, in envisaging better living conditions for them, women’s actions and their personae should be acknowledged as situated within a more encompassing economic scenario, and that failure to do so leads to inaccurate foresight and expectations, thus obscuring avenues for change.

It is with this in mind that I contend that SSF is both broader and narrower than generally conceived. Broader, because one should take into account the activities of a gamut of informal organizations and institutions (particularly those involving household economies) that carry out solidarity and social finance that are not generally considered, and narrower because a number of the organizations one tends to label as SSE include non-SSE elements such as non-egalitarian gender relations and some kinds of exploitation. Hence the need to discern key processes that characterize what one might really want to call social and solidarity economics and financing, and find ways of supporting activities that can lead to counteracting poverty and social injustice.

With this aim, I will first discuss some of the assumptions —economic and financial as well as social and cultural— that underlie much of our thinking in this arena. I argue that a number of variables are omitted in visualizing social and solidarity finance and that they tend to be framed within misleading portrayals of the economy, thus obscuring possible avenues for change.

In envisaging better conditions for the workings of SSF, we need to situate it within a more encompassing scenario that does not overlook the contradictions, ambiguities and vulnerabilities of market oriented economies nor neglect the value of non-commoditized forms of production and exchange. This entails a critical revisiting of notions of value, capital and money, as well as pinpointing certain variables concerning social networks and gender.

Economic and Financial Assumptions

In simplified terms, SSF endeavors can be classified in three very general categories: 1) those aimed at increasing investment and production, under the assumption that production leads to wealth; 2) those that seek social change, arguing that the economy does not work well for the poor; 3) and those oriented to welfare, envisioned as social compensation for those who for different reasons cannot provide for themselves. Of course, agendas overlap and intertwine within and between organizations. Those oriented to production can embrace some sort of welfare, and a number of those seeking social change also engage in production in the procurement of income. In general terms, however, the economy is considered the critical setting for the creation of wealth and poor women are excluded from it.

The range of expectations with regard to women and poverty alleviation is thus quite wide, both within SSE organizations and government programs, and between them.

Some organizations rightly focus on issues of entitlements, autonomy and democratization as important elements in their endeavours. They openly contest the separation between social and economic processes. The issue is not always solved, however, when it comes to formulating short or medium term alternatives. Vague notions of social capital are resorted to, but the ways in which social assets are articulated in economic processes within market economies is seldom clearly elucidated. The “market” tends to be thrust into the enemies’ camp and women’s options framed within a narrow view of the economy.

Social and Cultural Assumptions

Women’s activities as caretakers or even breadwinners might be acknowledged as important, but these are generally classified within the sphere of the social and cultural, which tends to be perceived as separate from the economic. Indeed, the generalized assumption is that dealing with women is dealing with those not participating in the economy. In this setting, there is a tendency to categorize wealth as related to the sphere of ‘the economic’ and poverty to that of ‘the social’.

In this scenario, apparently contradictory images represent partial “truths” that coalesce in commonly held representations of women and their life prospects. While acknowledging them as valuable and worthy, there is a tendency to slip into stereotypical—and often naïve— notions of their circumstances and their selves. On the one hand, their past (particularly in the cases of indigenous or aboriginal women) must be retrieved to save their future, and on the other, a modern future must be concocted for them. All too often, in development planning and practice, images such as these taint expectations regarding women’s options. This leads to the formulation of weak and misplaced alternatives.

Contradictions, Ambiguities and Vulnerabilities of Market-Oriented Economies

The corporate world, commonly credited with the power to control the economy, requires constant efforts of bridging gaps and covering up inconsistencies. Fear and uncertainty guide market behavior at least as much as “rational” cost-benefit analysis does. Capitalization takes place under fragile conditions. However, these are all too often missed in the design of possible alternatives to poverty, which are guided by illusory models of success. Failure to identify the weaknesses of market oriented economies thwarts the potential to identify possible niches for social change.

It is important to acknowledge that this limited view of economic processes also entraps much participatory rural development endeavors, including some of those explicitly pursuing economic organization as a means for social change. Efficiency and cost-benefit markers are often drawn upon to assess achievement, which is all the more difficult, since economic success is expected to be collective and the outcomes must benefit the community as a whole. The effort is worthy. Yet, it tends to fall through, not least because key variables concerning both the sites and the nature of interaction between social and economic spheres are not adequately dealt with in the formulation of alternative expectations.

The Value of Non-Commoditized Forms of Production and Exchange

An important point to bear in mind is that resources are also being created in processes such as these. They are not always pre-existing and pre-distributed. Clean air, security, authenticity and historic relevance can be re-created as assets in particular transactions, as also can the non-use of chemicals in production and the utilization of artisan techniques. Resources, then, are not static. They do not exist in a given supply. Our conceptualization of their economic qualities (or the conceptualization we are able to impose on others) is crucial, because such resources need to be mobilized and leveraged. However, this can only be done within fields where their value is acknowledged and can be negotiated in accordance with certain conventions and expectations. And here, of course, patterns of exclusion and discrimination are reproduced and reinforced. Calculations and predictions vis-à-vis the future structure of opportunities--where processes of image construction and identification are crucial--enter into the equation.

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Microfinancial programs can become more meaningful change endeavors if they take women's strengths as point of departure, contextualizing such strengths in the face of capitalist markets' weaknesses. Such weaknesses include the capitalist need to frame out the value of household economy itself, as well as the ways in which power relies on subordination, omission and compliance. These matters should be considered in tackling the issue of assessment and mobilization of resources. Needless to say that such efforts would be uphill. On the one hand, immediate electoral or political gain from these programs—particularly in the case of government endeavors—would likely be meagre. On the other, women themselves tend to undervalue their strengths and resources, and, in the face of their pressing need for money, are willing to forego longer term change for immediate benefits. Such scenario is enhanced by the fact that a significant number of scientific studies feeding theoretical insights into development praxis still revolve around misplaced notions of the economy.