

The logo consists of the letters 'UN' in a white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue square.

Inter-Agency Task Force on  
**Social and Solidarity Economy**

## **Decent Work and Gender Equality**

*The cooperative of 'Capuchinhas' of Serra do Montemuro*

*Teresa Cunha*

*Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra  
Portugal*

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### **Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?**

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## Abstract

The 'Capuchinhas' cooperative is a women's socioeconomic initiative within 'Serra do Montemuro', one of the most isolated and impoverished regions of central Portugal. This cooperative started in the 1980s as a local alternative to the lack of employment, the progressive devaluation of local knowledges and natural local resources and the inequality based on gender. A group of women created a collective self-managed group to overcome the local constraints in fulfilling their life project of being happy and emancipated. Trusting in their own skills and mutual collaboration they decided to initiate a local project to produce innovative cloths and accessories using ancestral technologies, local resources as wool, linen and natural dying products valuing their territory and its sustainability.

Having in mind the importance of the international standards embodied by the Sustainable Development Goals, specially that one on Decent Work and Gender Equality and anchored in a feminist hermeneutics I aim at to contribute to give epistemological attention to cultural traction in transformative social projects. Through an in-depth and co-operative ethnography carried-out with the Capuchinhas's team I bring into light what can be learned from this experience in its potentialities and constraints. Having in mind the critical concepts of cognitive justice and gender justice I argue that this long-lasting experience has heuristic value to a bottom-up implementation of the agenda 2030 in Europe.

## Keywords

Capuchinhas cooperative; Gender Equality; Agenda 2030; Social and Solidarity Economy; Feminist economy

## Bio

Teresa Cunha is a senior researcher and professor at the Centre for the Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, Portugal where she co-coordinates the Research Programme Epistemologies of the South, the Gender Workshop and the Winter Advanced School 'Feminist Ecologies of Knowledges'. Her major research interests are feminist economy, social and solidarity economies and economies lead by women in the global South. 'Women InPower Women. Other economies engendered and led by women form the non-imperial South' (Buenos Aires: CLACSO) is one of her most relevant works.

## Introduction

Almost two decades after the beginning of the twentieth first century it is clear to human community that many challenges must be faced with courage and straightforward. The deepness of inequalities, of all sorts, and the unsustainability of the contemporary economic and environmental state of affairs, beyond fear and frustration, gives us the opportunity to exercise our thinking to picture other possibilities to our common future. The tasks ahead are difficult and complex but we need to look at them with a twofold attitude: practicing critical scrutiny over the problems and avoiding, at all cost, waste experiences and knowledge that are available to envisage a brighter and balanced life to all in harmony with natural environment.

The United Nations initiative that led to the definition of the seventeen *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG) show, in first place, how much concern is the international community about the great disparities that the majority of the world's population have to deal with in their daily life. They result, among other things, from a multidimensional and demanding evaluation of the present social, economic and environmental conditions of life in the planet. On the other hand, the SDG embodies several tools to interpret and intervene fostering positive changes and global justice. Is coupled with this general framework that I analyze the cooperative of 'Capuchinhas' as one of the social performers of *gender equality and women's empowerment*, critically connected with *inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work* (SDG: 5 and 8).

The 'Capuchinhas' cooperative is a socioeconomic initiative of women from 'Serra do Montemuro', one of the most isolated and impoverished regions of central Portugal. This cooperative started in the 1980s, not only as a form of resistance, but also as a local alternative to the lack of employment, the progressive devaluation of local knowledges, natural local resources and the inequality based on gender. They created a collective self-managed decision-making group to agree, in solidarity, on what should be their purpose and working methods within a short and long-term time framework. In another words, they started by discussing together what would be their tactical and strategic plan of action to address inequalities and imbalances and how to achieve a sustainable and decent work in their territory centred in people, performing a harmonious relationship with their natural environment and countering the increasing commodification of all areas of life.

The cooperative of 'Capuchinhas' is developed its economic and social action framed by what Peter Utting (2015) define as a social and solidarity organization: embraces older and new knowledge, operates with a self-management rational, has a bottom-up decision-making structure and is social centred. The cooperative produces and commercialize innovative cloths and accessories using ancestral technologies, local resources as wool, linen and natural dying products valuing their territory and its sustainable development without abandoning the objective of economic well-being of their participants. After 32 years of existence the cooperative of 'Capuchinhas da Serra do Montemuro' remains one of the most interesting experiences of an economy imagined and led by women, capable of creating wealth and valorising the territory in its various elements, in Portugal.

