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Social and Solidarity Economy, Territorial Sovereignty, and Development in Africa: A Multi-Scalar Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a renewed analytical framework to examine the role of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) in African development by articulating it with territorial governance and territorial sovereignty within a geopolitical and multi-scalar perspective. Moving beyond approaches that treat economic, institutional, or social dimensions separately, the paper proposes an integrative conceptual model that highlights the indirect, mediated, and conditional relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty.

The analysis identifies four key mechanisms through which SSE operates: the activation of endogenous capacities, the structuring of territorial value chains, the transformation of governance modes, and the strengthening of territorial resilience. It shows that the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on institutional quality, policy coherence, and power configurations, within a global context marked by structural asymmetries and unequal integration into global value chains.

While SSE emerges as a potential lever for territorially embedded and inclusive development, its transformative capacity remains constrained by structural dependencies, power relations, and internal contradictions. By integrating a geopolitical reading, the article contributes to rethinking development trajectories in Africa and provides a conceptual framework for future empirical research.

Keywords: Social and solidarity economy (SSE); territorial sovereignty; Africa; territorial governance; global value chains; territorial resilience; development

Highlights

- Develops a multi-scalar geopolitical framework linking SSE and territorial sovereignty
- Demonstrates that SSE operates through indirect, mediated, and conditional mechanisms
- Identifies four drivers : endogenous capacities, territorial value chains, governance, and resilience
- Shows how structural asymmetries in global value chains constrain SSE outcomes in Africa
- Proposes a conceptual model to guide future empirical research on territorial sovereignty

General Introduction

Over the past decades, transformations in the global economy have profoundly reshaped development trajectories, giving rise to increasing asymmetries between territories and reinforcing structural dependencies. While globalization has undeniably facilitated economic integration, it has also produced uneven outcomes, often limiting the ability of peripheral economies to effectively shape and control their own development paths (Stiglitz, 2002; Rodrik, 2011). At the same time, the persistence of hierarchical structures within the world economy continues to constrain the positioning of developing regions, particularly in Africa (Wallerstein, 2004).

Within this evolving context, the concept of sovereignty has undergone a significant transformation. Traditionally associated with the authority of the nation-state, sovereignty is now increasingly interpreted at the territorial level, referring to the capacity of local systems to mobilize resources, coordinate actors, and shape development trajectories within a globalized environment. This shift aligns with territorial and institutional perspectives, which emphasize that development outcomes are deeply embedded in local configurations of actors, institutions, and resources (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Pike et al., 2017).

Moreover, contemporary analyses point to the growing need to reconcile economic integration with territorial regulatory capacities. Globalization creates constraints, but it also calls for more strategic forms of territorial insertion into the global economy—forms that seek to balance openness with local control (Rodrik, 2011). In African contexts, this challenge is particularly pronounced. Structural transformation depends not only on macroeconomic reforms, but also on the ability of territories to mobilize endogenous resources and to organize processes of local value creation (African Development Bank, 2022). In this sense, territorial sovereignty can be understood as a capacity for strategic integration within a global system marked by persistent asymmetries.

Within this broader framework, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has progressively gained attention. Initially perceived as a marginal or compensatory sector, SSE is now increasingly recognized as a potential driver of inclusive and territorially embedded development. It encompasses a wide range of organizational forms that combine economic activities with social objectives and alternative governance structures (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Laville, 2016). Institutional analyses further underline that SSE constitutes a dynamic and evolving field, shaped by diverse national and regional contexts (OECD, 2023).

In African economies, SSE occupies a particularly important place due to its deep embeddedness in informal systems and social networks. These dynamics reflect long-standing forms of collective organization and economic coordination rooted in local contexts (Hart, 1973; Meagher, 2010). From this perspective, SSE should not be viewed as peripheral, but rather as a structural component of many local economies.

Despite this growing recognition, several limitations persist in the existing literature. First, analyses of SSE often remain fragmented, focusing separately on economic, social, or institutional dimensions without adequately integrating power relations and issues of sovereignty. Second, dominant analytical frameworks are largely derived from European experiences and may not fully capture African specificities, particularly those related to institutional hybridity and the strong interconnections between formal and informal systems. Third, the geopolitical dimension of SSE remains insufficiently explored, especially with regard to its potential role in reshaping relations between territories and the global economy.

In response to these gaps, this article proposes a renewed analytical framework that articulates SSE, territorial governance, and sovereignty within a geopolitical and multi-scalar perspective. It seeks to address the following research question:

To what extent can the social and solidarity economy contribute to strengthening territorial sovereignty in African contexts characterized by structural asymmetries and unequal power relations?

From a theoretical standpoint, this article makes three main contributions. First, it bridges distinct fields of research by integrating SSE into a broader analytical framework combining institutional economics, territorial development, and political economy. Second, it introduces a geopolitical perspective into the analysis of SSE, emphasizing its role in reshaping power relations across different scales. Third, it proposes an integrative conceptual model that highlights the indirect, mediated, and conditional relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty.

Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual and analytical approach based on a critical review of the literature. Its objective is not to empirically test causal relationships, but rather to provide a coherent framework that can guide future empirical research.

