



Social and solidarity economy insights for the circular economy: Limited-profit and sufficiency

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ABSTRACT

Given the call for societal transformations to foster sustainability transitions, we consider in what way the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) contributes to a more circular society. We build on recent critiques of mainstream Circular Economy (CE) and engage with the notion of sufficiency, with respect to defining limits for and by society, in considering social and ecological imperatives over profit motives. The main aim of our article is to analyse the implications of the normative principles and values of the SSE for ensuring an integral circularity approach. For that purpose, we conducted qualitative research involving 26 in-depth interviews with 31 key informants from 20 initiatives in two case studies: SSE networks in the Basque Country and Western Switzerland. We reveal how one of the guiding principles of the SSE – limited-profit – is a clear basis for a distinctive circularity approach towards sufficiency. Our main contribution is to demonstrate how SSE principles foster specific characteristics of the Sufficiency-driven Business Model (SBM) and shape an integral social circularity approach. This perspective on circularity results in entities that embrace the following measures: seeking to transform the economic system as a whole; prioritizing the implementation of the more transformative Rs (Refuse, Rethink, Reduce); recognizing limited profit as a core distinctive principle; minimizing overall consumption; raising conscious consumer engagement (satisfying needs over wants); fostering stakeholders' cooperation and collaboration; and maximizing social and ecological aims over economic profitability.

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1. Introduction

Following the promise of fulfilling sustainability objectives, interest in the Circular Economy (CE) has grown exponentially in the last decade, but so have academia's criticisms of mainstream CE orientations (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Gaps persist regarding the CE's contribution to broader sustainability dimensions, sustainable

development and sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Millar et al., 2019; Schröder et al., 2019a). Many authors have pointed out a missing social dimension in the CE (Murray et al., 2017; Korhonen et al., 2018), and have recently explored elements to address this lacuna (Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020; Mies and Gold, 2021; Walker et al., 2021). Other authors have argued that links to human needs and social transformation concerns were present in earlier depictions of the CE but were neglected in later developments (Clube and Tennant, 2020, 2023). Furthermore, many of these 'CE limits' connect with longstanding debates in ecological economics, such as the feasibility of indefinite economic growth and the need to consider economic activities as subordinate to biophysical dynamics. Some CE discourses

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are well aligned with economic growth, while others are closer to steady state, post-growth or degrowth postulates (Bauwens, 2021; Kirchherr, 2022).

In parallel, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has emerged as an economic model encompassing research and practices that recognize the ‘social embeddedness’ of economic activity: all activities are subordinate to institutional arrangements and social imperatives (Laville and García-Jané, 2009; Coraggio, 2011). The SSE, as an amalgam term, can include both traditional social economy and newer solidarity economy initiatives. Social economy is primarily about expanding the economic space where people-centred organizations and enterprises can operate. A solidarity economy promotes social and systemic transformations and emphasizes issues of redistributive justice, ‘deep’ sustainability, alternatives to capitalism, as well as participatory democracy and emancipatory politics (Utting, 2015). The term SSE is increasingly used to speak of organizations and enterprises engaged in the production and exchange of goods and services, which are autonomous from the state and are guided by objectives and norms that prioritize social well-being, cooperation and solidarity. They include, for example, cooperatives and other social enterprises, mutual associations, unions of informal economy workers, fair trade networks, and solidarity finance schemes. The SSE seeks to transform the economic system to achieve greater equity and social cohesion, and to put the economy at the service of human needs, instead of putting people at the service of economic growth. The SSE is also gaining traction worldwide, both among practitioners involved in local initiatives and among international institutions (EU, 2021; OECD, 2022; UNRISD, 2021); and it has also been linked to the achievement of sustainable development (UN General Assembly, 2023).

