

Boosting welfare sustainability by solidarity: Opportunities resulting from circular social economy in Portugal



Impulsar la sostenibilidad del bien estar por medio de la solidaridad: Oportunidades provenientes de la economía social circular en Portugal

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Helena Reis Amaro da Luz Ph.D.¹

1. University of Coimbra, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences

Integrated Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Studies Center (CEIS20), Portugal

helenareis.luz@fpce.uc.pt, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1592-0953>

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ABSTRACT:

Aims: To analyze welfare and sustainability concepts framed by United Nations 2030 Agenda highlighting its commitment towards poverty and hunger; to discuss the concept of circular economy exploring the dimensions of sustainability to which it is associated; to analyze the relationship between the circular economy and the social economy, and to distinguish practices based on the assumptions of the circular economy with an inclusive impact at the level of confronting situations of vulnerability/poverty in Portugal.

Method: This is a theoretical reflection based on a review of current literature, documentary analysis and searching on websites, on the opportunities of the social economy embedded in solidarity sector to foster welfare (social) sustainability by pursuing circular economy principles.

Findings: The issues of poverty and hunger are central to understand the welfare concept and occupy a pole position in the agenda of human sustainability. The circular economy approach has been distinguished mainly as an alternative philosophy of growth (focusing on business) and (environmental) sustainability. Social economy anchored in solidarity organizations reveals the (neglected) social dimension of circular economy due to circular economy principles that they adopt connected to their mission.

Conclusions: The opportunities of circular economy to address welfare sustainability, especially for responding to multiple social needs (e.g., basic needs) coming from the circular social economy stakeholders must be reinforced in discourses and political agendas. Also, that opens space to reconfigure the concept of circular economy widening its scope and focus on a complete approach committed to sustainability, being this a direction, that research can deepen.

RESUMEN:

Objetivo: Analizar los conceptos de bien estar y de sostenibilidad enmarcados por la agenda de las Naciones Unidas de 2030 la cual destaca el compromiso para luchar contra la pobreza y el hambre; debatir sobre el concepto de economía circular explorando las dimensiones de la sostenibilidad a las cuales está ligado; analizar la relación entre economía circular y economía social y distinguir las prácticas basadas en las hipótesis de la economía circular con un impacto inclusivo a nivel del tratamiento de las situaciones de vulnerabilidad / pobreza en Portugal.

Método: Se trata de una reflexión teórica basada en una revisión de la literatura actual, el análisis documental y la búsqueda de sitios web, las oportunidades de la economía social incorporadas en el sector de la solidaridad para promover la sostenibilidad (social) del bien estar según los principios de la economía circular.

Descubrimientos: Los problemas de la pobreza y del hambre están en el centro de la comprensión del concepto de bien estar y ocupan una posición clave en la agenda de la sostenibilidad humana. El abordaje de la economía circular se ha distinguido principalmente como una filosofía alternativa de crecimiento (centrada en los negocios) y la sostenibilidad (ambiental). La economía social anclada en las organizaciones de solidaridad revela la dimensión social (descuidada) de la economía circular debido a los principios de economía circular que adoptan y que están vinculados en su misión.

Conclusiones: Las oportunidades de la economía circular para tratar la sostenibilidad social, especialmente para responder a las numerosas necesidades sociales (por ejemplo, las necesidades básicas), provenientes de los participantes de la economía social circular deben ser reforzadas en los discursos y las agendas políticas. De igual manera, esto abre un espacio para reconfigurar el concepto de la economía social circular ampliando su alcance y atención sobre un acercamiento completo comprometido en la sostenibilidad, siendo esto una orientación que la investigación puede profundizar.

KEY WORDS:

SUSTAINABILITY; WELFARE; SOLIDARITY;
SOCIAL ECONOMY; CIRCULAR ECONOMY.

PALABRAS CLAVES:

SOSTENIBILIDAD, BIENESTAR, SOLIDARIDAD,
ECONOMÍA SOCIAL, ECONOMÍA CIRCULAR





RÉSUMÉ :

Objectif: Analyser les concepts de bien-être et de durabilité dans le cadre de l'agenda des Nations Unies de 2030 qui met en relief l'engagement pour lutter contre la pauvreté et la faim ; discuter le concept d'économie circulaire en explorant les dimensions de la durabilité auxquelles il est lié ; analyser la relation entre l'économie circulaire et l'économie sociale et distinguer des pratiques basées sur des hypothèses de l'économie circulaire avec un impact inclusif au niveau de l'approche des situations de vulnérabilité/pauvreté au Portugal.

Méthode: Il s'agit d'une réflexion théorique basée sur une révision de la littérature actuelle, l'analyse documentaire et la recherche de sites web, les opportunités de l'économie sociale incorporées dans le secteur de la solidarité afin de promouvoir la durabilité (sociale) du bien-être suivant les principes de l'économie circulaire.