### 1- A feminist hermeneutics of the SDG and Economies of Hers

It is commonly accepted by social sciences literature that, throughout history, women are the human group that has been subjected to the most systems and layers of oppression (Cunha, 2014). However, women are much more than victims. They are resistance, social energy, epistemological strength, and active actresses of social transformation. They invent, every day and despite constraints, forms to overcome limitations, subalternity and inequalities. Therefore,

I state, there is no social and cognitive justice without gender justice: all women, and other identities that represent themselves as feminine, as well as their practices, knowledge and works, must be valued and be free from any form of discrimination and violence.

I question any feminist or non-feminist epistemology that does not highlight the constant danger of the *single story*<sup>1</sup> and the various structures of power that, on the one hand, homogenize and amalgamate the intense and potentially infinite diversity of women's knowledge and their emancipation projects; and on the other hand do not question the power relations that, in one way or another, in production and work continue to undermine their functions, activities, ways of living and of speaking the world. Likewise, I am persuaded that the hegemonic capitalist order, in which, we live is one of the most powerful structures of women's discrimination and obscuring. I argue, therefore, that a feminist hermeneutics of the social and solidarity economy calls us to deconstruct any androcentric apparatus that is, explicitly or implicitly, present in our analyses and theorizations, however critical they appear to be.

Silvia Federici, in her seminal work *Caliban and the Witch*<sup>2</sup>, analyses the emergence of the capitalist order was possible due to the subjugation of women to a function of reproduction of the workforce (2010:85). This new order, and the accumulation of capital it prompted, entailed very violent processes that led to the destruction of women's powers and reinvention of a hierarchy based on gender, race and age that came to be constituents of class domination. (*Ibid*: 90). She asserts that capitalism was not an evolution within the system but rather the counter-revolution carried out by feudal lords, wealthy merchants, bishops, and popes to subdue and destroy secular struggles for the emancipation of small farmers, craftswomen and men and workers of various other trades central to the political economy of the time (*Ibid*: 33-34).

This point is central to my analysis because it sheds light on one key issue: in the interstices of Europe there have been, and still are, ways of life resistant to capitalist order. They persist, in many ways, in various sociabilities. Just as the epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2018) alert us, many social practices have either been left out of capitalism, or have been thought and carried out in resistance against it. The 'Capuchinhas' cooperative, as we shall see below, can be, to a large extent, a good example of this. Subaltern, clandestine or invisible, this pluriverse of other economic rationalities are active even if, on the surface, reality appears totally dominated by the hegemony of contemporary capitalism and its unsustainable drive. This is one the reasons why to give space on critical importance of our common interest in thinking on how must be concretely realized the Sustainable Development Goals. It appears to me to be a quest for social transformation and, at the same time, a civilizational change. It does mean that we need to think the SDG as a tool for a radical and fresh look to our way of imagine the present and guarantee the future for all.

In line with these reflections I argue that social and solidarity economy in contemporary European societies is one of the living ruins of this world of resistance against profit centred economy and its main contradiction between capital and nature. Articulating ancestral memories and wisdom with new technologies and knowledge; embracing harmony and collective well-being; valuing all work that produces life in its all forms, the social and solidarity economy is creating a new paradigm to live together. In this paper, I aim to show how a local interpretation of this rational led these women of the 'Capuchinhas' cooperative to build up an economy of hers to fulfil gender equality, decent work. At the same time, bring into light the social learning that can be useful to respond to the challenges posed by inequalities, progressive

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<sup>1</sup> Here paraphrased: *The danger of the single story* by Chimamanda Adichie.

Available at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)

<sup>2</sup> We here use the Spanish translation of the book *Caliban and the Witch* by Traficantes de Sueños.

commodification of life and the place of women's knowledges and workings in the resistance and creation of concrete and feasible alternatives.