The literature linking both CE and SSE approaches is still nascent. According to Moreau et al. (2017), applying SSE principles to the CE may allow for the inclusion of social and institutional dynamics necessary for social and ecological transformations. Other authors mention the SSE as one of the main theories for developing the social dimension within the CE (Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020); and still others call for more value-based and normative approaches to the CE (Mies and Gold, 2021), which resonates with SSE experiences. Thus, bringing CE and SSE reflections together is highly pertinent. The SSE is already considered to be well-positioned to foster what Bauwens et al. (2020a) call the ‘bottom-up sufficiency scenario’ for the CE, or what Calisto-Friant et al. (2020) call a ‘transformational circular society’. Yet research that connects theoretical and empirical knowledge is still lacking. Many contributions come from a European context: Gobert et al. (2021) focuses on grassroots initiatives of the SSE that promote reuse, reemployment and repair as citizen-based contributions to sustainability transitions in France. Leipold et al. (2021) detail competing narratives within the food sector in France as well. Campagnaro and D’Urzo (2021) considers social cooperation initiatives in Italy in relation to the CE. The social economy’s contribution to the CE is also studied in an OECD report (2022) focused on the role of social inclusion, local collaborations and strengthening stakeholders’ engagement. From a Global South perspective, Gutbelert and colleagues (2017, 2021) study how waste pickers from the informal economy create new grassroots cooperatives in Argentina and Brazil and contribute not only to better waste management, but also to implementing solidarity measures involving livelihood improvements, and thus propose an ‘amended circular economy’ bringing together principles from both ecological economics and SSE. Other authors also analyse the role of the waste picker organizations in bringing together circular economy and SSE aims in Brazil (Ribeiro et al., 2020; Sakamoto et al., 2021). However, a commonly accepted framework for merging SSE and CE analysis is still missing.

The aim of our contribution is to consider the links between the SSE and the CE by asking: in what way does the SSE contribute to circularity? More specifically, our main research question is: what are the implications of the normative principles and values of the SSE networks – such as the limited-profit motive – for insuring a more integral circularity

approach? We contribute to both the CE and SSE literature by considering how SSE principles might serve to address some of the ‘CE limits’. For that purpose, we conduct qualitative research based on 26 in-depth interviews with 31 key informants representing 20 SSE initiatives in two SSE networks – REAS-Euskadi in the Basque Country and APRES-GE in Western Switzerland. We analyse both the discourses related to how circularity strategies are understood by key actors within these networks, and the practices derived from their guiding principles. Linked to the limited profit motive, we reflect on sufficiency as a normative aim that draws attention to ‘enough’ as both a maxima and minima limit (Spengler, 2016), and how such limits might come to be defined through a political process (Sahakian et al., 2021).

The article is structured into six sections. Section two introduces our conceptual focus on the CE and the SSE. Section three describes the research methodology and the characteristics of our two case studies. Section four presents the results of our fieldwork and offers insights on how an integral circularity approach is applied within the SSE, and which SBM characteristics are fostered. Section five discusses the implications of these results for broader debates linked to limits to growth and sufficiency. Section six summarizes the main conclusions.

2. Conceptual approach to CE and SSE

2.1. The circular economy

Definitions of what constitutes a CE vary (Kirchherr et al., 2017). Some authors argue that the CE is a contested concept, which avoids any single, universal definition so as not to exclude any interests (Korhonen et al., 2018). While some definitions of the CE would lead to economic growth dynamics, with circularity promoting the production of goods in further cycles, others are closer to post-growth or degrowth proposals and the aim of lowering production and consumption in absolute terms.

The CE seeks to reduce resource extraction and waste disposal through a series of strategies to maintain a social metabolism within ‘planetary boundaries’ or ‘earth system boundaries’ (Steffen et al., 2015; Rockström et al., 2023). These CE strategies are interrelated and include: (1) the slowing, closing, narrowing, intensifying or dematerializing of economic material cycles (Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019; Geissdoerfer et al., 2020); (2) the 3Rs approach, which covers reduce, reuse and recycle; or its extended 9Rs version, referring to refuse, rethink, reduce, reuse, repair, refurbish, remanufacture, recycle and recover (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Potting et al., 2017); and (3) Sustainable or Circular Business Models (CBMs), which propose fundamental shifts in the purpose of business and almost every aspect of how it is conducted (Bocken et al., 2014; Lewandowski, 2016).