Découvertes: Les problèmes de la pauvreté et de la faim sont au centre de la compréhension du concept de bien-être et occupent une position de premier plan dans l'agenda sur la durabilité humaine. L'approche de l'économie circulaire s'est principalement distinguée comme une philosophie alternative de croissance (centrée sur les affaires) et la durabilité (environnementale). L'économie sociale ancrée dans les organisations de solidarité révèle la dimension sociale (négligée) de l'économie circulaire à cause des principes d'économie circulaire qu'elles adoptent et qui sont liés à leur mission.

Conclusions: Les opportunités de l'économie circulaire pour traiter la durabilité sociale, spécialement pour répondre aux nombreux besoins sociaux (par exemple les besoins de base) en provenance des acteurs de l'économie sociale circulaire doivent être renforcées dans les discours et les agendas politiques. Pareillement, cela ouvre un espace pour reconfigurer le concept de l'économie sociale circulaire en élargissant son envergure et attention sur une approche complète engagée dans la durabilité, ceci étant une orientation que la recherche peut approfondir.

RESUMO:

Objetivo: Analisar os conceitos de bem-estar e sustentabilidade enquadrados pela Agenda das Nações Unidas de 2030, que destaca o compromisso para lutar contra a pobreza e a fome; debater sobre o conceito de economia circular explorando as dimensões da sustentabilidade às quais está vinculado; analisar a relação entre economia circular e economia social e distinguir as práticas baseadas nas hipóteses da economia circular com um impacto inclusivo ao nível do tratamento das situações de vulnerabilidade/pobreza em Portugal.

Método: Trata-se de uma reflexão teórica baseada em uma revisão de literatura atual, análise documental e pesquisa em site, as oportunidades da economia social incorporadas ao setor da solidariedade para promover a sustentabilidade (social) do bem-estar segundo os princípios da economia circular.

Resultados: Os problemas da pobreza e da fome estão no centro da compreensão do conceito de bem-estar e ocupam uma posição chave na agenda da sustentabilidade humana. A abordagem da economia circular tem-se diferenciado principalmente como uma filosofia alternativa de crescimento (com foco nos negócios) e a sustentabilidade (ambiental). A economia social ancorada em organizações solidárias revela a dimensão social (negligenciada) da economia circular devido aos princípios de economia circular que adotam e que estão vinculados à sua missão.

Conclusões: As oportunidades da economia circular para abordar a sustentabilidade social, especialmente para responder às muitas necessidades sociais (por exemplo, as necessidades básicas), provenientes dos participantes da economia social circular devem ser reforçadas nos discursos e nas agendas políticas. Da mesma forma, isso abre um espaço para reconfigurar o conceito da economia social circular, ampliando seu alcance e atenção em uma abordagem completa e comprometida com a sustentabilidade, sendo esta uma orientação que a investigação pode aprofundar.

MOTS CLÉS :

DURABILITE, BIEN-ETRE, SOLIDARITE, ECONOMIE SOCIALE, ECONOMIE CIRCULAIRE.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

SUSTENTABILIDADE, BEM-ESTAR, SOLIDARIEDADE, ECONOMIA SOCIAL, ECONOMIA CIRCULAR

INTRODUCTION

The high exposure to poverty and to related effects such as hunger have been acknowledged as a mayor challenge at international agendas placing these phenomena at the heart of the debate about welfare and sustainability. On a global scale, but also on a regional scale (e.g., Europe) and in national contexts, as in the case of Portugal, the involutive trends associated with the risk of poverty changed due to new threats like the COVID 19 pandemic, which further increased concerns around the issue of poverty. Being a complex phenomenon, poverty have at its basis a deficit income that restricts the access to essential goods, but it is a notion that leads to other denials, which are summarized in the premise of the violation of human rights and access to a decent life, compromising welfare of individuals and welfare societies in long term. Indeed, in the sustainability agenda, the objective of welfare is unavoidable and is reflected in the proposal to achieve multiple objectives, where the satisfaction of basic human needs is highlighted, however, as advocated, it must be reconciled with other commitments allied to transmutations in the way of promoting economic development and dealing with the environment. In this regard, circular economy shows to be a promising concept since it proposes concrete practices of change, from production to consumption, in order to achieve greater efficiency, but it cannot only be focused by the regard of business practices. Mainly because its opportunity in terms of promoting social sustainability is highly significant, and here social economy agents are in a favorable position to boost the inclusion, expansion, and dissemination of the concept in different aspects, revealing the initiatives in the field of solidarity practices an important contribution. Thus, this approach intends to analyze welfare and sustainability concepts framed by United Nations 2030 Agenda highlighting its commitment towards poverty and hunger; to discuss the concept of circular economy exploring the dimensions of sustainability to which it is associated; to analyze the relationship between the circular economy and the social economy, and to distinguish practices based on the assumptions of the circular economy with an inclusive impact at the level of confronting situations of vulnerability/poverty in Portugal.