## 2- The 'Capuchinhas' cooperative: where gender equality and decent work happens

The 'Capuchinhas' cooperative operates in an old school building in the village of Campo Benfeito. The village of Campo Benfeito, within the Montemuro mountain region, has today 51 inhabitants of which 14 are children and young people. The four women who constitute the 'Capuchinhas' are the mothers of 5 of these newest inhabitants.

In the early 1980s, a community meeting was held with the population of the Montemuro mountain to identify the territory's needs for the promotion of local economic initiatives. It was in this context that a 'Cut and Sew' course took place in 1985 considered by the population an appropriate response to face the lack of local employment initiatives. The trainer chosen was a resident of the village, Cidália da Conceição, who was familiar with the craft and its techniques. This choice made two important things clear. On the one hand, it was recognized that many local knowledges were not forgotten, on the contrary, remained present and active in the village. On the other, it was evident that the processes needed a dynamic anchored in the expectations and desires of the populations with a strong cultural traction.

She was the one who trained and formed a group of more than a dozen women facing, at the time, complicated life projects. Their attachment to the territory, where they were born and raised, had not yet led them out of their village in search of an opportunity for waged employment that the mountain seemed unable to offer them. The conciliation between staying and achieving their independence appeared to be very difficult.

*We wanted to be different from our mothers who were always dependent on their husbands for money and to do what they thought best with it. We wanted to be independent, able to govern ourselves, make decisions with autonomy and freedom. For us it was very important to break with some things of the past, but without having to renounce to the village of Campo Benfeito.*

In other words, these women deeply felt a contradiction: the value of the land, the knowledges and ways of life associated with it, and the idea that under those conditions it would be very difficult to achieve all they wanted for their lives.

They were aware of the problems and their decision was to face them and start to begin their transformation process, retaining what they did not want to give up (Tzul Tzul, 2015). In other words, what lied at stake, in my view, is that for them the dichotomies between tradition and modernity, transformation and conservation between the private and the public, resulted in a permanent conflict because they were not only strange to them, but also did not account for the present reality or the future they wanted for themselves. This is the first lesson to retain: how much dichotomies invented by the modern reason may be harmful to a bottom-up project of emancipation.

In 1986, the governmental Commission for the Status of Women (CCF)<sup>3</sup> became aware of the communitarian work developed in Montemuro and promoted a further training course for several groups of artisans. Cidália, Henriqueta and Ester from Campo Benfeito, went to Porto participate in this training that aimed to prepare women for their process of economic independence. This included, among other things, teaching them practical management tools so

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<sup>3</sup> At the moment this governmental body is called Commission for Citizenship and Equality of Gender. More information available at: <https://www.cig.gov.pt/>.

that they could account for production costs and calculate the value and final price of their products, inform them of the steps and documents required to legalize their activities and how to approach and deal with potential customers. It was during this training that Adelaide Ferreira, another Montemuro woman created the image of the hooded cloak - 'Capucha' - that is still used by the Cooperative:



In this respect, it is also very interesting to note that, these ladies, showed their ability to maintain their connection to the land and those things that were more than objects because they signified their belonging and their culture and, at the same time, projected, in them, their imagination of the future. The 'capucha' which protected them from the cold in the winter was transformed into the 'Capuchinhas' a project of emancipation expressed by Henriqueta with the following words: *I wanted all! I wanted everything and I want to be the one to say what everything is for me.*

For about 8 years, the creative work benefited from some assistance and financial support from the government to maintain the material conditions of production of clothing and accessories made from local resources: wool and linen fibres, natural dyes made from various trees of the region, namely the oak and the walnut tree. From linen shirts, which were in disuse, new blouses were created. From rag blankets, waistcoats were made and the first pieces in burel<sup>4</sup> appeared.

It is here that the 'Capuchinhas' begin to reinvent the use and reuse of resources at hand. At first glance it seems that the strategy had more to do with the lack of financial means to buy the fabrics or other raw materials to work with. But, as follows, this perception has changed. They transformed their way of seeing and appreciating what were, in fact, resources, deemed of little importance to others. Among them I highlight: the products of the fields and herding, such as flax and wool; knowledges about the chemical properties of plants, bark, flowers and roots; the technologies linked to the production of food, be them agricultural or mechanical, that is to say, everything that is part of the human and cultural heritage passed on from previous generations. They began to integrate the principles of non-waste into their creations by extending and renewing the material and social utility of many things. Circular economy, one of the pillars of for a sustainable economy, was set in motion, be it by ancestral practices of reuse, be it through reinvention and innovation practices that were beginning to consolidate under the cooperative. This is the second lesson that I want to stress from this experience: the circular economy and the reuse as a principal is fundamental to think innovation and sustainability.