Regarding the CBMs, there is a variety of approaches in the literature but with differing interpretations related to their characteristics (Bocken et al., 2014; Rosa et al., 2019; Geissdoerfer et al., 2020; Salvador et al., 2020). Within this diversity the Sufficiency-driven Business Models (SBM) emerge as a specific category, which is particularly relevant for our study, although it represents a minority stream in current practice and is still under-researched. As Bocken and Short (2016:46) put it, they consist on: “curbing consumption as part of the business model by moderating demand through education and consumer engagement; making products that last and avoiding built-in obsolescence; extending product lives to slow disposal and replacement; focusing on satisfying ‘needs’ rather than promoting ‘wants’ and fast-fashion; and reducing overall resource consumption through conscious changes in sales and marketing ...”. More recently, Niessen and Bocken (2021) put the focus of the Business for Sufficiency framework on the following items: rethink; reduce; refuse; less clutter; less speed; less distance, and less market. These characteristics are close to those identified in degrowth-oriented businesses, which seek an alternative understanding of businesses as oriented to solving environmental and social problems, rather than simply making profits, through collaborative value creation and democratic governance (Khmara and Kronenberg, 2018), and put

forward environmental concerns regarding downscaling, promoting societal wellbeing embedded within communities, and a radical shift in values towards sufficiency (Nesterova, 2020). How companies can adopt and fulfil these many characteristics needs to be studied in greater depth, and no universal framework exists.

As the CE continues to gain in popularity, so do its criticisms. Limits to existing strategies include a lack of consideration for rebound effects and path-dependencies (Korhonen et al., 2018; Figge and Stevenson, 2019), and also of the total scale and composition (carbon intensity) of certain flows (Haas et al., 2020). Other critiques include the practical challenges of designing 3Rs processes (Ghisellini et al., 2016), or the contradictory use of targets with regard to recovery and recycling (Morseletto, 2020). Calisto-Friant et al. (2020) have regrouped many of these gaps and critiques into five blocks, and we consider how the SSE may be useful for engaging with three of them: systemic thinking on entropy and limits to growth; governance, social justice and cultural change; and alternative visions of circularity, sufficiency and conviviality.

We also take up the suggestion of Moreau et al. (2017), which points out that current mainstream CE applications tend to mainly consider cost-effective opportunities in the realm of economic competitiveness and thus fall short of grappling with the social and institutional pre-dispositions necessary for societal transitions. These authors note that institutional conditions are key for setting the rules of what is profitable (or not), and so might foster greater circularity and solidarity opportunities in production and consumption. They also consider it essential to avoid cost shifting in time and place, and to implement collaborative and democratic governance systems that do without profit motives. To handle these institutional conditions, Hinton and Maclurcan (2017) point out that a not-for-profit world could represent an 'economics of enough' and a truly circular economy, since it would not require endless growth because the economic surplus could be reinvested to promote social and environmental goals.

Schröder (2020) also warns that just transitions involving social equity are needed, as any transition that involves the CE will not only be technological, but also intensely political. Similarly, for Genovese and Pansera (2021), the main shortcoming of the CE is precisely its apolitical and technocratic framing; they call for a re-politicization of the concept. Calisto-Friant et al. (2021) have identified a major gap between words and actions in recent EU policies, which leads to a de-politicization of CE approaches. The absence of a social and political dimension in certain CE considerations is also linked to the alignment between mainstream CE discourses and practices, and economic growth dynamics, which may explain why the concept has gained traction so easily among policy makers and private businesses.

2.2. The SSE: centrality of the limited-profit motive and democratization of the economy

The SSE, as an amalgam term including both traditional social economy and newer solidarity economy initiatives, refers to a heterogeneous set of theoretical approaches and practices that have been used to designate a different way of understanding the economy (Pérez et al., 2015). The SSE builds on the social economy, which can be traced back to the 18th century in Europe and the emergence of the cooperative movement, as well as on more recent developments centering on the primacy of labour over capital (Monzón and Chaves, 2008). The solidarity economy is a more recent concept that emerged in the 1990s, and involves an attempt to rethink economic relations from parameters based on justice, cooperation, reciprocity and mutual aid (Laville and García-Jané, 2009). The SSE is not defined merely as a set of business models with a social purpose, but is based on an alternative concept of the economy and the political sphere.