METHOD

This is a theoretical reflection based on a review of current literature, documentary analysis and searching on websites, on the opportunities of the social economy embedded in solidarity sector to foster welfare (social) sustainability by pursuing circular economy principles. The review for discussing the issues of poverty and hunger encompassed documents with statistical information, reports, legal diplomas and specialized bibliography, namely scientific works, and articles. The analysis of welfare and sustainability concepts as well as circular economy and social economy theory and practice were carried out based on reference works in these fields, and on scientific articles selected in the search engine SCOPUS, Web of Science and EBSCO Discovery Service, using the SciELO, Directory of Open Access Journals, Science Direct, RCAAP and Academic Search complete databases, with the descriptors welfare, sustainability, sustainability development, circular economy, and social economy, by their own or in a combined way. The examples of good practices were selected by our knowledge of their field intervention and their specific information was retrieved from its websites.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

The issues of poverty and hunger are central to understand the welfare concept and occupy a pole position in the agenda of human sustainability. The circular economy approach has been distinguished mainly as an alternative philosophy of growth (focusing on business) and (environmental) sustainability. Social economy anchored in solidarity organizations reveals the (neglected) social dimension of circular economy due to circular economy principles that they adopt connected to their mission.

Regarding this systematization, the three axes of the discussion, that arose from our reflective analysis are the follow: I) Thinking in Welfare: Poverty and Hunger in the Agenda of Human Sustainability - An introduction to crucial issues compromising people's dignity; Welfare and sustainability: Commitments; II) Circular Economy and Social Economy: Convergences towards (social) Sustainability - Circular economy approaching sustainability: Contours; Social economy and its embedded circular mission; III) Inclusive Circular Social Economy - Circular social economy: Appointments to a comprehensive approach; Initiatives and dynamics of circular social economy.

THINKING IN WELFARE: POVERTY AND HUNGER IN THE AGENDA OF HUMAN SUSTAINABILITY

An introduction to crucial issues compromising people's dignity

Poverty is one of humanity's biggest problems reversing the condition of the present and threatening a dignified life in the future being the strongest predictor of hunger. Globally, in 2017, about 9,2 % (689M) of people lived below the international poverty line (US\$1.90 a day) which means in extremely poverty (World Bank 2020). Recent data estimates that hunger affects globally around 690 million people which means 8,9 % of the world population, which can turn to up 9,8 % in 2030 by the impact of COVID (FAO et al. 2020).

Although the world has seen in the last two decades notable progress in facing these phenomena, the COVID-19 pandemic perturbed this trend. By the end of 2021 more than 150 million people are expected to live in poverty due to the pandemic. Also, it is expected that this disease may rise the number of world's people undernourished, in a range between 83 and 132 million people, remaining malnutrition a problematic issue that affects the most vulnerable population (e.g., children) at a large scale (FAO et al. 2020).

In Europe, according to recent data (Eurostat 2020), about 21,1 % (92,4M) of the population (EU-27) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019, being women, young adults, people with a low educational level, people with health problems, and unemployed, those who are more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In this region (as well as in Northern America) nearly 18 million people could not have in 2017, a healthy diet, observing income distributions estimates (FAO et al. 2020).

Regarding Portugal, data from the Survey on Living and Income Conditions (EU-SILC) provided by the National Statistics Institute (INE)¹ indicate that the rate of poverty (at-risk-of-poverty rate² for the NSI) comprised 16,2 % of residents in 2019. Considering people at risk of poverty or living in households with per capita labor intensity very low or in a situation of severe material deprivation, the correspondent rate of poverty or social exclusion was 19,8 % (2,037 thousand people) in 2020 (2019 income) (INE 2021). This statistical source also informs that in 2019, Portugal gathers among older adults working conditions at-risk-of-poverty, the unemployed (40,7 %); other inactive (28,9 %); those retired (15,7 %) and the employed people (9,6 %). The at-risk-of-poverty rate for older adults active represented 14,9 % in 2019, and the risk of poverty for under 18 and for the elderly population was about 19,1 %, revealing an increase from 2018. For households with children, the at-risk-of-poverty rate represented 17,6 %, being higher in those constituted by one adult and at least one child or two adults with two or more children, 25,5 % and 39,8 % respectively.

