Guidelines for non-extractive SSE research

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Introduction

There is a growing interest from researchers towards Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) and its actors. Undergraduate and postgraduate students, scholars, independent researchers, as well as those working in think-tanks and other organisations want to work with SSE practitioners and organizations for their research and projects.

This interest provides opportunities to create and disseminate knowledge on the field of SSE. However, the growing demands for research can create a pressure, or research overload on SSE actors. Additionally, it's possible that research demands do not align with the research subjects' needs in the long term. More importantly, some research can become a process of extracting knowledge from SSE actors into the researching party.

Some SSE actors report that they are not adequately informed about the objectives, funding, research findings and outcomes of the projects in which they are involved. There are also examples where the information obtained from the research is not shared at all with the research subjects. It cannot be expected that this type of research will be of benefit to SSE actors or to the field of SSE in general.

Given that background, the aim of this guidelines is to develop an ethical code for the relationship between researchers and practitioners, as the creators of the knowledge. To this end, a set of principles have been developed to enable collaborative engagement. It is hoped that this work can serve as a Charter to help SSE units and practitioners to engage with the researchers. The ultimate aim of this guidelines is to contribute to the establishment of a true knowledge commons in SSE.

The guidelines consists of two main parts: first part is the key considerations to be taken into account for non-extractive research and the second part are guiding principles to be followed in this process.

Glossary

Knowledge commons	The knowledge commons as activity concerns not just using the resource in creative ways but of producing new knowledges from them and making these available through open access (UNESCO, 2021). As an idea, the knowledge commons specifies that the knowledge is available to all for their benefit, for them to use when they confront material and intangible challenges in making the futures they imagine.
Non-extractive research	Non-extractive research is a term that reflects this idea of studying groups and communities without obtaining information from them one-sidedly for the benefit of the researcher, but to arrive at scientific results that are beneficial to all, and to recognise all counterparts as creators of knowledge, to create a true knowledge commons.Non-extractive research describes research method and philosophy that recognises, respects, consults and integrates community of practice (Igwe, Madichie, and Rugara, 2022). Non-extractivist research is in itself a way of doing research that gives back to the communities it focuses on. This process involves respect and healthy communication, as well as the basic ethical guidelines that social research requires.

1. Key Considerations

As the visibility and political significance of SSE increases, the demand for research into the field grows. However, this interest also brings with it a problem in the form of extractive research that does not empower the organisations and people on whom it is based. To realize a non-extractive research, researchers should embrace ethical practices and a community-based approach (Igwe, Madichie, and Rugara, 2022).

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) aims to move participants from being passive sources of information to becoming an active part of the research process. The basic requirements of this process are to involve, consult, collaborate, inform, empower and practice. Accordingly, non-extractive research is expected to follow the steps outlined below.

1.1. Define Research Relationships

Non-extractive research should be based on mutual trust and exchange between researchers and practitioners (ARC, 2023). To build and maintain this trust, a sense of equality is needed. SSE organisations tend to be less institutionalised than their private sector counterparts. Many of the people working in them may not be familiar with academic research. It's important that researchers don't put themselves in a position of superiority over the people they work with. In other words, there is no place for a hierarchical relationship.

Involving participants means allowing them to be part of the research process from the design stage to the completion of the work. They should be "full participant in shaping the research question, analysing the data and developing effective knowledge dissemination strategies" (DCU, 2019).

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Involving participants in the project makes it easier for them to express their concerns and aspirations, and ensures that the context is consistently understood. Therefore, researchers should consult and collaborate with participants in the conduct of their studies. In this process, researchers should allow practitioners to choose the way they want to be involved in the study according to their preferences and talents, as long as it meets the requirements of scientific research. This involvement can take the form of determining the scope and topic of the study, providing insight into the findings, advising on which method would lead to more accurate results, and networking with other SSE actors with whom they may be familiar.

There are several ways in which participants can contribute to the study, in addition to sharing their experience and knowledge. Before the research begins, they can be informed about how the project will be funded and whether they approve of the funder, and give their opinion. As first-hand practitioners of SSE, participants can also be involved in the development of interview guides. In this way, the interview questions used in the research can be more comprehensive for non-academics in the field and lead to better results. If practitioners are significantly involved in the conduct and documentation of the study, they should be able to be included as co-authors in the final paper.