From a theoretical standpoint, this article makes three main contributions to the literature. First, it integrates the social and solidarity economy (SSE) into a broader analytical framework that combines institutional economics, territorial development, and political economy. Second, it introduces a multi-scalar and geopolitical perspective,

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emphasizing how SSE interacts with global value chains and power structures. Third, it proposes an integrative conceptual model that highlights the indirect, mediated, and conditional relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty in African contexts.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the theoretical foundations. Section 2 develops a geopolitical reading of SSE dynamics. Section 3 analyzes territorial mechanisms and empirical dynamics. Section 4 introduces the conceptual model and theoretical propositions. Section 5 examines conditions, limits, and tensions. The final section concludes by discussing implications and avenues for future research.

Theoretical Foundations of SSE and Territorial Sovereignty

This section establishes the theoretical foundations of the article by clarifying the key concepts of the social and solidarity economy (SSE), territorial sovereignty, and governance. It aims to situate SSE within broader debates on development, institutional dynamics, and territorial embeddedness, thereby providing a coherent analytical basis for the geopolitical and empirical analyses that follow.

The Social and Solidarity Economy: An Alternative Mode of Economic Organization

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) refers to a heterogeneous set of organizational forms—including cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, and social enterprises—that combine economic activities with social objectives and alternative governance structures. Unlike conventional capitalist firms, SSE organizations are characterized by the primacy of social goals, participatory governance, and a limited distribution of profits (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Laville, 2016).

From an institutional perspective, SSE can be understood as a specific configuration of economic organization that shapes incentives and coordination mechanisms in ways that differ from both market-based and state-driven systems. As emphasized by institutional economics, economic performance depends not only on resource endowments but also on the rules governing interactions among actors (North, 1990). As Douglass North (1990, p. 3) emphasizes, “institutions are the rules of the game in a society,” shaping the way interactions among actors are structured. In this sense, SSE contributes to redefining these rules by fostering cooperation, reciprocity, and collective decision-making processes.

Recent analyses further suggest that SSE constitutes an evolving and context-dependent field, shaped by diverse institutional environments and socio-economic conditions (OECD, 2023). This diversity is particularly visible in African contexts, where SSE is deeply embedded in informal economies and social networks. Early work on informality already highlighted that economic activities in many African cities rely heavily on non-formalized systems of exchange and production (Hart, 1973). More recent studies confirm that these informal and semi-formal networks continue to play a central role in structuring economic interactions (Meagher, 2010).

From this perspective, SSE should not be viewed as a marginal or residual sector. Rather, it appears as a structural component of local economies. Its capacity to mobilize endogenous resources and to articulate economic and social objectives makes it a potentially significant driver of territorially embedded development.

Territorial Sovereignty: A Renewed Approach to Development

The concept of territorial sovereignty has undergone a profound transformation in the context of globalization. Traditionally associated with the authority of the nation-state, sovereignty is now increasingly understood as the capacity of territories to shape their own development trajectories within a global system characterized by interdependence and asymmetry (Rodrik, 2011). In this article, territorial sovereignty is understood as the capacity of a territory to mobilize its endogenous resources, coordinate actors, and strategically position itself within global economic structures. Here, the term “territory” refers to a spatially defined unit of analysis—which may include a local community, municipality, district, region, or province—characterized by a certain degree of institutional capacity, resource endowment, and actor coordination. This understanding is consistent with territorial development approaches that emphasize the role of localized institutional and productive configurations in shaping development trajectories (Storper, 1997; Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2017).

The relevant scale of analysis may vary depending on the research question and empirical context, but the analytical framework proposed in this article is designed to remain applicable across multiple territorial levels. Territorial sovereignty therefore emphasizes not only autonomy, but also the capacity to negotiate interdependencies within a system marked by asymmetrical power relations.

Critical analyses of globalization emphasize that economic integration produces uneven outcomes, often reinforcing structural inequalities between core and peripheral regions (Stiglitz, 2002). At the same time, world-systems theory highlights the persistence of hierarchical structures that constrain the positioning of peripheral economies within global dynamics (Wallerstein, 2004). Taken together, these perspectives underline the need to rethink sovereignty beyond its purely legal dimension and to consider it as an effective capacity for economic and institutional control.

This reconfiguration must also be situated within broader debates on the limits of globalization, which emphasize the necessity of reconciling economic integration with territorial regulatory capacities. In this regard, development trajectories increasingly depend on the ability of territories to mobilize local resources, coordinate actors, and design context-specific strategies (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

In African contexts, these issues take on particular significance. Structural transformation depends not only on macroeconomic policies but also on the capacity of territories to generate local value and to strengthen productive systems. Recent analyses confirm the growing importance of territorial approaches to development, highlighting the role of localized production systems and regional dynamics (African Development Bank, 2022).

In this light, territorial sovereignty can be understood as a strategic capacity for integration into the global economy—one that enables territories to negotiate their position within a system marked by persistent asymmetries.

SSE, Social Capital, and Territorial Governance

The effectiveness of SSE in shaping territorial dynamics is closely linked to the role of social capital and governance structures. Social capital—understood as the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation—constitutes a key resource for collective action (Putnam, 1993).

However, social capital is not evenly distributed, and it may also contribute to the reproduction of existing inequalities. As emphasized by Bourdieu (1986), access to social networks and resources is shaped by power relations, which can limit the inclusiveness of collective initiatives.