In a wider and most conventional understanding, the entrance in poverty and its related effects (e.g., hunger) relies on the income issue or purchasing power. For the Cambridge dictionary, poverty means "the condition of being extremely poor [being the poor those] having little money and/or few possessions"(Cambridge Dictionary 2021). According to scholars, several concepts can be distinguished in this regard. From Sachs (2005) arguing, it is useful to understand the meaning of three degrees of poverty, such as extreme/absolute poverty, moderate poverty, and relative poverty. Extreme poverty is related to "that households cannot meet basic needs for survival. They are chronically hungry, unable to access health care, lack the amenities of safe drinking water and sanitation, cannot afford education for some or all of the children, and perhaps lack rudimentary shelter (...)" (Sachs 2005, 20). At this point, The Hunger Project (2021) remarked that, even if not every person living in poverty faces chronic hunger, all over the world there are millions of people live with hunger and malnourishment that cannot afford to buy enough food or nutritious foods, being hunger a severe and powerful demonstration of poverty. Concerning moderate poverty, it "generally refers to conditions of life in which basic needs are met, but just barely. Relative poverty is generally construed as a household income level below a given proportion of average national income" (Sachs 2005, 20). As Costa (2008) highlight, the paradigm of income poverty is used to establishes a threshold/poverty line for defining the income level below which a person is positioned in extreme poverty. Although defining the number of people living on extremely low income is a needed way for identifying poverty, and for guiding policies, it is also acknowledged that poverty is broader than the issue of income. As so, European Union definition of poverty identifying the poor as the individuals who are excluded from a minimum acceptable way of life due to constraints of people or enforced lack of resources (Fusco, Guio and Marlier 2010) expanded somehow the concept to non-monetary aspects or *material deprivation* (EU-SILC), focusing

1 The EU-SILC was carried out in 2020 on previous year's income.

2 Percentage of individuals with income below 60% of the median income (per adult equivalent) in a country in a certain year. In 2019 this poverty line corresponded to 540 € monthly (INE, 2021)

on some aspects of living conditions related to housing conditions, possession of durables and capacity to afford basic requirements. Thus, it can be assumed that “poverty is pronounced deprivation in well-being (...)” (World Bank 2001, 15), and it encompasses low achievements, either of income and consumption, either in mainstream aspects necessary for a survival and existence with dignity, such as education, health, nutrition among others that made unfeasible the embracement of opportunities and capacities (Ng et al. 2013; World Bank 2001).

One cannot deny that poverty represents multiple deprivations which influences opportunities and multiple domains of human life, hurting human dignity. The notion of poverty as capability failure anchored in deprivation replaces the poverty discourse from a low level of income to access goods/services towards an approach related to well-being (Osmani 2005). Mainly, and having as reference Amartya Sen’s capability approach, poverty denounces inability to achieve basic capabilities (e.g., be free from hunger) for human survival and development, resulting live deprivation from lack of capability of having freedom to choose what one can do or to pursuit what a person values (Costa 2008).

Whether approached in relative or absolute terms, or focusing capabilities, the global problem of poverty must be seen in the light of human rights (Marks 2017). The increasing recognition of poverty as a human rights problem is in line with the fundamental issue that it encompasses concerning the violation of individual human dignity (Lötter 2007) meaning the harming and denied of one’s welfare condition in a broader sense. To reinforce poverty in a pole position of dignity agenda one must consider that the pursuing of welfare (collective, individual) must be informed by a rights approach - to an adequate standard of living - and with the aim of sustainability.

Welfare and Sustainability: Commitments

The notion of welfare has different meanings and gathers different analytic perspectives, from economic, psychological, sociological, social policy, among other perspectives. Walker (2005, 7) emphasizes that for conceptualizing welfare it is useful to make distinctions “between, first the welfare or well-being of individuals and families, and (...) secondly, between individual well-being and that of societies as a whole”. In fact, welfare often refers to an individual or to a collective dimension, and in this sense, it is commonly positioned either at a micro level (individual well-being or welfare, e.g., normative, individual perceptions of society and individual living standards, assigning values to individual experiences) or in an extensive dimension of a macro nature (societal well-being, e.g., welfare policies, social welfare) (Blau and Abramovitz 2003; Walker 2005; Greve 2008).

Welfare addresses the field of needs, both material and immaterial. It implies to overcome a need for something, to satisfy needs, being the effect, the satisfaction from accomplishment (Ivankina and Latygovskaya 2015). Related to social arena (e.g., social policy domain), social welfare is connected to a whole community (or nation) considering everyday people’s conditions, the broad context of social existence including vital issues, quality of live and opportunities, resulting from the conciliation of plural elements (provision of subsistence resources, relationships, assessment of personal needs...).

Welfare is an evolutive assumption that must be interpreted contextually, and that changes over time, being a dynamic process. Besides, as it has been discussed, the idea of sustainable and inclusive welfare currently acquires strong opportunity especially when it portrays a shared conception of society - founded on safeguarding essential objective needs, as well as subjective dimensions of individual welfare expectations, seeking to realize the human rights – posting that the coverage of human needs must be guaranteed to all people throughout their lives but also to future generations (Muñiz 2019).

Assuming that sustainability is connoted with the maintenance or pursuit of welfare in long term that must be taken in a meaningful and comprehensive way, a resulting integrated approach is supported by the understanding that social sustainability is the goal to achieve, being environmental sustainability the context and the economy, the means towards a development sustainability framework (Koumparou 2018; Luz 2020). In fact, sustainability and welfare are interconnected processes orientated towards the choice of solutions to create equal opportunities, provide the satisfaction of needs, improve social justice and safeguard nature for present and future generations (e.g., Ivankina and Latygovskaya 2015), a sum of processes guided through sustainable development impetus. Moreover, the linkage of concepts address the challenge of system’s transformation and interaction to achieve the “desired welfare sustainability” or a more sustainable societal model.