In short, all research relationships should conform to the values and principles of SSE.
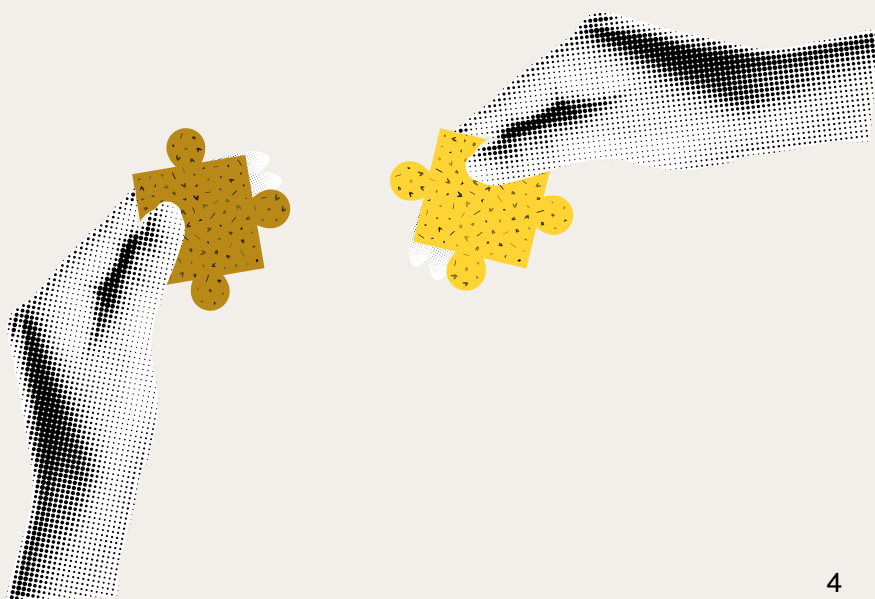
1.2.   Consider Language and Communication

The language used in academic circles may seem inaccessible to those who are not familiar with the terminology. If the materials used in the research are to be accessible to participants who are not part of the academic community, it is important to use language and terminology that is both understandable and accessible (ARC, 2023).

The format of communication between researchers and participants should also be considered. Written documents are usually the first method that comes to mind for research proposals and results, but videos, webinars and even workshops are equally valid ways of accessing this type of information.

It should be noted that the availability of the communication method is as important as its practicality. The chosen means of communication must be easily accessible to all those involved in the research. A reliable internet connection may be an issue for participants, especially those living in rural areas, and the ability to work with a computer (or telephone or equivalent device) may vary for all participants. These issues should either be resolved before the actual research takes place, or at least form a basis for setting realistic expectations for communication; i.e.

1.3.   Decide on Financial Compensation

As working professionals, SSE actors participating in studies may have to spend money directly or lose some income by participating in the research process (ROCO, n.d.). In order not to burden them, participants may be reimbursed for their expenses. To avoid potential confusion or disagreement, it is better for participants and researchers to agree on what expenses can be reimbursed and to what extent. Similarly, participants can be financially compensated for their time, and researchers should inform participants in advance about the details (amount, method of payment, etc.).

As SSE organisations are not primarily concerned with financial gain, researchers should also avoid using financial compensation as the main incentive for potential participants to take part in research during recruitment. Instead, the focus should be on the benefits the research can bring to the SSE organisations, the communities they work with and the field of alternative economy research.

1.4.   Rethink Research Process

The research process itself can be extractive in the sense that it treats the human participants in the study as passive sources from which information can (or should) be extracted by researchers. To make research non-extractive, the process should be community-based and both culturally and socially inclusive of the SSE actors involved in the process. The key components of research in terms of how they can be distanced from extractive elements are discussed below:
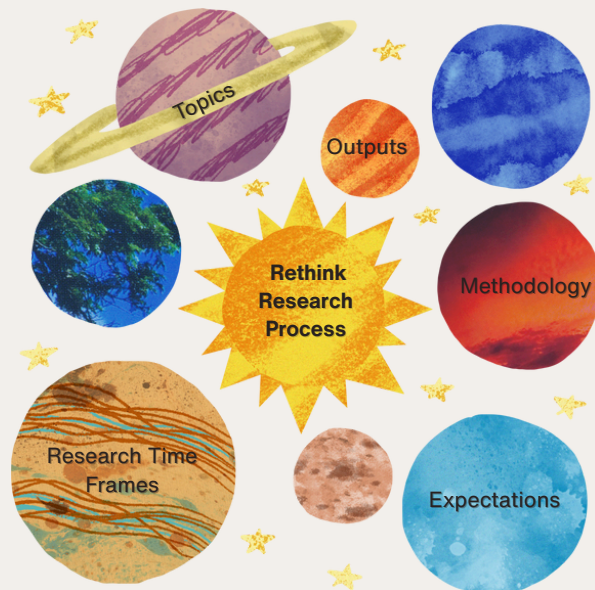
1.4.1. Topics

The topics of research may depend on the interests of the researchers or the practical concerns of their funders. When studying SSE, it's important to remember that although SSE organisations carry out economic activities to achieve their goals, they also serve the collective and/or general interest. Therefore, a comprehensive study of SSE organisations should include all aspects of their mission, be it social, economic and/or environmental.

