

CREATING AN ONLINE SSE COMMUNITY IN ASIA

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THE ASEC NETWORK

The Asian Solidarity Economy Council (ASEC) was established in 2011 at the Asia Solidarity Economy Forum in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia (ASEF 2011). It is a regional network of social solidarity economy (SSE) grassroots organisations which met yearly to share experiences and learn from each other. Also undertaking case study writing, policy research and advocacy for development policies to recognise the role of SSE partners and their contributions in addressing poverty, inequality and injustice in society. ASEC is part of a global movement as the Asian continental partner in RIPESS an inter-continental movement to promote social solidarity economy. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has provided good opportunities to enhance the visibility of SSE. RIPESS has observer status in the UN Taskforce on SSE.

Although technology and online facilities were available before however during the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions to movements domestically and internationally has made us to become more innovative and open to new platforms for conversations, discussions and deliberations.

THE ASEC ONLINE COMMUNITY

ASEC too realised the challenges and started online conversations among partners on April 4, 2020 and April 11, 2020 to enquire about how they were coping with the pandemic and its impact upon grassroots communities. We received participation from fifteen Asian countries and about 30 people participated. We then realised that this online platform would be enhanced to create a forum for sharing and learning. It was within our reach as we had members who had the skill to develop the online platform using existing programs like Zoom, You Tube, Facebook & WhatsApp.

ASEC established the ASEC SSE Academy. This is an online academy where there is a sharing of SSE principles and practices. We undertook a weekly SSE sharing session in the month of May 2020 and 212 people from 34 countries registered. We found that 195 were from 16 Asian countries and the remaining 17 are from 16 non-Asian countries who had signed up to participate in the Academy. Each week we spent about two and half hours together. An average of 55 people participate in each of the sessions with the largest being 74 and the lowest being 37. This is very encouraging as people from 34 different countries joined in the zoom discussions. We do have a following in our Facebook account but we really do not have their details. We now have a You Tube account which already has 13 recordings from our talks and conversations at the ASEC SSE Academy platform.

CONTENT OF THE SSE ACADEMY

The online academy sessions were divided into two parts. The first two are related to SSE Principles and the subsequent sessions were on SSE practices. The SSE principles were developed by Dr Ben Quinines and they are five dimensions of the SSE framework. These are:

- The tiple bottom line of profits (economy), people (social) and planet (environment)

- Responsible Governance
- Edifying Values

The SSE organisation hold in balance all these five dimensions. It is community owned, driven by ethical values and has governance structures which are collectively owned and accountable. These are based on democratic participation and multi stakeholder engagement. SSE organisations could be partly grant driven but there is now a clear shift to fostering a strong business and sustainable element so as to ensure that the initiative is able to operate on a sustainable basis.

We also linked the SSE agenda with the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of leaving no one behind in addressing poverty and inequality. Peace and partnership are also very important focus for community and nation building.

LESSONS FROM THE SSE ACADEMY

Over the period of five sessions fourteen (14) case studies were presented. They are projects undertaken in six Asian countries (from South Asia – India and Sri Lanka and from ASEAN- Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia).

Table 1 illustrates some key features such as location, target group, innovation and lessons learned. We can draw a number of lessons from these 14 case studies.

Lesson One: SSE Stories

These 14 stories seek to illustrate the five dimensions of SSE. We are building a narrative and the stories show a lot of potential. We will need to further develop specific indicators of measurement but the reality is that at the grassroots there are many innovations. We need to capture these stories and give greater visibility to them.

Lesson Two: Local economy

We can note that at the local grassroots levels there is a striving local economy of producers and consumers. This is often not captured as the focus of economic growth and reports are about big businesses. The grassroots local economy which is the live wire in the local community of producers and consumers is not adequately captured or documented. This could be local agricultural producers, animal husbandry for poultry, meat or milk as well as handicraft and tailoring. Eco-tourism and local retail business as well. The saying goes that there is “wealth at the bottom of the pyramid” and therefore grassroots are survivors in the local economy. There are stories of local markets as well as direct producers and consumers meet face to face or online through logistic companies providing transport.

Lesson Three: Micro and informal

All the case studies are showing that these SSE community business are micro at the level of an individual family but as they network and cooperate they see the potential in the collective action as in the case of collecting the milk at the village level and grouping them among other village with the volume to establish their factories for milk processing and the competing with others in the market place.

Informal sector is seen as they are not in the formal and organised economy. What is significant is that these people are hard working in a self-employed position without handouts but seeking a way out through their collective enterprise ventures. SSE is creating the space and clearly is a vehicle for the empowerment of the informal and micro business into the formal economy

Lesson Four: Women & vulnerable target groups

Women are the SSE prime movers at the grassroots. Whether at the urban or rural it is the women who are playing a key role at both the leadership and workers levels. They are instrumental in fostering local grassroots economy. For SSE movements, women are key as well as SSE developments is a definite vehicle for women empowerment and inclusion in the markets

Lesson Five. Local community governance and collective action

SSE movements can clearly illustrate the collective, community partnerships and ownership of local development initiatives as well as business enterprises.

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