In this context, Hediger (2000) reminds that the welfare function combines principles of basic human needs, integrity of the ecosystem and the socio-cultural system, relying on a deep understanding of the various determinants of human well-being in the changing natural and socio-economic environment (Hämäläinen 2013). In this equation the increasing use and waste of natural resources, overconsumption, climate change, and other factors configure risks for sustainable welfare or for human wellbeing, that welfare agents have to deal with (Hirvilammi 2020).

With this regard, it is also assumed that change in population's social conditions of life must benefit from a holistic action, involving multiple stakeholders and alternative development strategies, including (re) emerging economy models, capable of optimizing sustainability and minimizing situations of social vulnerability, begin sustainable welfare initiatives in the respective national contexts and inherent communities/territories (Luz 2020).

CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND SOCIAL ECONOMY: CONVERGENCES TOWARDS (SOCIAL) SUSTAINABILITY

Circular economy approaching sustainability: Contours

Since Rio Earth Summit in 1992, several demands such as the importance of using fewer resources, avoiding waste, and adopting changes in production and consumption are seen as crucial for improving lives of poor people, being the transition towards sustainable consumption and production (SCP) a fundamental issue for achieving sustainable development (UNEP, 2015).

The Oslo Symposium held in 1994 highlights the imperative of SCP stating that sustainable consumption is “the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emission of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations” (IISD 2021). Later, by Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, adopted in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, SCP alongside with poverty eradication, and the management of natural resources were recognized as three “overarching objectives of, and essential requirements for, sustainable development” (United Nations 2002, 2). For accomplishing global sustainable development, changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable. This means that sustainable development asks for a new paradigm calling for responsible behavioral changes to promote social welfare, economic growth, and ecological restoration. SDG (12) emphasizes the need to “substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse (...) encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances (...) to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of (...) the poor and the affected communities” (United Nations 2015, 23).

Circular economy approach has been distinguished as a fundamental alternative for growth and sustainability as it focuses on a better use of the economy's resources, arguing that wasted products can be repaired, reused, (re) transformed and shared, avoiding their waste, and /or completion of the life cycle (Bonciu 2014; European Commission 2015; Martin 2016; Preston 2012). Thus, to foster different aspects of sustainability, circular economy perspective has become increasingly emphasized in political agendas, such as the European Circular Economy Package (European Commission 2015) and the New Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission 2020), relying on strategies converging with the objectives of SDG for 2030, by stating its role at the service of people, regions, and cities, reinforcing its possibilities for societies well-being sustainability.

The dynamics of circular economy integrates a new vision that contrasts with the linearity (take -make-consume-discard) of the current economic model. It calls for the central principles of the 3 R's, reduce, repair/reuse and recycle, denounces a greater balance between the economy and the environment (e.g., Vadakkepatt et al. 2021). Cradle to Cradle approach represents the circularity flow relying on the assumption that waste wherever possible must be used as raw material for another process (e.g., Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013; Leitão 2015). Mainly, circular Economy intends to “retain the inherent value of products by utilising a product for as long as possible and within the shorter loops of material circulation, i.e. reuse, repair and remanufacturing” (Milios 2018, 868).

The transition to circular economy reports principally opportunities in terms of the use of resources efficiency related to consumption/production which implicitly impacts environment and economy, being argued that the definition of circular economy anchored on the sustainable development perspective is essentially a response for two

of the three spheres, i.e., the social sphere, that of social sustainability does not have an explicit place in this concept (Bonet Fernandez, Petit, and Lancini 2014; Koumparou 2018; Luz 2020; Ribeiro 2020) or was not use for authentic purposes (Foladori 2002). Although it is important to understand that this model is inherent in social initiatives and can also integrates dynamics to value social justice, equity and to promote responses to situations of poverty and vulnerability of people facing basic subsistence needs (Luz 2020; World Bank 2015). To this point social economy can make the difference contributing to distinguish and to the reinforcement of sustainability social dimension of circular economy once it gathers dynamics connected to circular economy principles.

Social economy and its embedded circular mission

Social economy has been consolidated as a set of organizations and practices generated by people to overcome their needs and problems being driven by a social benefit motive (European Union 2010). Concerning the activities provided by entities mostly co-operatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations, as well as social enterprises, and nonprofit institutions addressing services to people in need and communities, the underlying principles of these agents rely on its social goals (e.g., solidarity), its voluntary and open membership, its participatory and democratic impetuous for taking decisions (foundations configure differently as they have no members), its management autonomy, the focus on non-distribution of surplus and the primacy of people and work over capital (Ávila and Campos 2018; Social Economy Europe 2015).

