

Solidarity-Based Cooperation Networks

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Definition

The concept of network is specific to the Complexity theory, with notions that are also taken from cybernetics, ecology and other systemic concepts from other areas. The concept of *network* emphasizes the relationships between different parts that are interconnected, the flow of elements that circulate through those relationships, the linkages that strengthen the collective synergy, the autopoietic movement by which each element contributes to the reproduction of the other elements, the potential for transformation of each part by its relationship with the rest and the transformation of the whole as a result of the flows that circulate through the entire network. Thus, the coherence of each member depends on its integration to the network, on the flows in which it participates, and on how it receives and cooperates with the other members.

The concept of Solidarity-Based Cooperation Networks, as an analytical category, comes from reflecting on the activities of contemporary social actors, understood from the point of view of the complexity theory and from the philosophy of liberation. As a strategic category it is the center of the so-called Network Revolution, in which economic, political and cultural actions influence one another, subverting the hegemonic patterns and processes on which capitalism rests, and thus moving forward in the construction of a solidarity-based globalization.

In the latter sense, considering its economic aspect, it is a strategy for connecting solidarity-based production, commercialization, financing and consumer ventures, as well as other forms of grassroots organizations (associations, unions, NGOs, etc.) in a process consisting of mutual feedback and joint growth, which is self-sustainable and opposed to capitalism. There are four basic criteria for participation in these networks: a) there should not be any form of exploitation of labor, political oppression, or cultural domination; b)

the ecological balance of the ecosystems should be preserved (while allowing for the transition of ventures that are not yet ecologically sustainable); c) significant parts of the surplus should be distributed for the expansion of the network; d) self-determination of the ends and self-management of the means under a spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

The basic goal of these networks is *to boost productive chains through a solidarity and ecological approach*: a) producing within the networks everything that is still consumed from the capitalist market: final products, inputs, services, etc; b) correcting value flows, avoiding the regeneration of capitalist production, which is what happens when solidarity-based ventures buy goods and services from capitalist businesses; c) generating new jobs and distributing income, by organizing new ventures to satisfy the demands of the networks; d) ensuring the economical conditions for exercising public and private freedoms in an ethical manner. The collective reinvestment of surpluses enables the progressive reduction of the number of working hours in a day and increases the spare-time of all workers, thus improving living conditions as well as the consumption habits of each individual.

The viability of this post-capitalist alternative depends on the expansion of solidarity-based consumption {VER}, on the collective reinvestment of surpluses, and on a solidarity-based cooperation amongst everyone. In a network, *consumption, commerce, production and service* organizations are in a state of permanent interconnection via material (products, inputs, etc.), information and value flows which circulate through the network.

The basic qualities of these networks are autopoiesis, intensity, extensity, diversity, integrity, feedback, value flow, information flow, material flow and aggregation. The management of a solidarity-based network must be necessarily democratic, because the participation of its members is entirely optional, respecting the contracts entered into by its members. Its characteristics include: decentralization, participatory management, coordination and regionalization, all of which aim to ensure the self-determination and self-management of each organization and of the network as a whole.

In fact, when this kind of *local networks* are organized, they work to meet the population's immediate demands for work, improving consumption and education, and asserting human dignity and the people's right to live well, while combating the structures of exploitation and domination responsible for poverty and marginality as they begin to create a new mode of production, consumption and coexistence in which solidarity is paramount. Therefore, Solidarity-Based Cooperation Networks: a) allow different social actors to join in an organic movement with a strong potential for transformation; b) meet the immediate demands of these actors in terms of satisfying their labor and consumption needs, affirming their individuality, whether female, black, etc.; c) deny capitalist structures of exploitation of labor, expropriation in consumption and political and cultural domination; and d) implement a new post-capitalist way of producing and consuming, of organizing collective life reaffirming each person's right to diversity and individuality, promoting through solidarity the exercise of public and private freedoms in an ethical manner.

Genesis and historical development

Over the last few decades countless networks and organizations have appeared around the world in the sphere of civil society -in the fields of economics, politics and culture-, which advocate an ethical approach to exercising public and private freedoms, and which have developed into an embryonic non-governmental public sector. Women and ecological networks and organizations, education, health and housing movements, and many other groups that advocate a solidarity-based economy and ethics in politics –to name just a few- are multiplying, giving way to the emergence of a new sphere of social contracts. The development of a new awareness and of new practices concerning gender relationships, the balance of the ecosystem and a solidarity-based economy, for example, is not driven by the market or the State. The consensus on these new practices has been built within networks in which people and organizations from different parts of the world cooperate actively among themselves, proposing transformations to the market, the State, and the diverse social and cultural relations, based on an unyielding defense of the need to universally ensure the conditions necessary to exercise public and private freedoms in an ethical manner.

The progressive and complex integration of these diverse networks, cooperating amongst themselves in solidarity, has made it possible to envision the feasibility of a new revolution on a global scale, capable of overcoming the capitalist logic of wealth concentration and social marginality and the different forms of political, economical and cultural domination.