At the same time, transformations in governance models have led to a shift from hierarchical forms of coordination toward more network-based and participatory approaches. Territorial governance increasingly involves multiple actors interacting through complex arrangements rather than relying solely on top-down state control (Rhodes, 1996; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Bevir, 2013).

In African contexts, governance dynamics are often characterized by institutional hybridity, where formal institutions coexist with informal practices. These configurations play a central role in economic coordination and social regulation (Meagher, 2010). Within this framework, SSE can act as a mediator, linking different actors and facilitating coordination across institutional boundaries.

Toward a Geopolitical Reading of SSE

Beyond its economic and social dimensions, SSE must also be analyzed within a broader geopolitical perspective. The integration of African economies into global value chains is characterized by asymmetrical power relations, with high value-added activities largely concentrated in core economies (Gereffi et al., 2005).

This unequal distribution of value reflects deeper structural dynamics of the global economy, in which peripheral regions are often confined to low value-added segments (Kaplinsky, 2000). In this context, the challenge is not only to participate in global markets but also to capture a larger share of value.

SSE may contribute to partially reconfiguring these dynamics by promoting local value creation, strengthening territorial production systems, and fostering alternative forms of economic organization. However, its impact remains conditioned by structural constraints and global dependencies (World Bank, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023).

From this perspective, SSE can be understood as a potential lever for reshaping relations between territories and the global economy, contributing to a bottom-up reconfiguration of development processes.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this section shows that SSE constitutes a distinct mode of economic organization, deeply rooted in social relations, institutional configurations, and territorial dynamics. By linking SSE to the concepts of sovereignty and governance, it provides a solid theoretical framework for understanding its potential role in reshaping development trajectories. This foundation makes it possible to move, in the next section, toward an analysis of how these dynamics unfold within global geopolitical structures.

Geopolitical Dynamics of SSE in a Globalized Economy

This section examines the geopolitical context within which the social and solidarity economy (SSE) operates. It aims to situate SSE within the broader transformations of the global economy, with particular attention to structural asymmetries, power relations, and the multi-scalar organization of economic and political processes. By doing so, it highlights both the constraints that shape SSE and the opportunities it may offer for territorial reconfiguration.

Globalization, Structural Asymmetries, and the Reconfiguration of Power

The contemporary phase of globalization has profoundly transformed the organization of production and the distribution of economic power. While it has facilitated market integration and the expansion of global value chains, it has also reinforced structural asymmetries between territories. As several critical analyses have shown, the benefits of globalization are unevenly distributed, often favoring core economies while constraining the development prospects of peripheral regions (Stiglitz, 2002; Rodrik, 2011).

From a geopolitical perspective, these dynamics are closely linked to the persistence of hierarchical structures within the world economy. World-systems analysis highlights that global economic relations are organized around differentiated zones—core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral—characterized by unequal access to resources, technologies, and decision-making power (Wallerstein, 2004). This structural configuration continues to limit the capacity of many African economies to upgrade within global value chains and to capture higher value-added activities.

At the same time, globalization has contributed to a diffusion of power beyond the nation-state. Economic and political regulation increasingly involves a plurality of actors, including international organizations, multinational corporations, and transnational networks (Strange, 1996). This evolution challenges traditional conceptions of sovereignty and calls for a renewed understanding of the role of territories within global dynamics.

Reconsidering Center–Periphery Relations: Toward a Territorial Perspective

Revisiting center–periphery relations requires moving beyond purely macroeconomic approaches to incorporate territorial and institutional dimensions. While classical dependency theories emphasize structural constraints imposed by the global system, more recent perspectives underline the importance of local actors and institutional configurations in shaping development trajectories (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

In this regard, territories should not be seen as passive recipients of global forces. Rather, they can be understood as active spaces of coordination, capable of mobilizing resources and structuring economic activities. Territorial development approaches emphasize the role of localized production systems, collective learning processes, and institutional coordination in driving development (Storper, 1997; Pike et al., 2017).

In African contexts, this territorial perspective is particularly relevant. Development dynamics are often shaped by interactions between formal institutions and informal practices, leading to hybrid configurations that influence both economic organization and governance (Meagher, 2010). These dynamics suggest that structural constraints, while significant, are not absolute and may be partially reconfigured through endogenous processes.

The Role of SSE in Global Value Chains

The integration of African economies into global value chains constitutes a central dimension of contemporary development dynamics. These chains are characterized by fragmentation and specialization, with value creation and capture unevenly distributed across different stages of production (Gereffi et al., 2005).

Within this context, SSE can contribute to reconfiguring value chains by promoting local transformation, strengthening producer organizations, and fostering shorter and more localized supply circuits. These mechanisms may enhance the capacity of territories to retain value and reduce dependence on external actors.

However, the potential of SSE remains constrained by structural factors. As highlighted in the literature on global value chains, upgrading processes are often limited by barriers related to technology, market access, and asymmetrical power relations (Kaplinsky, 2000). Empirical analyses further confirm that many African economies continue to face difficulties in accessing higher value-added segments of global production systems (World Bank, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023).

In this light, SSE can be seen as a mechanism for incremental transformation rather than a complete alternative to existing global economic structures.