There are different traditions and theoretical approaches of social economy, and this sector covers a plurality of realities according to cultural, social, and political contexts. Despite these differences that do not fit the focus of the present analysis, the social economy proves to be a human economy conceived to serve people and human societies and due to goods and services produced has an essential role to benefit people favoring its development anchored in its ethical foundational principles and values. The main linking point with the issue of sustainability as a whole and precisely with its social dimension is the intention towards concretizing humanity in the sense of promoting the systems that facilitates sustainable lives in communities, not only for present but in a prospective horizon.

Social sustainability is understood as embracing human rights, social cohesion, poverty reduction, equality, labor rights, welfare, postulating the respect for environment (e.g., Koumparou 2018). Such concerns must be considered in any human development process where “society” intervenes to promote social justice for all its citizens. The principle of human dignity represents the fulfillment of humanity. Thus, thinking about development requires at first to respect human being, so that he can respect nature. And from the point of view of the human being, he himself is the most important part of the environment. Consequently, economic, and environmental dimensions are constituents of social sustainability (Jorge 2015, 15-16).

The connection of these assumptions to social economy is straightforward and can be ensured in different ways by various agents of social economy. In fact, if the person is at the heart of sustainability paradigm which guide organizational policies/actions, the person also reflects the focus of social economy activity.

Even if social economy face diversity (wide range of organizations) and is orientated towards multiple objectives, it should always exist a concern with solidarity, which means that independently of differences among these entities all social economy organizations possess a concern with individuals and assign primary importance to social aspects (OBESP 2011). However, and regarding our analysis, the so-called non-market sector which includes non-profit solidary sector deserves relevance. Fundamentally, because it provides context-specific responses towards the development of people and communities, building initiatives to fight poverty and the satisfaction of fundamental needs, being their action conciliate with circular economy principles, as it happens in several organizations/initiatives in Portugal.

Inclusive circular social economy in Portugal

Circular Social Economy: Appointments to a comprehensive approach

In Portugal, social economy has a historical tradition and represents an institutional and a structural sector that acquired an explicit legal recognition by the Basic Law of the Social Economy in 2013. According to this law social economy gathers organizations such as a) cooperatives, b) mutual associations, c) mercies, d) foundations, e) private social solidarity institutions not covered by the preceding paragraphs, f) associations with altruistic purposes that

operate in the cultural, recreational, of sport and local development, g) entities covered by the community and self-managed sub-sectors, integrated under the terms of the constitution into the cooperative and social sector and h) other entities with legal personality that respect the guiding principles of the social economy (...) (Assembleia da República 2013, art 4). In common, these organizations develop economic and social activities with the aim of pursuing the general interest of society achieved either directly or through the pursuit of the interests of their members, users, and beneficiaries. Orientations towards the primacy of people and social objectives; the respect for the values of solidarity, equality and non-discrimination, social cohesion, justice and equity, transparency, individual responsibility and shared social and subsidiarity, constitute, among others, driving principles of its action (Assembleia da República 2013, art 5).

The sector has been showing not only an evolution and growing dimension, but also a remarkable social and economic importance. From the latest Social Economy Satellite Account (SESA), focused on 2016 year, this sector was represented by 71,885 entities, had employed 236,288 people, was responsible for 6,1 % of national paid employment (full-time equivalent) and for 3 % of gross national value added (INE 2019).

In Portugal, the social economy organizations have an outstanding potential, and they evidence, considering the social solidarity sector, a significant strength based on the functions they perform in the field of human and social services where they assume a leading character in the set of other service providers. Private Social Solidarity Institutions (IPSS), constituted by social solidarity associations; social solidarity cooperatives; mutual associations; social solidarity foundations and mercies, have a distinguished prominence resulting from their intervention in the domain of social security, health, education and in other fields where needs of individuals, families and communities call for its support (Ministério da Solidariedade, Emprego e Segurança Social 2014; Assembleia da República 2015).

As it was pointed out by SESA (INE 2019), in 2016, the entities held the status of IPSS or equivalent represented 5,622 entities which corresponded at 7,8 % of all social economy entities, being mostly of their activity connected to social services. Moreover, and regarding its relative position in social economy sector as whole, it can be said that in 2016, the IPSS represented 38,8 % of production, 44,2 % of gross value added, 51,5 % of remunerations, 31,2 % of other subsidies to production and 63,1 % of paid employment (full-time equivalent).

Overall, due to its proximity to communities, the IPSS have been shown, by their action, to have capacity to respond with high efficiency to situations of social emergency and support to citizens in situations of greater vulnerability, demonstrating capacity for innovation and adaptation, given the necessary social responses (Ministério da Solidariedade, Emprego e Segurança Social 2014). As Hespanha et al. (2000) remarked, the versatility of these organizations and their easy and quick adjustment to social problems is an advantage for them. Furthermore, by focusing on people and communities they promote local and territorial development, emphasizing an intervention towards sustainability development, meeting circular economy (Luz 2020).