Starting from the fields of culture and politics, these networks will advance progressively to the field of economics, reaffirming the need for full democracy, which can only be achieved by introducing and implementing self-management mechanisms for society in every sphere of activity. Therefore, it is not about the political control of the State by society, but about the democratic control of the economy by society, about the generation of flows of information, especially regarding things that can affect everybody's life and that can be the object of human decisions.

In the last decades we have seen the emergence and proliferation of countless solidarity-based cooperation practices in the field of economics, among them: the revival of Companies Self-Managed by Workers, Fair Trade, Solidarity-Based Trademark and Labeling Organizations, Ecological Agriculture, Critical Consumption, Solidarity-Based Consumption, Local Employment and Trade Systems (LETS), Local Exchange Systems, Community Exchange Systems, Local Exchange Systems with Social Currency, Exchange Networks, Community Economy, Micro-Credit Systems, Popular Banks, Ethical Banks, Solidarity-Based Purchasing Groups, Boycott Movements, Free Software diffusion, among other economic practices based on solidarity. A significant number of organizations that are involved in these practices and that, as a whole, cover the different segments of the productive chains (consumption, commerce, service, production and credit) will start performing joint networked actions, while others have been doing it for over thirty years. The global growth of these networks indicates the increase of new fields of possibilities for solidarity-based actions strategically articulated with an aim to promote public and private freedoms, which are beginning to be discussed in the world social forums.

Current importance. Main controversies.

The new generation of networks that is beginning to emerge based on a solidarity-approach to cooperation features countless solidarity practices developed by different specific preexisting networks. By building on these practices and understanding them from the standpoint of the complexity paradigm, cooperation strategies based on solidarity can be deployed, having the potential to expand new social relationships of production and consumption, promoting a new understanding of society in which human beings, considered in their multiple dimensions, can have access to the material, political, educational and informational means to ethically fulfill their individuality, wanting and promoting the freedom of others.

With the conditions necessary for the exercise of freedoms, these Solidarity-Based Cooperation Networks can strategically advance towards the construction of a new form of social organization that is configured as a post-capitalist society.

Economically, the idea is to spread solidarity-based labor and consumption. Solidarity-based consumption implies the selection of consumption goods or services that focus on our needs and desires, aiming to fulfill our personal well-being as well as promoting the well-being of the workers involved in producing the goods or providing the services, and also aiming to maintain the balance of the ecosystems. In fact, when we consume goods produced by processes that exploit human beings and harm ecosystems, we ourselves are responsible for the exploitation of those people and for the harm caused to the ecological balance, because by purchasing such goods, we contribute to the process whereby those responsible for such oppression can turn the goods into capital to be reinvested in the same way, thus reproducing the same socially unjust and ecologically harmful practices. The act of consumption, therefore, is not merely economic but also ethical and political. It is an exercise of power by which we can either effectively support the exploitation of human beings, the progressive destruction of the planet and the concentration of wealth and social marginality, or we can oppose that harmful mode of production, promoting, through *solidarity-based consumption*, the expansion of public and private freedoms, the decentralization of wealth and an ecological and socially sustainable development. By choosing and consuming products identified by the trademarks of the

solidarity-based networks, we contribute to the full development of solidarity-based productive processes, and to the ensure that the money we spend in consumption is reinvested in solidarity-based production, promoting the well-being of all those involved in productive and consumer networks.

Solidarity-based labor means, in addition to self-management and social co-responsibility of workers, that the surplus of productive processes –which according to capitalist logic is accumulated by increasingly smaller groups- should be reinvested to finance other productive ventures based on a solidarity-approach, enabling those currently excluded by capital to participate in labor and consumption activities, increasing the range of solidarity-based goods and services offered, and expanding producer and consumer networks, improving the living conditions of all those involved in solidarity-based production and consumption. Thus, with the surpluses generated by solidarity-based ventures new productive ventures can be organized, creating job opportunities for the unemployed, favoring a stable performance that, thanks to the solidarity-based consumption carried out by the same workers, increases the network's final consumption levels, thus generating more surpluses to be reinvested. The new ventures to be organized should aim to produce goods that are still being purchased by the members of the network in the capitalist market, whether such goods and services are for final consumption or inputs, maintenance materials and other items required by the productive process. This approach -accompanied by a critical assessment of ecologically unsustainable capitalist patterns of production and consumption- aims to correct the value flows, so that final and productive consumption do not further private accumulation of wealth outside the networks, and instead feed back into solidarity-based production and consumption processes, thus completing the segments of the productive chains where the networks are still not autonomous.