Multi-Scalar Governance and the Transformation of Regulation Mechanisms

The transformation of global economic structures has been accompanied by a reconfiguration of governance mechanisms. Regulation is no longer confined to the national level but increasingly operates across multiple scales, involving local, national, regional, and global actors.

This multi-scalar governance framework is characterized by complex interactions between public institutions, private actors, and civil society organizations. Network-based governance approaches emphasize coordination, negotiation, and partnership as central mechanisms for managing these interactions (Rhodes, 1996; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Bevir, 2013).

Within this context, SSE can play an important mediating role. Its strong territorial embeddedness enables it to connect local dynamics with broader regulatory frameworks, facilitating coordination across different levels of governance.

Toward a Multi-Scalar Reading of SSE Dynamics

A comprehensive understanding of SSE requires a multi-scalar perspective that takes into account interactions across different levels of analysis. At the local level, SSE contributes to production, cooperation, and social inclusion. At the national level, it interacts with public policies and regulatory frameworks. At the continental level, it is influenced by regional integration processes, particularly those driven by the African Union. At the global level, it is embedded in international trade and global value chains.

Recent analyses emphasize that Africa occupies a central position in current geoeconomic reconfigurations, especially in debates concerning the resilience and diversification of global value chains (UNCTAD, 2023; World Bank, 2020). Within this evolving context, SSE operates in a complex multi-level environment that both constrains and enables its development.

This multi-scalar perspective highlights the dual nature of SSE. On the one hand, it creates opportunities for local empowerment and territorial development. On the other hand, its potential remains shaped—and in some cases limited—by broader structural dynamics.

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Conclusion

Overall, this section shows that SSE is embedded in a complex geopolitical environment characterized by structural asymmetries and multi-level governance dynamics. While globalization imposes significant constraints, it also creates spaces for territorial reconfiguration. These insights provide the analytical foundation for examining, in the next section, the concrete mechanisms through which SSE shapes territorial dynamics.

Territorial Dynamics of the Social and Solidarity Economy in Africa: Mechanisms, Effects, and Structural Constraints

Building on the theoretical and geopolitical perspectives developed in the previous sections, this section focuses on the concrete mechanisms through which the social and solidarity economy (SSE) shapes territorial dynamics in African contexts. It examines how SSE contributes to the activation of local resources, the structuring of value chains, the transformation of governance arrangements, and the strengthening of resilience, while also highlighting the structural constraints that limit its impact.

Activation of Endogenous Capacities and Territorial Anchoring

One of the central contributions of SSE lies in its capacity to activate endogenous resources and to anchor economic activities within local contexts. Unlike externally driven development models, SSE initiatives rely on locally embedded knowledge, social networks, and collective action mechanisms. These elements make it possible to mobilize resources that are often overlooked or underutilized in conventional economic frameworks.

This dynamic can be interpreted through the lens of the capability approach, which defines development as the expansion of individuals' and communities' real freedoms to act (Sen, 1999). This dynamic can be interpreted through the lens of the capability approach, which defines development as the expansion of individuals' and communities' real freedoms to act. As Amartya Sen (1999, p. 36) states, development can be understood as "the expansion of real freedoms that people enjoy". From this perspective, SSE contributes to transforming latent resources into effective capabilities, thereby strengthening local autonomy and adaptive capacity.

Territorial anchoring plays a key role in this process. Development is not simply a matter of resource availability, but also of the capacity to coordinate actors and to structure collective action within specific spatial contexts (Pike et al., 2017). In African settings, where informal institutions and social networks are particularly significant, this anchoring is often reinforced by existing community structures and collective practices (Meagher, 2010).

However, the activation of endogenous capacities is not automatic. It depends on institutional quality, access to resources, and the inclusiveness of governance arrangements. In contexts marked by inequality and institutional fragmentation, these mechanisms may remain uneven or limited in their effects.

Structuring Territorial Value Chains: Between Local Opportunities and Global Constraints

A second key mechanism through which SSE operates concerns the structuring of territorial value chains. By promoting local transformation, collective organization, and shorter supply circuits, SSE initiatives can enhance the capacity of territories to retain value locally and to reduce dependence on external actors.

This dynamic must be understood in relation to the broader organization of global value chains, which are characterized by fragmentation and an unequal distribution of value across different stages of production (Gereffi et al., 2005). In such systems, peripheral economies are often confined to low value-added segments, which limits their capacity for economic upgrading.

Within this context, SSE may contribute to partially reconfiguring these dynamics by strengthening the bargaining power of local producers and facilitating access to markets.

Beyond the mobilization of local resources, SSE also contributes to territorial sovereignty through the construction of collective coordination mechanisms that reinforce local bargaining capacities and territorial control over value creation processes. By organizing producers, facilitating knowledge sharing, and promoting collective governance arrangements, SSE initiatives may reduce dependency on external intermediaries and strengthen the territorial anchoring of economic activities (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Laville, 2016). In several African contexts, cooperatives and community-based organizations have contributed to improving market access, stabilizing local incomes, and reinforcing localized production systems, particularly in agriculture and informal economic sectors (FAO, 2021; ILO, 2022). These dynamics illustrate how SSE can enhance the strategic capacity of territories to negotiate their integration into broader economic systems while preserving local socio-economic priorities.

However, structural constraints remain significant. As highlighted by Kaplinsky (2000), upgrading processes are often limited by technological barriers, market access constraints, and asymmetrical power relations.