In 1987 the first pieces, produced at the hands of Cidália, Henriqueta and Ester were sold. Cidália was the most experienced and her greater dexterity in the craftsmanship of the items was mirrored in the higher profitability of those garments: *at a fair, Cidália managed to earn 80 contos<sup>5</sup> and we just made 5 contos each*<sup>6</sup>. This observation merits reflection. From the very beginning, the 'Capuchinhas' cooperative has always sought to generate financial income so that these women could fulfil their objective of being independent in two ways: breaking with tradition of men's tutelage and have the material means to decide to live in their land. This achievement that acts both in a change of subjectivities and in the materiality of life was and is paramount to them. The 'Capuchinhas' team is teaching us that, in our monetary system, is needed to combine social transformation with economic allowance.

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<sup>4</sup> Burel is a cloth made with wool which by mechanic processes becomes impermeable and is used in the cold highlands in Portugal. The necessary ancestral knowledge to produce burel is still alive and in use in the country.

<sup>5</sup> The equivalent to 400 €

<sup>6</sup> The equivalent to 25 €.

However, their relationship with monetary market did not subject them completely. They have been refusing to become simple instruments of the market. They have developed a strategic relationship with the market, which is tempered by their choices which include conserving their way of life and production and their personal independence.

A year later, another young woman, Helena Félix, joined the 'Capuchinhas' group. Working for the 'Capuchinhas' cooperative was, for Helena, the exercise of a craft profession, to have her own money and to be able to decide on its use.

*Being a part of the 'Capuchinhas' meant learning many things such as: researching the ancestral knowledges of our villages, valuing my own work and also how to serve the clientele and the sale of the items made by myself and my companions.*

The next steps required improvement in some techniques and the introduction of weaving. For this purpose, they recruited the older woman of the village who knew how to weave and prepare the looms. Maria Augusta Carneiro, now 91 years old and the oldest person in the village. She states, to this day, that in these things of working with looms, time is priceless. Maria Augusta made this conviction of hers explicit when she illustrates her thought with the anecdote of the quilt and the scarf.

*I wanted a new handkerchief to use during festivities and to go to Mass. It was then that I decided to make a quilt to sell. I went to Lamego to the fair and saw how much the handkerchief cost. I decided to sell the quilt for the value of the handkerchief because that was what I wanted. I got 100 escudos and I spent 100 escudos. Even today I have the handkerchief and I use it often.*

I have been arguing that sustainability, in its different facets, has to incorporate another economy of time and desire (Cunha, 2015; 2017). First of all, because within the production of the immanent and transcendent conditions of life in its various forms, time cannot be thought in the same way as that which is the industrial manufacturing - endless repetitive - or the digital - binary - rationales. To encrust the economy, meaning, embed live in the economy (Polanyi, 1957) the repetition of tasks and responsibilities implies a constant adjusting of needs and this requires another notion of time and creativity. For this to happen, time must be understood in a non-instrumental and non-linear way. Time produces time, as life produces life. Time cannot be calculated or transformed into a price without restricting its substantive value in the production of life. This economy of time implies another economy of desire in which sobriety and frugal consumption are key elements. What is desired must be in balance with the time necessary for this production of life. Time is not money and money cannot be time. This is the fourth lesson to keep in mind. The vertigo of accumulation, which represents the contemporary forms of capitalism, is an economy of the desire where a few to accumulate most of all must be dispossessed. This means taking away their time to live, their time to be, their time to think, to rejoice, to mourn. Time becomes a cannibal of itself, generating the massive reproduction of social injustices. Thus, the restraint of desire is not its renunciation, nor a defence of neo-liberal impoverishment or austerity. On the contrary, it is the recognition that innovation is not in the programmed and forced obsolescence of things, ideas and people. The political economy of this sobriety is the based in epistemologies of care and non-waste. What Maria Augusta did in exchanging her quilt for her coin-mediated scarf is an unequivocal statement that what is most important is not prices, or market value, but the use value of things. And, this value is always contextual and constructed in a relation in which time and desire cannot be reduced to mere commodities nor removed from its historicity and matrix where life happens (Cunha, 2015).