The linkage between social economy and circular economy may be address in several ways. Ávila and Campos (2018) emphasize that circular economy is a transversal paradigm to the economic system and therefore intersects also with social economy as it aims to reinforce the concerns to environment among societal agents (public, private, social economy entities).

Also, a core understanding of social economy is that it mobilizes different ways of production, distribution, consumption, managing and financing, contributing, to the reinforcement of social, economic, and territorial cohesion as well as to a development model, more concerned with the individual and more respectful of the environment (e.g., OBESP 2011; Social Economy Europe 2015). At this point, as it is discussed (Noya and Clarence 2007), social economy can have an active role at the local level, in waste recycling, reuse campaigns, among other dynamics, combining in its response, the environmental, the local and the social dimension (e.g., facing social exclusion). Crucial importance has dynamics such as second-hand sales, exchanges, product sharing, donations, repair, and products reuse, anchored in logics of community proximity based on solidarity, pursuit by entities of social economy (among others) to face poverty and to promote social justice, social cohesion, inclusion, and social equity (Ribeiro 2020).

As the European Economic and Social Committee (2017) noticed, circular economy and social economy converge in various directions, once these approaches place at the core of their concerns, individuals, and sustainable development. This reflects in both, the promotion of creative and innovative capacity at the level of communities (local level), to enhance sustainable development multiple processes (e.g., economic, social, environmental).

Following research and case studies (e.g., Mairie de Paris and ADEME 2015; Luz 2020; Ribeiro 2020) it is important to understand that, in articulation with social economy, circular economy:

- Is not limited to the activity of companies, but it is transversal to various actors. This means that it is a societal “project/ambition”, calling on several interlocutors for its transition, from civil society, citizens, social economy organizations;
- It refers to new forms of production, consumption, but also to sociability, being an approach committed to sharing, to donations, to reuse, to processes of recycling, (re)transformation, stimulated when new needs are revealed coming from the appeals of societies/communities (e.g., underprivileged segments of society);
- It is necessarily social, solidary, inclusive and, like social economy, it is a territorial project, based on a proximity nexus and that benefits from local social capital.

Also, the valuation of circular economy by social economy, stems from its ability to realize societal added value - according to its mission - rather than profit, by creating opportunities for people to enhance their well-being, by supporting those in need to face their vulnerability or poverty condition (assuring elementary needs, the access to goods and services), promoting an inclusive dynamic as a result of partnerships relations from stakeholder’s community. Social economy largely run by IPSS can address the response to elementary needs, the access to goods and services (e.g., donations, products reuse) which results in a positive impact at a social level (e.g., fighting poverty) and on an environmental level (e.g., avoiding waste, keeping the products as long as possible), reinforcing these assumptions, the idea of social circular economy. As Rogers et al. (2012, 69) state, “moving towards social as well as environmental sustainability will require a focus on well-being and meeting human needs”. Therefore, social economy as an economy based on a human approach, can be a facilitator of a transition towards a social circular economy, expanding the conceptions of production and consumption through multiple initiatives, having a substantive value, and should be distinguished.

Initiatives and dynamics of circular social economy

As it has been recognized (e.g., Bonet Fernandez, Petit, and Lancini 2014; Chaves-Avila and Gallego-Bono 2020; SUSY Consortium 2015), social economy is a key driver of economic and social development, guiding its mission by the agenda of the dignity of the publics it serves, conciliating its actions with the improvement of the population’s quality of life and minimization of social inequalities.

With this regard, initiatives of social economy such as solidarity/social stores, food banks, “resource banks”, among other multiple expressions, reflect dynamics engaging social economy agents that facilitate the “hand in hand” circulation of goods/products, reconciling sustainability practices with the principles of circular economy:

- *Solidarity or Social Stores* constitute initiatives/projects aimed to promote the creation of more adequate responses to social problems, usually configured as an intervention orientated for meeting the immediate needs. Human rights and community solidarity reflect the basis of social store initiatives conducted by agents such as social economy organizations. According to Ribeiro (2020) social stores promoted by IPSS emerge from the proximity to the communities, to reinforce mechanisms of social rights near the most excluded population but reflect also impacts in environment. In fact, as Lalanda (2013) defines, “A solidarity store is an initiative that can transform solidarity into local development, by encouraging a fairer society, less selfish and, above all, more attentive to the needs of others and the need to protect the ecosystem”.

Existing all over the country, social shops in Portugal are multifaceted, appearing mostly within framing entities and are developed principally by public entities (e.g., Municipalities, parish council) and social economy/non-profit and/or non-governmental organizations (e.g., Mercies, Red Cross), benefiting greatly from partnership between several agents (public, nonprofit and companies). Although its typology is varied in terms of recipients (e.g., open to the community; by signaling from entities/organizations), mostly emerge to promote support to needy people, providing food items, but also clothing, textiles, toys, teaching materials, furniture, and other products.