The SSE seeks an economy that places an emphasis on: service to its members or to the community ahead of profit; autonomous management; a democratic decision-making process; and the primacy of people

and work over capital in the distribution of revenues (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012). The SSE includes entrepreneurial initiatives that tend to share two common features: first, they are characterized by not being based – or at least not exclusively – on an economic rationale oriented at monetary accumulation in the market sphere; secondly, a moral and normative dimension is usually present in their logic of action (Sanz, 2019).

Considering that SSE experiences are deeply embedded in social and institutional arrangements and involve much more than mercantile logics (for instance redistribution, reciprocity and self-sufficiency), the SSE in practice diverges from the experiences of capitalist enterprises in at least two fundamental ways: SSE initiatives take a different approach with respect to both profit-seeking motivation and in relation to competitive market practices. This discussion of the limited-profit and cooperative motives of SSE entities is a central theme in this article, and builds on previous work that considers how SSE entities interact with the market on the basis of these distinctive logics (Sahakian, 2016; Villalba-Eguiluz and Pérez de Mendiguren, 2019).

The limited-profit motive in the SSE differs from that of Non-profit Organizations. Non-profits are characterized by their legal inability to share profits among their stakeholders, while SSE entities adopt a policy of regulating or limiting (not forbidding) this eventual profit distribution, by means of equitable profit-sharing formulas (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012, Monzón and Chaves, 2008). In some contexts, such as Switzerland, for-profit companies can also be a part of the SSE, so long as they adhere to SSE principles. The profit motive is not a black or white issue, but is better understood as a continuum within which many different situations coexist, while sharing the limited profit motive.

SSE also seeks to reassert social control or 'social power' over the economy (Wright, 2010), by giving primacy to social and often environmental objectives over profits, emphasizing the place of ethics in economic activity and rethinking economic practice in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship (Utting, 2015). One key principle for this democratic self-management is the collective ownership or control formulas over the means of production instead of shareholder control. The SSE initiatives, in their most transformative versions, seek to transform the whole global capitalist system, organized as a counter-hegemonic project motivated by a belief that an alternative to capitalism is both ethically and existentially required (Newey, 2017). Its potential relates to the fact that the forms of production, exchange and consumption involved tend to integrate some combination of economic, social, environmental and cultural objectives, as well as the political dimensions of participatory governance and empowerment (Hillenkamp and Laville, 2013). Thus, the SSE can also be seen as a social movement that promotes the democratization of the economy, starting with its own governance systems (Coraggio, 2011; Askunze, 2013).

2.3. The limited-profit principle and sufficiency

The idea of the limited-profit motive, central to the SSE in both theory and practice, can be tied more generally to debates on limits in sustainability studies. The limits to untrammelled economic growth are contested, in that growth is seen as incompatible with the Earth's finite resources (Meadows et al., 1972). The compelling 'planetary boundaries' concept is one representation of limits, delineating an orbit with several thresholds tied to biogeochemical cycles: to avoid passing these thresholds is to maintain the Earth system within a 'safe operating space' (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). These 'boundaries' open up questions of procedural justice: for whom and by whom are these boundaries established? The notion of planetary boundaries can be challenged by introducing that of 'societal boundaries', suggesting that limits must be collectively defined (Brand et al., 2021). The notion of 'societal boundaries' builds on Gorz's (1989) work on self-limitation and autonomy.