When defining the topic, researchers should recognise the specificities of the field and prioritise the issues faced by SSE organisations. Trying to address the problems they face can make research participants much more willing to be an active part of the process. Consulting with those involved would be beneficial when doing this.

1.4.2. Methodology

The methodology of a non-extractive research should include a detailed review of literature and previous work to gain a better understanding of the context of SSE actors. In reviewing the existing body of research on SSE, it may be fruitful to look critically at whether community involvement has been reflected in the research methods or whether it has been superficial.

The use of a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative approaches to integrate both the social and economic sides of SSE would be desirable to improve the quality of the research. Quantitative methods, in particular, could provide an opportunity to further involve participants in the research process and allow researchers to learn more from them.

Informing participants about the methods and literature related to the research allows them both to become more effective participants and to adapt what they learn from the research to their organisations - potentially making the research mutually beneficial even before it is completed.

1.4.3. Outputs

As their involvement would be crucial to the study, the people and organisations involved, both participants and researchers, have an ethical right to see and benefit from the research findings. All parties who were involved in the research process should be acknowledged for their efforts, with their contributions identified as clearly as possible. Any ideas or opinions that appear in the research outputs/findings must be correctly attributed to the people who expressed them, whether they are researchers or practitioners.

The results should be freely available to research participants without a paywall (Chitondo & Dombroski, 2019). Participants may need copies of the resulting work in a format that is easily accessible to them (for example, in hard copy if they do not have reliable access to computers/the internet). Researchers should make copies available to everyone involved in the research.

Researchers should feel accountable to participants. The opinions of participants are as important to research as the peer review of other academics and researchers. Participants should be able and encouraged to give their criticism to ensure the objectivity of the research.

1.4.4. Research Time Frames

The schedules of researchers, participants and organisations can vary greatly. SSE organisations are often small to medium sized structures and there may not be many people involved in each organisation. Therefore, participation in a research project could prove to be a significant strain on their schedules.

With this in mind, researchers should be provided with a clear schedule before the research begins, and they should stick to it. This schedule should detail when the project will start and how long it will take, how many people will be interviewed, how long the interviews are expected to take, and when participants can expect to read the final work. If necessary, researchers should be prepared to make changes to the schedule in the interests of the participants, and should inform them of any changes in advance.

1.4.5. Expectations

All participants should be clear about their expectations and try to find common ground. Ultimately, both researchers and participants want the study to succeed, but unless everyone has realistic expectations of the outcome, this is unlikely to happen. It would be helpful to have a detailed document setting out what is expected of researchers, participants, project partners, etc. throughout the duration of the project.

It would be helpful to organise scheduled meetings where everyone can get a sense of how the project is progressing. This would allow participants to voice their concerns and give feedback before the research is completed. These meetings would also allow the researchers to make changes quickly if something unexpected happens.

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2. Guiding Principles

SSE organisations play an informative role in their communities and value transparency in the way they work and in the knowledge they generate. Many SSE actors are willing to work with researchers to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and to raise awareness of their work. However, this willingness can also make them vulnerable to exploitation if an appropriate framework and set of principles are not put in place. It is important to ensure that research conducted in collaboration with SSE actors is non-extractive and mutually beneficial to all parties.

These principles should be seen as open to change depending on the context and type of research being conducted. Rather than a strict set of rules, it would be more accurate to see them as an adaptable and flexible framework that will evolve as we deepen our understanding of non-extractive research. The main function of the Principles is to protect participants by acting as a code of ethics. Ultimately, the focus is on compatibility with the principles and values of SSE.

Here are principles that can be of help to researchers in the pursuit of this example of non-extractive research:

2.1. Have clear and ethically responsible intentions

Starting from the planning phase, researchers should carefully consider the implications of their research, especially the underlying reasons for conducting it. The purpose should be to disseminate information regarding SSE first and foremost. Researchers should have a well-defined reason for conducting research and should seek to make relevant and reciprocal contributions to organization they received aid in their study. Researchers should also consider whether they may have any underlying biases in the process.