In the late 90's Maria Augusta decided to retire: she left the cooperative, dismantled her loom and did not weave again. Nonetheless, all her wisdom and techniques were passed on to Engrácia who is now the weaver of the cooperative. For these different generations of women weaving wool or linen has different meanings. New practical functions were engendered for these fabrics as well as new aesthetics. However, the knowledges that flowed between generations and that preserve the relations with the land, with culture, with the technologies of production are still present in this art. Repetition with innovation is what characterizes this work. At this point we can see that it is not a work of reproduction, in the sense of infinite duplication. Another feature that is important to note is that the domestic and the public spheres are not dichotomies but continuities. What is learned at home, for the life of the home is relevant outside the home. In other words, competencies are mobilized whenever it is necessary and in the various spaces-times of life. And this is another form of thinking abundance and resource richness present in every human community.

Ofélia Cabral, Ester 's mother, also knew how to weave and was proud of what her daughter was achieving in the village. In 1994 she was invited to join the group to strengthen it.

*I did not even think twice and I accepted, but I had to talk to my husband. He agreed as long as I did not go to the cooperative in the summer because there was a lot of work with the hay and he needed my help.*

She chose to keep her wages at home. She knew that if she put it in the bank, in the joint account, her husband would remain taking care of the money and deciding what to do. She was happy to be able to determine how to spend it and used it primarily to renovate and improve her home conditions. One of her greatest pleasures was not having to account or negotiate with her husband on how to spend every cent. Till this day that self-revolutionary time makes her smile and gives her a new image of herself: an autonomous and free woman. Ophelia's work at the cooperative did not immediately free her from any of the other chores that were her responsibility. She woke up early to leave lunch ready and take care of the animals. On returning from the cooperative she knew that she still had to face farm and household work at the end of the day. By the summer she knew that the harshness of collecting and treating the hay increased and the pressure to stop her going to the 'Capuchinhas', too. Ophelia knew that there was a machine called an assembler <sup>7</sup> that could get her out of this task so she could weave with the co-op's companions.

*My husband did not want to spend money to buy the assembler, but I asked my son how much it cost and where it could be bought. My husband thought I was not able to pay it, but I collected money and bought it.*

Ophelia has no doubts when she says that *the most beautiful time of my life was the time I was in the 'Capuchinhas'.* *It's beautiful to make our money.* A health problem made her move away from the looms and work in the 'Capuchinhas', but the seed and sowing of fellowship, autonomy, freedom, and the power to decide, changed forever the way she sees herself and the world. The experience of Ofélia shows that women do accumulate layers of work every day. Having a job, a payed job is not enough to liberate them of many other responsibilities. A more harmonious and balance share of tasks and work in family and within community needs much deep changes. The steps performed by Ofélia were relevant but shed light to how much solidarity economy must be concerned with gender equality in all spheres of life.

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<sup>7</sup> A mechanical device that joins the hay reducing, by far, the manual labor required for this operation.

It was only in the year 2000 that the ‘Capuchinhas’ formalized their cooperative which had direct implications for the calculation of the market value of its products. They had to include VAT <sup>8</sup>, which at the time corresponded to the value of their income, and had to begin to charge the cost of labor - hours of work. This was perceived as a constraint and an injustice because the application of the tax does not distinguish between the origin of the products nor the mode of production. *This means that it is the industrial model that prevails to the detriment of these other economies as our cooperative.* At the legislative plan, the restrictions are several and continuous and the lesson to be learned is that the norms and the juridical apparatus must recognize and protect these forms of economic production and commercialization. This will contribute to strength social fabric to introduce innovation and just redistribution based in local initiatives socially relevant.