In this network strategy -under what is beginning to be termed "*paradigm of abundance*"-, the more wealth distributed, the more everybody's wealth increases, when such distribution is made on the basis of remunerating the workers that create more wealth to be reinvested and shared. Thus, by being incorporated to the productive process and by receiving a just remuneration for their work, populations that were previously excluded are now able to consume solidarity-based

products and services that ensure their well-being, feeding back into the productive process itself under ecologically sustainable patterns. Collective agreements within the networks allow cost and price structures to be adjusted under standards that enable autopoiesis as an alternative to the *logic of shortage* that rules markets under the supply-and-demand relationship. Under the shortage logic that rules markets, where agents work aiming to obtain profit and other private advantages, an abundant supply tends to decrease prices, bringing them down even to levels below production costs, a situation where, for example, root-producing farmers are forced to leave a great part of their produce to rot under ground –because under the logic of the market there is no way to cover harvesting expenses-, even if they would prefer to harvest, knowing that over a billion people in the world live in extreme poverty and would certainly want to consume this food. Meanwhile, the needs of these starving populations do not work as *demand* under the logic of the market, because they do not possess the monetary means required to perform an exchange that would satisfy their needs. Thus, under the logic of shortage that rules the market there is no way to make it possible for starving populations to consume tons of food that are destined to rot, whether such populations are in another continent or in the countryside of the same nation where an abundance of production – that increases market supply- makes it unfeasible to recover harvesting costs, and frequently to recover the costs of cultivation. Also under that logic of shortage, high interest rates force some of those farmers, who have contracted debts to cultivate their crops, to sell parts of their lands in an attempt to pay off their debts, because the overharvest obtained by farmers as a whole, as a result of their competent productive work and to the favorable environmental conditions of their farming, prevents them from being able to settle their debts.

On the contrary, under the perspective of *solidarity-based cooperative networks* the goal is, in the economics field, to ensure the production, distribution, employment or consumption of the material means needed for the fulfillment of the ethically delineated public and private freedoms. The diversity principle implies promoting the satisfaction of individual demands, not based on profit but on the well-being of each and every person, and exercising individual freedoms on the basis of solidarity in the best possible way. The networking of consumption and production in mutual feedback linkages, with income distribution, is what economically enables the consistency and expansion of this solidarity-based system (MANCE: 2000: 120-156).

Hence, what is sought is to integrate consumption, production and credit in a harmonic and interdependent system, collectively and democratically planned and managed, that serves the common goal of fulfilling the need to ensure people's well-being at all levels in a sustainable manner, including such areas as culture, art and entertainment.

Politically, solidarity-based cooperation networks support democratic governance, seeking to ensure that everyone has the same possibility to participate and be involved in decision-making, not only as regards production and consumption activities performed by the networks, but also in the other political areas of society, aiming to fight all forms of labor exploitation, consumer expropriation and political or cultural domination, emphasizing the value of active citizenship in the search for the common good and cooperation among nations.

As the network, in its economic dimension, is based on a solidarity-approach to labor and consumption, it simultaneously constitutes a political network; that is, an economic network cannot survive without its members assuming a different set of principles to govern co-existence amongst people, in particular, overcoming individualism through solidarity-based cooperation, looking for the best way of establishing the collective and personal exercise of freedom. Under the dynamics of solidarity-based cooperation networks, the concern (or desire) of the other for its own difference entails, at a micro-political level, actions to promote the fulfillment of the diverse individualities, with an ethical approach and in the most complete way. Macro-politically it entails the structural transformation of society, suppressing the dichotomy between the creator of social demand and the political re-creator, through democratic mechanisms of public self-management that the network exercises in its own consistency. With the promotion of public and private freedoms, the network's growth increases its political power –by attracting more and more segments of society to the proposal of a post-capitalist society– which enables the constitution of a new social block capable of promoting molar revolutions supported by countless micro-political molecular revolutions, and transforming the structure and conduction of governments and States.

In the field of information and education, solidarity-based cooperation networks seek to promote, in the best possible way, the diffusion of information and the generation of elements for interpretation that will not only enable individuals to enhance their knowledge, technical skills and technological know-how or their competence in producing and interpreting new knowledge necessary for decision-making in all areas of their lives, but that will also allow for recovery of sensitivity, self-esteem and other ethical and aesthetical elements that are essential for the well-being of each individual and of the community as a whole.

In this sense, the relevance of one of the properties inherent to the network should be emphasized: i.e., the continuous flow of information. By promoting the free communicative interaction among members, ensuring everyone has the material means to transmit and receive messages to and from any of its members, the network sustains the solidarity-based flow of relevant information for particular decisions regarding the different considerations of the members. Also in this field, proper means are necessary to meet demands for education, professional training, and scientific and artistic development, among many other demands, all of which are necessary conditions for the exercise of individual freedoms and for the well-being of all.

Ethically, solidarity-based cooperation networks promote solidarity, that is to say, the commitment to achieve the well-being of all, the other's concern (or desire) for its valuable difference, so that each person can enjoy, in the best possible way, public and private freedoms. To want that difference means to welcome ethnic, religious and creed diversities, as well as of hopes, arts and languages, in sum, to welcome the variety of forms of individual fulfillment of human freedom that do not oppose the exercise of public and private freedoms in an ethical manner. Promoting freedoms means to ensure people the material, political, educational and informational conditions for an ethical existence in solidarity.

References

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