Empirical analyses further confirm that African economies continue to face substantial challenges in accessing higher value-added segments of global production systems (World Bank, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023). In this light, SSE appears more as a mechanism for incremental transformation than as a means of fundamentally overcoming structural dependencies embedded in the global economy.

Additional empirical observations from African contexts further illustrate these dynamics. For instance, agricultural cooperatives and local producer organizations in several African countries have contributed to strengthening local value chains by promoting collective marketing strategies and enhancing access to markets. Similarly, initiatives in the social and solidarity economy sector have supported income diversification and improved resilience among vulnerable populations, particularly in rural areas (FAO, 2021; ILO, 2022).

These examples, although not exhaustive, illustrate how SSE can operate as a practical mechanism for reinforcing territorial dynamics, while remaining embedded within broader structural constraints.

Transformation of Territorial Governance and Power Relations

SSE also plays an important role in transforming governance structures at the territorial level. By promoting participatory decision-making processes, collective ownership, and horizontal coordination mechanisms, SSE initiatives contribute to redefining the relationships between actors.

These transformations are consistent with broader shifts in governance models, which increasingly emphasize network-based coordination rather than hierarchical state control (Rhodes, 1996; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Bevir, 2013). In this perspective, governance is understood as a process of interaction among multiple actors, involving negotiation, cooperation, and shared decision-making.

However, these processes are not neutral. As emphasized by Bourdieu (1986), power relations shape access to resources and influence within social structures. In many African contexts, governance arrangements are characterized by institutional hybridity, where formal and informal systems coexist and interact (Meagher, 2010).

As a result, SSE initiatives may both challenge and reproduce existing power structures. While they can enhance participation and inclusion, they may also be subject to capture by dominant actors, thereby limiting their transformative potential.

Territorial Resilience: Adaptation and Structural Limits

The concept of resilience provides an additional perspective for analyzing the role of SSE in territorial dynamics. Resilience refers to the capacity of systems to absorb shocks, adapt to changing conditions, and maintain functionality over time (Boschma, 2015).

SSE contributes to strengthening territorial resilience by diversifying economic activities, reinforcing social networks, and enhancing adaptive capacities. These characteristics are particularly important in contexts marked by economic volatility and social vulnerability, where formal support systems may be limited.

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Recent analyses highlight the role of SSE in responding to crises—whether economic, social, or environmental—by providing flexible and locally adapted solutions (OECD, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2022). These dynamics illustrate the capacity of SSE to sustain economic activity and support vulnerable populations.

However, resilience should not be interpreted as an inherently positive outcome. In some cases, it may reflect the capacity of territories to cope with adverse conditions without addressing the structural causes of vulnerability. In this sense, resilience may coexist with persistent inequalities and limited prospects for structural transformation.

Critical Assessment: Limits and African Specificities

Despite its potential, SSE faces a number of limitations that must be critically examined. First, much of the existing literature is based on European experiences and does not fully capture the specificities of African contexts, particularly those related to informality and institutional hybridity (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017).

Second, many analyses tend to focus on micro-level dynamics without sufficiently considering macro-level structures and global constraints. This limits the capacity to understand how SSE interacts with broader economic and political systems.

Third, the role of informality remains underexplored in many studies, despite its central importance in African economies (Charmes, 2012; Meagher, 2010). Informal practices are not marginal; rather, they constitute a fundamental component of economic organization.

Finally, the geopolitical dimension of SSE is still insufficiently developed. A better understanding of how SSE interacts with global power structures is essential for assessing its potential to contribute to territorial sovereignty.

Contribution of the Article

In light of these limitations, this article makes several contributions. First, it integrates SSE into a broader analytical framework that explicitly incorporates territorial dynamics, governance mechanisms, and global economic structures.

Second, it adopts a multi-scalar perspective that connects local processes with national and global dynamics. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which SSE can contribute to territorial development.

Third, it introduces a geopolitical dimension into the analysis of SSE, highlighting its potential role in reshaping relations between territories and the global economy.

Conclusion

Overall, this section shows that SSE operates through multiple and interrelated mechanisms that shape territorial dynamics. While these mechanisms contribute to strengthening local capacities, coordination, and resilience, their effectiveness remains conditioned by structural constraints and power relations. This observation naturally leads to the formulation of an integrative conceptual model, which is developed in the following section.

Conceptual Model and Theoretical Propositions: SSE, Territorial Governance, and Sovereignty

This section builds on the analytical insights developed in the previous sections in order to formalize an integrative conceptual model. Its objective is to synthesize the identified mechanisms and to articulate them within a coherent framework linking the social and solidarity economy (SSE), territorial governance, and sovereignty. In doing so, it seeks to provide a structured analytical tool for understanding the complex and mediated relationships that shape development trajectories in African contexts.

Positioning and Theoretical Foundations of the Model

The analyses developed so far highlight a central limitation in the existing literature. Although SSE is widely recognized as a driver of inclusion and territorially embedded development, its effects are often examined in a fragmented way, either from an economic perspective or from an institutional standpoint, without explicitly integrating power relations and issues of sovereignty.