In this reading, limits are not just 'out there' in Earth system

dynamics, nor are they imposed upon societies by scientific elites who know best; rather, limits are part of a process of autonomy that must take place within societies and its institutions. It would follow that limited profitability is a recognition that some level of profits may be necessary, but that sufficiency principles require a consideration of ‘how much is enough’. [Hudon et al. \(2020\)](#) propose to establish a ‘fair profit framework’ through a collective exercise that determines what should be a sufficient profit based on measurable and comparable criteria. In this same vein, [Kallis \(2019\)](#) further reinforces this importance of limits created by and for society, which could lead towards a ‘sufficiency economy’ that guarantees ‘enough, for everyone, forever’ ([Alexander, 2012](#)). This relates to how needs are agreed upon, which opens up political questions around who defines limits for whom, as discussed in the emerging literature on limits and wellbeing ([Sahakian et al., 2021](#)).

The question of limits is central to analysing both SSE and CE, and becomes a point of differentiation. In the CE, the economy should be seen as subordinate to the biophysical limits of the Earth system ([Georgescu-Roegen, 1971](#)). Yet in mainstream CE practices, the limits that hinder the development of the CE are often associated with the level of profitability of any specific CE solution ([Moreau et al., 2017](#)). The efficiency rationale is key to the CE, as circular systems can be seen as rendering resource usage more efficient – thus maintaining profitability and competitiveness. Actors in the SSE may be closer to an ethic of supporting the common good, or engaging in processes that seek to meet the needs of individuals and collectivities ([Salustri, 2021](#)). Both the CE and the SSE acknowledge ecological limits, but unlimited profit is not put into question in the CE, while in the SSE the limited-profit motive is a central theme – as we will explore in our case study below. Furthermore, cooperation and reciprocity are central themes in how SSE entities are governed (*ibid*), particularly for cooperatives where collaboration is the basis of any form of activity, which is not necessarily the case with the CE.

3. Methodology and case study overview

3.1. Research methodology

We used a qualitative case study approach that allows for an in-depth study within specific settings ([Yin, 2018](#)) and offers a detailed comprehension of context-dependent dynamics and practical knowledge ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#)), while shedding light on a question with a broader scope ([Gerring, 2004](#)). [Table 1](#) summarizes the six methodological steps of our study. First, we reviewed literature explicitly involving both the SSE and the CE, using the following key terms in SCOPUS and WoS: “social and solidarity economy”, “solidarity economy”, “social economy”, combined with “and” “circular economy”. Secondly, since these

results were scarce, and not every article’s content was relevant to our investigation, we then searched for other CE literature strands that included relevant concepts for the SSE. Here we identified a set of concepts and topics that relate both to SSE and CE, which could serve as a useful and initial guide for our analysis. These ‘common SSE-CE topics’ come from alternative circularity debates and Sufficiency Driven Business Model (SBM) literature, which will appear again in our results and discussion.

The third and fourth steps involved fieldwork. Qualitative research was carried out in two regional territorial networks that play a major role in the promotion of the SSE: REAS-Euskadi (Basque Country) and APRES-GE (Switzerland). We selected these two cases and sectors for a number of reasons: (i) because of convenience and our prior extensive and valuable knowledge in working with them. (ii) Because both networks are representative of a new turn in the SSE movement, since affiliation is not dependent on any specific legal form, but on signing a charter of shared principles and values. (iii) Because both cases present slight differences regarding these principles, as we explain in the next subsection, and precisely within one principle, key to our study: that of limited profitability. (iv) Because in both cases the food and environment sectors on which we focused were relevant; these in turn are also relevant for circularity, since they use comparatively more resources than some other sectors in SSE networks. We followed an ‘information-oriented selection’ of cases ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#)), insofar as these two cases can be seen as ‘paradigmatic’ regarding solidarity principles and the chosen sectors as ‘general characteristics’, but at the same time represent ‘variation cases’ regarding the specific limited-profit motive and other context dependent factors. The aim was not to generate a strict comparison, but rather to use the case studies as a way of shedding light on generalizable and common issues in both contexts.