Despite of no existence of aggregated information about these initiatives, it can be mentioned that Red Cross (non-governmental/nonprofit organization) have around 17 stores distributed throughout the country³, and the platform

3 See <https://www.cruzvermelha.pt/apoio-social/grupos-vulner%C3%A1veis/loja-social.html>.



of social stores in Lisbon reports the existence of 21 social stores, coming the majority (13) from nongovernmental and/or non-profit associations/organizations committed to solidarity (e.g., NGO, NPO, IPSS)⁴. In addition, and to minimize social inequalities and enhance strategies towards social development and sustainability, social stores incorporate circularity dynamics, which distinguish its action from other spheres of action bringing social economy closer to the circular economy (Luz 2020). At the same time, these responses are also an investment for sustainable development in its broadest sense, converging with the dynamics of the circular economy. In social shops products are donated and/or sold (second hand), and/or repaired to reuse and/or recycled at the end of the product's life cycle, reverting the generate income to the benefit of people and to the organizations/project' mission. Overall, they combine a solidarity dimension (e.g., support to needy families and frequently their accompaniment) an economic dimension (e.g., allocated existing resources of organizations, gathering generated income, voluntary work) and an ecological dimension (e.g., stimulating the principles or the three R's: reduce, reuse, recycle).

- *Food banks against hunger*⁵ are IPSS aiming to avoid the waste of food products by sending them for free distribution to people in need (e.g., individuals, institutions). These entities guide their action by the assumption, "take advantage of where there is leftover, to distribute where it is lacking" having a proximity intervention in communities. By receiving foodstuffs, offers from companies and individuals, production surpluses from the agri-food industry, agricultural surpluses, they provide different kinds of support such as, baskets of food products delivered to families, prepared meals for nursing homes, day care centers and to other centers, also having a broad action (e.g., food support to the homeless).

According to Portuguese Federation of Food Banks Against Hunger⁶, there are 21 Food Banks operating in Portugal which in 2020 aided 2,400 institutions, and supported (e.g., baskets or prepared meals) nearly 380,000 people with proven food shortages. In general, they distributed 24,262 tons of food (with an estimated value of 34 million euros), in an average movement of 97 tons per working day. Through donations, collection, and distribution of food products, they raise the pillars of the circular economy, exerting a transforming action on people's lives.

- *Resource banks* are an umbrella concept to include multiple initiatives including of solidary nature to provide help to people in need articulated also with circular economy assumptions. The Donated Goods Bank⁷ is an example of these practices developed by an Association of Social Solidarity⁸ orientated towards products and equipment's reception, promoting its distribution near social institutions for supporting people mostly in need, promoting also circular economy. By this initiative, the ENTRAJUDA Association promotes the delivery of goods that are useful for social institutions to develop their mission, enhancing its strategy to fight for social exclusion. Another practice of this Association results from the Equipment's Bank⁹ which receives end-of-life equipment and whereby the recovery of goods (e.g., fridges, toasters, irons, computers) constitute a support for nonprofit organizations, as well as for individuals/families, being recycling conducted when products cease to be operational. As it is pointed out by the Association, it is developed a pioneering project in Portugal through the recovery of computer equipment for donation to institutions. Thus, a better use of resources is provided combining the concerns with sustainability in its holistic understanding. It should be noted that underlying these dynamics lies a focus on social inclusion as they advocate and expand opportunities for more equal access to goods and services, channeling various resources (e.g., volunteering) and bringing together collaborations (e.g., partnerships), enhancing in this way the means and actions in favor of welfare sustainability regarding individuals and in a broader societal perspective.

4 See https://dados.gov.pt/pt/datasets/lojas-sociais/#_

5 See. <https://www.bancoalimentar.pt/>

6 See. <https://www.bancoalimentar.pt/quem-somos/pagina-noticias/noticias-federacao/bancos-alimentares-contra-a-fome-angariam-2125-toneladas-de-alimentos-em-dois-dias/>

7 See. <https://www.bancodebensdoados.pt/>

8 See. <https://www.entrajuda.pt/>

9 See <https://www.bancodeequipamentos.pt/>



CONCLUSIONS

Welfare sustainability is a mayor challenge for our societies that implies commitments of all stakeholders in sustainable development policies and actions. Fighting poverty requires to consider additional challenges related to patterns of production and consumption in articulation with environmental concerns. Circular economy brings opportunities to address welfare sustainability, especially for responding to multiple social needs (e.g., basic needs) coming from the circular social economy stakeholders. Nevertheless, a comprehensive approach should be promoted in particular to highlight linkages between circular economy concept and social economy principles. Inclusive practices such as social shops, food banks and bank resources are some examples that can value social circular economy denouncing its relevance to publics in need and territories, contributing to the enhancement of its social dimension regarding sustainability. Studies that address the component of social sustainability as an opportunity and its benefit from circular economy are still incipient and scarce, so it is important to advance with research in this field. Also, disseminate examples of good practice at the level of social economy organizations that relies in socially innovative ideas and promote the circular economy must be promoted in favor of the global sustainability welfare.

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