This fragmentation reflects a broader analytical difficulty in capturing, within a unified framework, the interactions between territorial dynamics, institutional mechanisms, and global economic constraints. Yet, development trajectories are precisely shaped by the interplay of these dimensions, as emphasized by institutional and political economy approaches (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

In response to these limitations, this section proposes an integrative conceptual model that articulates SSE, territorial governance, and sovereignty within a systemic and multi-scalar perspective. The aim is not to empirically test causal relationships, but rather to formalize an analytical framework capable of explaining the mechanisms through which SSE may contribute to strengthening territorial sovereignty in African contexts.

General Architecture of the Conceptual Model

The conceptual model is based on a central hypothesis: the impact of SSE on territorial sovereignty is indirect, mediated, and conditional. SSE does not directly determine development outcomes; instead, it operates through a set of interdependent mechanisms that structure territorial dynamics.

Within this framework, SSE constitutes the independent variable, while territorial sovereignty is the dependent variable. Between these two poles, several mediating mechanisms intervene, including the activation of endogenous capacities, the structuring of territorial value chains, the transformation of governance arrangements, and the strengthening of territorial resilience.

In addition, the relationships between these variables are influenced by a set of moderating factors, such as institutional quality, public policies, power relations, and the degree of integration into the global economy. This configuration reflects a non-linear and context-dependent logic, consistent with contemporary approaches to development analysis (Rodrik, 2011).

Mechanisms of Action and Analytical Relationships

The functioning of the model rests on four main mechanisms that structure the relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty. Each of these mechanisms captures a specific dimension of the way SSE interacts with territorial dynamics.

SSE and the Activation of Endogenous Capacities

The first mechanism concerns the activation of endogenous capacities. SSE acts as a catalyst for mobilizing local resources and transforming them into effective capabilities for action. This process involves the strengthening of social capital, the activation of latent resources, and the development of local competencies.

This interpretation is consistent with the capability approach, which defines development as the expansion of real freedoms (Sen, 1999), as well as with territorial development approaches emphasizing the importance of localized resources and collective learning processes (Pike et al., 2017).

SSE and the Structuring of Territorial Value Chains

The second mechanism relates to the structuring of territorial value chains. SSE contributes to reshaping value creation processes by promoting local transformation, collective organization, and shorter supply circuits.

These dynamics enhance the capacity of territories to retain value locally, in contrast with global value chains characterized by an unequal distribution of value across different segments (Gereffi et al., 2005). However, this

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process remains constrained by structural asymmetries and power relations embedded in the global economy (Kaplinsky, 2000; Stiglitz, 2002).

As a result, SSE tends to generate a form of relative autonomy rather than full economic independence.

SSE and the Transformation of Territorial Governance

The third mechanism concerns the transformation of territorial governance. SSE promotes participatory decision-making processes, horizontal coordination, and collective ownership, thereby contributing to redefining the modes of interaction between actors.

These transformations are consistent with broader shifts toward network-based governance models (Rhodes, 1996; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Bevir, 2013). In this context, governance is no longer limited to hierarchical state control, but instead involves complex interactions among multiple actors.

However, these processes remain shaped by power relations. As emphasized by Bourdieu (1986), access to resources and influence is unevenly distributed, which may limit the inclusiveness of governance arrangements.

SSE and the Strengthening of Territorial Resilience

The fourth mechanism relates to the strengthening of territorial resilience. SSE contributes to enhancing the capacity of territories to absorb shocks and adapt to changing conditions by diversifying economic activities and reinforcing social networks.

This mechanism is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by vulnerability and uncertainty (Boschma, 2015; OECD, 2021). SSE initiatives have demonstrated their ability to support local economies and maintain social cohesion in times of crisis.

However, resilience should not be interpreted as an inherently positive outcome. In some cases, it may reflect the capacity of territories to cope with adverse conditions without addressing underlying structural constraints.

Theoretical Propositions

On the basis of these mechanisms, several theoretical propositions can be formulated.

- **First**, the intensity of SSE is positively associated with the activation of endogenous capacities (Sen, 1999).
- **Second,** SSE contributes to the structuring of territorial value chains, although this effect remains conditioned by global economic structures (Gereffi et al., 2005; Kaplinsky, 2000).
- **Third,** SSE transforms territorial governance modes, with outcomes depending on local power configurations (Rhodes, 1996; Bourdieu, 1986).
- **Fourth,** SSE strengthens territorial resilience by enhancing adaptive capacities (Boschma, 2015).
- **Finally,** the impact of SSE on territorial sovereignty is indirect and conditional, depending on institutional quality and global integration (Rodrik, 2011; UNCTAD, 2023).

Discussion And Scope Of The Model

The proposed model contributes to overcoming fragmented approaches by integrating the economic, institutional, and geopolitical dimensions of development. It highlights the importance of considering multi-scalar dynamics and the interactions between local and global processes.

At the same time, the model remains conceptual and context-dependent. Its empirical validation requires comparative analyses across different territorial settings. Furthermore, the influence of power relations and institutional configurations must be carefully taken into account, as they shape the outcomes of SSE initiatives (Bateman, 2010).

Theoretical Contribution

The main contribution of this section lies in the articulation of SSE, territorial governance, and sovereignty within a unified analytical framework. By integrating a geopolitical perspective and emphasizing the role of mediating mechanisms, the model provides a solid basis for future empirical research and contributes to advancing theoretical debates on development in African contexts.

