

ABSTRACT

Title: *Post-extractive Transitions from the Bottom-Up: The contribution of the Solidarity Economy Ecosystem (SEE) to social innovation in Ecuador*

This thesis explores the role of the Solidarity Economy Ecosystem (SEE) in Ecuador as a pathway for sustainable post-extractive transitions, conceptualized as a form of social innovation. It examines how the Solidarity Economy Ecosystem (SEE) contributes to sustainable post-extractive transitions by fostering self-organization, collective resource management, and social innovation, while identifying the structural factors that constrain its transformative capacity. Therefore, it focuses on two critical attributes: degree of alterity and social-institutional embedding of the SEE.

To achieve its goal, the research employs a qualitative methodology, including:

- **Case Studies:** Three embedded cases within the SEE are analyzed to illustrate its dynamics and challenges.
- **Document Analysis:** Examination of policy documents, including Ecuador's 2008 Constitution, which institutionalized solidarity economy principles.
- **Surveys and In-depth interviews (Fieldwork):** Engagement with SEE actors, such as cooperatives, community organizations, and policymakers, to understand their perspectives, practices, and challenges.
- **Theoretical Framework:** Grounded in concepts of social innovation, social interfaces and ecosystems (Van Wijk et al.; Long; Ostrom), alterity (Jonas and Fuller), alternative and diverse economies (Gibson & Graham, Coraggio) and post-extractive transitions (Gudynas, Acosta, Svampa & Riofrancos).

Key Findings:

1. Challenges Related to Alterity:

- The SEE exhibits partial alterity, positioned between "alternative additional" and "alternative substitute" forms of solidarity economy. While it offers meaningful alternatives to extractivist structures, its transformative depth is constrained by economic dependency on extractive practices.
- Participation in SEE organizations is often necessity-driven rather than conviction-based, limiting the intentional construction of systemic alternatives.
- Neoextractivist development models fail to provide adequate livelihoods, pushing populations toward solidarity economy practices without fully embracing their transformative logic.
- Despite generating employment and income—e.g., cooperative participation involving 9.2 million Ecuadorians—the SEE struggles to scale its activities due to limited articulation and lack of policy support.

2. Challenges Related to Social-Institutional Embedding:

- Structural limitations include fragmented representation, duplicated efforts, persistent gender and ethnicity gaps, weak actor coordination, incoherent public policies, institutional fragility, and budget cuts.
- The SEE functions as a fragile yet real pathway toward post-extractive transitions, requiring simultaneous strengthening of both alterity and social-institutional embedding.

3. The Role of Public Policy:

- The inclusion of Solidarity Economy in Ecuador's 2008 Constitution marked a significant milestone but has not translated into sustained top-down or bottom-up social innovation processes.

- Weak connections between community-level SEE actors and public policy have worsened, particularly after the neoliberal turn following Rafael Correa's government.

Conclusion:

The SEE represents an interactive space where diverse actors converge, negotiating power and resources to foster alternative socioeconomic systems. However, its transformative capacity remains limited by structural contradictions and insufficient institutional support. Strengthening the SEE requires addressing economic viability tensions, enhancing coordination among actors, and aligning public policies with the sector's needs. While the SEE holds potential as a viable pathway for post-extractive transitions, its success depends on overcoming challenges related to alterity and embedding, ensuring systemic transformation rather than sectoral substitution.

This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of solidarity economy as a social innovation and highlights the importance of collective action, institutional support, and gradual transitions towards post-extractivist transitions.