We conducted 26 interviews in total, involving 31 people from 20 SSE entities belonging to two sectors in the SSE networks: food and agriculture, and environmental services (see [Table 2](#)). The research teams in Western Switzerland and the Basque region worked collaboratively on research design and analysis. Building on the literature review and our previous knowledge of the SSE networks, a set of common SSE-CE topics both informed the interview design, and served as tools in the analysis of preliminary results. The selection of respondents was based mainly on three criteria: variety and coverage within sectors; relevant position within the organization and knowledge over time; and preferences of the networks themselves. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in their own languages (Basque, Spanish, French), and then translated into English for the relevant analysis and use of quotations (denoted as LBC for the Basque Country, and IWS for Western Switzerland). The main interview questions were aimed at uncovering both the discourses and practices of SSE actors related to the CE, and

Table 1
Overview of methodological steps.

	DESK WORK:		FIELDWORK:		DATA ANALYSIS:
1st step	Literature review linking SSE & CE. - Very few items (up to 2021) depending on search terms, respectively: “social and solidarity economy”, “solidarity economy”, “social economy” combined with “and” “circular economy”. No. in WoS: 7/12/13 No. in SCOPUS: 8/13/14	3rd step	- Interview design based on: research questions; our previous knowledge of SSE networks; literature review; discussion with SSE network leaders. - Preliminary testing of common SSE-CE topics (alternative circularities, SBM, etc.).	5th step	- Transcripts and translation - Initial thematic analysis- Triangulation of emerging concepts among research teams
2nd step	Identification of CE literature strands for the SSE, and common SSE-CE topics:- ‘Missing social dimension of the CE’; ‘Human centred CE’- ‘Alternative/Social Circularities’- ‘Circular/Sufficiency Business Models (SBM)’	4th step	- First-round of in-depth interviews: 20 interviews/entities Involving 26 people Duration 40–80min each - Second-round in-depth interviews: 6 extra interviews with selected previous entities Involving 7 people Duration 40–65min each	6th step	- Coding data by the Gioia method, identification of emerging 1st order concepts, 2nd order themes, and 3rd order dimensions - Discussion and writing

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2
List of interviewed SSE entities.

Ref.	Entities	Sector: Activity	Interviewees' position	Location
I.BC1	EHNE Bizkaia	Food, agriculture: Agricultural union	Board of Directors	Biscay
I.BC2	Labore	Food, agriculture: Cooperative Supermarket	Co-founding partner	Biscay
I.BC3	Goilurra	Food, agriculture: Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE), agroecological production	Head of social integration	Biscay
I.BC4	Ortutik Ahora	Food, agriculture: Agroecological training.	Board	Biscay
I.BC5	Emaús FS	Environment: WISE, Reuse.	Educational Services Coordinator	Gipuzkoa
I.BC6	Garbinguru	Environment: WISE, Management of environmental and forestry projects.	Manager	Araba
I.BC7	Goienar	Environment: Renewable energy	Head of communication	Gipuzkoa
I.BC8	Koopera	Environment: WISE, social-environmental Innovation.	Education board Responsible for new activities. Co-founder.	Biscay
I.BC9	Sustraiak Habitat Design	Environment: Agroecosystem regeneration.	Co-Founding Partner	Araba
I.BC10	REAS-Euskadi	REAS network Coordination Team	Directors	Biscay
I.WS1	Ecoservices	Environment: safety engineering	General management	Geneva
I.WS2	Sofies	Environment: sustainability consulting	Co-founder; chairman	Geneva
I.WS3	Réalise	Environment: WISE, IT repair, logistics	Manager; advisor	Geneva
I.WS4	FabLab	Environmental design: design, repair	Co-founder, manager	Geneva
I.WS5	Materium	Environment: construction recycling, circular design, training	Co-founder, manager	Geneva
I.WS6	SPP Vergers	Food, Agriculture: Cooperative supermarket.	Co-founder, employee	Geneva
I.WS7	Le Nid	Food, Agriculture. Cooperative supermarket.	Co-founder, Communication Director	Geneva
I.WS8	TerrEspoir	Food: fair trade	Coordinator, Manager	Vaud
I.WS9	La Brouette	Food, Agriculture: Cooperative supermarket.	Co-founder and employee	Vaud
I.WS10	APRES	APRES network coordination team	Coordinators	Geneva