Conclusion

Overall, this section demonstrates that the relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty is neither direct nor linear, but rather mediated through a set of interdependent mechanisms operating across multiple scales. By structuring these relationships within a coherent conceptual model, it provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding the complexity of development processes. This framework sets the stage for a critical examination, in the following section, of the conditions, limits, and implications of SSE in African contexts.

Conditions, Limits, and Implications of the Social and Solidarity Economy as a Lever of Territorial Sovereignty in Africa

This section offers a critical perspective on the role of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) by examining the conditions under which it can effectively contribute to territorial sovereignty, as well as the structural limits and tensions that shape its impact. While previous sections have highlighted the mechanisms through which SSE operates, it is equally important to assess the constraints that affect its transformative potential.

Conditions for Success: Mediating Mechanisms under Constraints

The capacity of SSE to contribute to territorial sovereignty depends on a set of enabling conditions that influence the effectiveness of the mediating mechanisms identified in the conceptual model. These conditions are not purely technical; rather, they are deeply embedded in institutional configurations, policy environments, and social dynamics.

Institutional Quality and Regulatory Capacity

A first decisive condition concerns the quality of institutions and their capacity to regulate and support SSE dynamics. Institutional approaches emphasize that economic performance and development outcomes depend heavily on the rules governing interactions among actors (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

In contexts characterized by institutional fragility or capture, SSE initiatives may struggle to scale up and to generate sustainable impacts. By contrast, inclusive and effective institutions can facilitate coordination, reduce uncertainty, and create an enabling environment for SSE development.

Policy Coherence and Ecosystem Structuring

The effectiveness of SSE also depends on the coherence of public policies and the structuring of supportive ecosystems. SSE cannot evolve in isolation; it requires a broader institutional environment that ensures access to finance, capacity building, and regulatory support.

At the continental level, development strategies increasingly highlight the importance of integrating local productive systems into regional frameworks, particularly within the agenda promoted by the African Union (African Union, 2021). These initiatives underscore the need to align SSE development with both national and regional policy objectives.

Social Capital and Coordination Capacity

Social capital plays a central role in enabling SSE initiatives. Trust, networks, and shared norms facilitate cooperation and collective action, which are essential for the functioning of SSE organizations (Putnam, 1993).

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However, as emphasized by Bourdieu (1986), social capital is unevenly distributed and may reinforce existing inequalities. Consequently, the effectiveness of SSE depends not only on the presence of networks but also on their inclusiveness and accessibility.

Multi-Scalar Articulation and Strategic Integration

Finally, the success of SSE depends on its ability to articulate different scales of action. SSE operates at the intersection of local dynamics and global constraints, requiring a capacity for strategic integration into broader economic systems.

This multi-scalar articulation is essential for transforming local initiatives into structurally significant processes capable of influencing territorial sovereignty (Rodrik, 2011; UNCTAD, 2023).

Structural Limits: Economic and Institutional Constraints

Despite its potential, SSE faces important structural limitations that restrict its capacity to generate transformative effects.

A Potentially Instrumentalized SSE

One limitation concerns the risk of instrumentalization. SSE may be used as a policy tool to compensate for market or state failures without addressing underlying structural issues. In such cases, it may contribute to maintaining existing inequalities rather than transforming them.

Constraints of the Global Political Economy

SSE operates within a global economic system characterized by asymmetrical power relations. Analyses of global value chains show that value creation and capture are unevenly distributed across different segments (Gereffi et al., 2005; Kaplinsky, 2000).

These structural constraints limit the capacity of SSE to generate significant changes in the positioning of territories within the global economy.

Local Power Relations

At the territorial level, SSE is embedded in existing power structures. Access to resources, decision-making processes, and economic opportunities is shaped by unequal power relations (Bourdieu, 1986; Meagher, 2010).

These asymmetries may give rise to capture dynamics, thereby limiting the inclusiveness and effectiveness of SSE initiatives.

Scaling-Up Challenges

Another major limitation concerns the difficulty of scaling up SSE initiatives. While local anchoring constitutes a key strength, it may also restrict the capacity of these initiatives to expand and to integrate into broader economic systems.

Structural Contradictions of SSE

Beyond its limitations, SSE is characterized by internal contradictions that reflect its hybrid nature.

Inclusion vs. Reproduction of Inequalities

While SSE aims to promote inclusion, it may also reproduce existing inequalities due to unequal access to resources, networks, and opportunities.

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Autonomy vs. Dependence

SSE seeks to strengthen local autonomy, yet it often remains dependent on external funding, markets, and institutional support.

Formalization vs. Loss of Solidarity Logic

Processes of formalization, while necessary for scaling and institutional recognition, may lead to a weakening of the original solidarity principles that underpin SSE.

Geopolitical Tensions: Between Local Anchoring and Global Constraints

SSE operates within a set of tensions reflecting its position at the intersection of local and global dynamics.

Territorial Anchoring vs. Global Integration

SSE is deeply rooted in local contexts but must simultaneously engage with global markets and standards, creating tensions between embeddedness and competitiveness.

Sovereignty vs. Interdependence

Territorial sovereignty does not imply isolation. SSE operates within a system of interdependence, where local autonomy must be negotiated within global constraints (Rodrik, 2011).