Engrácia is the only one who knits and shares with Isabel the weaving. Henriqueta and Ester are responsible for sewing. The items are made by order of request and each then decides the rhythm and number of pieces they intend to execute considering their personal goals in terms of income and the commercial objectives of the cooperative. In addition, there are more tasks to be performed in the cooperative and shared among all of them. Each day of the week, each one is responsible for administrative tasks such as: mail service, reading emails, order processing, accounting support, and customer service. Fridays are the days spent in mutual aide to carry out all that remains to be done and which has not been assigned to anyone in particular. Participation in fairs or other events goes through the same process of accounting for working hours and everything is recorded in an individual ledger. Each one controls her time and her work and the basis of this management model is interpersonal trust: *We do not have to check of each ledger’s.* Trust and commitment are two main characteristics of this economic dynamics in producing what is perceived as decent work and just labour relationships.

I understand the ‘Capuchinhas’ cooperative as an economy that does not have for objective the accumulation of capital and in which the control of the modes and times of production is decided by the group. There are several characteristics that I can identify in this cooperative that lead me to affirm that we are facing an economy in which life and emancipation are at the centre and co-labour is its main direction. The first is that their products are not sold on consignment because this would mean relinquishing control of part of the production-marketing circuit and transferring decisions about their work, resources, and time spent to others. They prefer that the whole production chain be thought of as a whole on which they decide with autonomy. The second is the relationship they establish with the designers who work with them. They know they need to mobilize such skills outside their group, but they are uncompromising in how they manage that relationship. There is no individual ownership of production and they refuse to not have the last word about what they produce. Like current cooperative stylist Paula Caria claims, *they are the owners of their project.*

Conscious of this, their cooperative is a controlled growth economy. Better yet, this option indicates that they differentiate economic growth and wellness, well-being, happiness, and freedom. They produce what they have the capacity to produce and work collectively to secure their salary and the existence of their production unit. Therefore, they manage their schedules and their dedication to the ‘Capuchinhas’ according to what they want to continue to do in the community and in the family. For them, their emancipation passes by renouncing *slavery for money*, as they say. For them, their jobs must mean living well and with the abundance of what is essential to them: dignity, respect and time to enjoy everything they can for themselves, the family and the community.

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<sup>8</sup> Value-added tax.

The 'Capuchinhas' cooperative is a life story where many lives can fit. The language of gender equality still makes them smile when talking about the social and learning impact of their project in the region. Very little concerned with the concept of gender they continue to give their own content to their way of being equal and different from the men with whom they deal in their lives. They know that, in their own terms, the cooperative of the 'Capuchinhas' represents, for many women in the Serra do Montemuro, and beyond, a concrete face of emancipation without having to renounce to either territory, family and their happiness.

## Final Notes

I am aware that many issues remain to be thematised and need a deeper analysis. Nevertheless, some lessons emerge from such experience of the cooperative of 'Capuchinhas' and have heuristic value and relevance to a bottom-up implementation of the SDG and agenda 2030 in Europe. In these final notes, I want to systematizing those that I am convinced are the most important, both as potentialities and as constraints:

- Be aware of the inner economic plurality of European societies and what richness it represents to think the present and prepare the future;
- Women are always social actors, creative subjectivities, and are ready to a full recognition of their historical and economical role in a fair and sustainable society;
- There is no social and solidarity economy as a sustainable future without cognitive justice and gender justice. Narratives of women are critical;
- Social transformation needs to be anchored in the expectations and desires of the populations and account a strong cultural traction;
- Based upon ancestral and new knowledge the circular economy is fundamental to think sustainability I all its facets;
- In our present monetary system social and solidarity economies need to combine social transformation with economic allowance;
- Sustainability and the rise of decent work for all and gender equality have to incorporate another economy of time and desire;
- Having a job, a payed job is not enough to liberate women of many other responsibilities. Gender equality needs much deeper and continuous changes;
- Social and solidarity economy must be concerned with concrete gender equality in all spheres of life respecting cultural imagination of what is emancipation;
- Trust and commitment are two main characteristics of decent work and just labour relationships;
- The norms and the national and international juridical apparatus must recognize and clearly protect forms of economic production and commercialization which are not based in accumulation and profit;
- Finally, it is clear that one of the constraints is the possibility to scale-up of these practices and experiences.

However, I want to state the proliferation of local embed initiatives like this one may constitute another way to think scaling-up social and solidarity economies and gives us the lesson that the *Big*, in our difficult times, is probably fate to unsuccess.

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