Self-reflection
- What is the purpose of the research?
- Are the results expected to contribute to the field of SSE?
- Do the results have the potential to have a real impact beyond peer or academic recognition?
- After considering the above questions and exchanging ideas and opinions with participants, should the research priorities be re-evaluated?

2.2. Approach participants with sensitivity and regard

Prior to conducting research, the planning process should include a respectful and comprehensive study of existing information about the target communities or SSE actors. Before interviewing participating organisations, researchers should conduct a detailed search for primary secondary sources on the research topic in order to avoid unnecessary and repetitive questions.

Researchers should show a high degree of respect for the values, privacy, well-being and customs of participants. As the research would not be possible without them, participants should be treated as valuable contributors to the study.

Self-reflection
- Has information identifying the organisation been obtained from sources such as their website or brochures?
- Has any previous research been carried out on the organisations and people involved by other means?
- Has a detailed literature review been made, including previous research on the organisation?
- Have the participants been consulted on the appropriateness of the interview questions?
- Do researchers respect participants' time and work load?

2.3. Obtain negotiated and informed consent

Researchers should be prepared and willing to disclose relevant information about the research process. They should also ensure that participants know what the research involves, how it will be conducted and how the results will be used before the research even begins. Researchers should be transparent and accountable about the context of the research, such as which organization they represent, which information they want to obtain, how long the research is expected to take, who they want to interview, what is the source of funding, what are the expected outcomes and before all else, the purpose of the study. Researchers should also be transparent about where the research will be published and how they benefit from it.

Participants should be allowed to withheld their consent at any point of the research.

Self-reflection
- Have participants been properly and adequately informed about the purpose of the study, i.e. the source of funding, the project leader and team, the methodology of the study, how the results will be used, whether the results will be open access or shared with participants?
- Are participants aware of their rights as research subjects?
- Is there any pressure on participants to participate and/or continue with the research?
- Can participants withdraw from the study at any time?
- Is there a basis for holding researchers accountable for their actions?
- Do participants know in advance if and how they will be financially compensated for their efforts?

2.4.   Practice equal and democratic communication

When studying SSE, taking account of SSE values has the potential to produce more productive results. Democratic participation is one such value that can help researchers and SSE actors ensure that the results have a tangible, positive impact on the field of research and any similar organisations that may learn from the research.

Researchers should allow participants to have a voice in communication without unilaterally extracting knowledge. This means that participants should be treated as active participants in the research process rather than passive sources of information. This can be achieved through open, equal and democratic communication with participants. Researchers should validate concerns and questions as they would any other member of the research team. In short, researchers should be open to the idea of co-creating knowledge with the participants.

Participants' feedback should influence how the rest of the research is conducted, as long as it does not compromise the objectivity and purpose of the study. This method not only gives them a sense of ownership of the research findings, but also gives researchers the chance to learn from the participants' experiences and gain a new perspective, rather than relying solely on numerical data. It may also make it easier to consult participants on issues about which the researchers do not have first-hand information.

Self-reflection
- ·Do researchers allow their position to damage democratic communication?
- ·Are participants kept out of the conversation by researchers using academic jargon?
- ·Are participants given the opportunity to provide insight into the research methodology?
- ·Do researchers take participants seriously even when they do not explain themselves in the correct terminology?
- Are researchers willing to engage with the nature of SSE and overcome any underlying biases they may have?

2.5. Make conclusions available and practical

Before the results are published, the final version of the study should be shared with all participants so they can give their comments and feedback. All participants should be properly acknowledged and credited for their contributions, and if any participant wants to remain anonymous, researchers should respect their will.

Research findings and outcomes should always be freely available to participants, and the conclusions should ideally include some practical application, guidance, warning or support for the organisation. Not all SSE organisations may have the resources to analyse the results data to find out what the findings say about them and how they might proceed from there. The findings should be communicated to participants in a language they can understand. At this step, researchers should be open to explaining and/or interpreting the results.

Participants should have an opportunity to communicate with researchers after the results are published.

Self-reflection
- Are all participants properly given credit for any specific contributions they have made?
- Are findings shared with the participants before it is formally published?
- Can participants freely access the final version of the paper?
- Can participants interpret the results? Is it possible to make it more comprehensible to them?
- Is there a way to allow participants to better utilize the findings about their organization and/or field of work?

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