Relocalization vs. Structural Dependence

Efforts to relocalize economic activities may be limited by structural dependencies embedded in global production systems (UNCTAD, 2023).

AfCFTA and Multi-Scalar Regional Integration

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), operational since 2021, introduces a new level of multi-scalar governance that may have significant implications for the development of SSE in Africa (African Union, 2021; AfCFTA Secretariat, 2021). On the one hand, AfCFTA could expand market opportunities for SSE producers by reducing trade barriers and facilitating regional value chains. On the other hand, increased competition from larger producers across African countries may disadvantage smaller SSE organizations lacking the resources and capacities to compete effectively.

The extent to which AfCFTA implementation incorporates SSE-sensitive provisions—such as preferential treatment for cooperatives or support for localized value chains—will be a determining factor in shaping the relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty. This dimension remains insufficiently explored in the existing literature and deserves further investigation.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

This analysis contributes to extending existing frameworks by integrating SSE into a broader perspective that incorporates power relations, territorial dynamics, and global economic structures.

Implications for Public Policies

Public policies should recognize SSE as a strategic component of development rather than a marginal sector. This requires coordinated interventions across multiple levels of governance and alignment with broader development strategies.

In this regard, international analyses emphasize the importance of policy frameworks aimed at inclusive and transformative development (UNRISD, 2016).

Policymakers should also recognize that SSE organizations in African contexts often operate at the intersection of formal and informal systems (Hart, 1973; Charmes, 2012; Meagher, 2010). Rather than imposing rigid formalization requirements that may exclude informal actors, public policies should adopt progressive and differentiated approaches.

This could include simplified registration procedures for informal cooperatives, access to microcredit without collateral requirements, and legal recognition of customary forms of collective organization. The challenge lies in creating an enabling environment that supports transitions from informality to formalization without undermining the solidarity principles and adaptive flexibility that often explain the effectiveness of SSE in African contexts (ILO, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Implications for Territorial Actors

For local actors, SSE represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Its effectiveness depends on their capacity to coordinate, mobilize resources, and strategically position themselves within multi-scalar dynamics.

Conclusion

Overall, this section highlights that SSE cannot be considered a universal or self-sufficient solution to development challenges. Its effectiveness depends on complex interactions between institutional, economic, and political factors. These insights provide a critical foundation for synthesizing the main findings of the article in the general conclusion.

General Conclusion

This article set out to develop a renewed analytical framework for understanding the role of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) in African development trajectories, by articulating it with the concepts of territorial governance and sovereignty within a geopolitical and multi-scalar perspective.

The analysis has shown that SSE cannot be reduced to a marginal or compensatory sector. Rather, it constitutes a specific mode of economic organization capable of mobilizing endogenous resources, structuring territorial dynamics, and fostering collective action. At the same time, its impact on development cannot be understood through linear or deterministic approaches. Instead, it must be analyzed within a systemic framework that integrates economic, institutional, and political dimensions.

The conceptual model proposed in this article demonstrates that the relationship between SSE and territorial sovereignty is indirect, mediated, and conditional. SSE operates through four main mechanisms—activation of endogenous capacities, structuring of territorial value chains, transformation of governance modes, and strengthening of territorial resilience—whose effectiveness depends on institutional quality, policy coherence, and power configurations (North, 1990; Sen, 1999; Gereffi et al., 2005; Rodrik, 2011).

This perspective makes it possible to overcome fragmented approaches by integrating SSE into a broader analytical framework that explicitly takes into account power relations and global economic structures. In this regard, the article contributes to introducing a geopolitical reading of SSE, emphasizing its potential role in reshaping relations between territories and the global economy.

At the same time, the analysis highlights the structural constraints and internal tensions that limit the transformative capacity of SSE. These include institutional fragility, unequal access to resources, and structural dependencies linked to global value chains (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Kaplinsky, 2000; UNCTAD, 2023). Moreover, SSE is characterized by internal contradictions, particularly between inclusion and inequality, autonomy and dependence, and formalization and the preservation of solidarity principles.

From a theoretical standpoint, this article contributes to advancing the literature by integrating SSE into a multi-scalar and geopolitical framework that connects local dynamics with global structures. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that SSE should be recognized as a strategic component of development, requiring coherent public policies and coordinated interventions across multiple levels of governance (UNRISD, 2016).

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this framework also provides a solid basis for future empirical investigations that could further assess the concrete impact of SSE on territorial sovereignty across different African contexts.

Future empirical research should adopt mixed-method approaches to test the conceptual model proposed in this article. Quantitative analyses could assess the relationship between SSE density and indicators of territorial sovereignty—such as local value capture, producers' bargaining power, and income diversification—across different African countries using existing datasets from the ILO, FAO, and World Bank (ILO, 2022; FAO, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Comparative qualitative case studies could help identify the combinations of institutional quality, policy coherence, and power configurations that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of SSE initiatives (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Participatory action research could also involve SSE actors in the co-design and evaluation of territorial development interventions. Methodological triangulation will be essential for capturing the complexity of the relationships identified within this framework.

Finally, this article opens several avenues for future research. Empirical studies are needed to test the proposed conceptual model in different African contexts, to assess the conditions under which SSE can effectively contribute to territorial sovereignty, and to better understand the interactions between local initiatives and global economic structures.

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