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

involve the following key discussion questions: How do they define and apply the CE; What specific CE strategies and tools do they put in place in their operations; How do they apply the main circular Rs; Which Circular-Sufficiency Business Model characteristics do they put into practice; How do they understand the relation between SSE and CE, and specifically what are the implications of SSE principles for the circularity implementations; How is sufficiency taken into account, and how do they differ from other enterprises within the same sector; What are the limits and tensions facing all these challenges; How do they relate to broader sustainability aims and policies. For these main topics, other sub-questions were developed which were more context specific. After the first round of interviews, which for some initiatives had a more open and exploratory focus, a second round of interviews were conducted with a subset of the initial sample to validate some of the initial findings and to further discuss key ideas that had emerged. In this second round, we also sought to better understand how each actor can be differentiated from non-SSE actors in the same sector.

Our fifth research step involved data analysis combining both inductive and deductive approaches, using techniques from the Gioia method to capture emergent concepts, themes and dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). Finally, our sixth research step refers to coding, discussion and validation among research teams, and collaborative writing. One limit of the study is that we did not observe in more detail how the SSE is playing out, as this would have necessitated rigorous participant observation over the long term. But we did aim to move beyond discourses to capture practices within these organizations when it comes to the SSE and how it relates to SSE, which required descriptive exchanges on how and in what way things are done. We also reviewed the grey literature related to both networks to substantiate our findings, based on internal and external reports that document activities.

3.2. Case study overview: REAS-Euskadi (Basque Country) and APRES-GE (Western Switzerland)

In Table 3, we present general features of the two networks to understand their size and relevance, their types of members, and the sectors in which they are involved.

A common characteristic is that these SSE networks are guided by a set of values and normative principles of action implemented via several

indicators that are usually summarized in a mandatory charter that interested organizations must sign, adhere to, and progressively implement. Despite using different terms, they share much common ground regarding principles and values (see Table 4). We were able to note that there are different kinds of models or approaches that also try to somehow promote both ecological and social principles, such as B-Corps

Table 3
Description of the networks.

Network's Name	REAS-Euskadi (Basque Country)	APRES-GE (Western Switzerland)
Date of Creation	1997	2004
Territorial Scope	Basque Country	French-speaking Switzerland, and neighbouring regions in France.
No. of members	80 entities	327 entities, 331 individuals
Types of members	No individuals. All other forms: 23 Limited Companies 26 Associations 26 Cooperatives 5 Foundations	Individuals. All other forms: 25 Limited Companies 190 Associations 23 Cooperatives 33 Foundations 17 Public limited companies 38 Individual companies
No. of participants	3255 workers 3783 volunteers 15383 members	5000 workers 12000 volunteers 85000 members
Income	Total revenue: 144 mill. €	Total revenue: 430 mill. CHF
Activity Sectors	Health & Care: 16 Education & Research: 12 Environment: 10 Food, catering: 10 Culture & Leisure: 6 Counselling Services: 5 Spaces & Networks: 4 Manufactures sales: 4 Others: 13	Education: 53 Civic activities: 53 Environment-Waste Management: 50 Services: 43 Art &leisure: 39 Social action & health: 36 Food: 33 Commerce: 15

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on REAS (2020) and respective websites (www.apres-ge.ch; www.reasred.org/reas-euskadi).

Table 4
SSE Network’s values and principles.

Network	REAS-Euskadi	APRES-GE
Principles	Sustainability Not for profit Cooperation	Respect for the environment Respect for social wellbeing Respect for democracy and responsibility
	Work Equity Commitment to local communities/environment	Respect for labour Respect for coherence Mandatory criteria: Transparency Collective interest Autonomy Limited profitability
Values	Solidarity Autonomy	Solidarity; 1 + 1 > 2 Autonomy; autonomous but not individualistic
	Nature People	Ecology Social wellbeing; to be, not to have
	Self-management	Participatory citizenship and democracy
	Liberating culture	Diversity Coherence; say what we do and do what we say

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on REAS’ Solidarity Economy Charter and APRES-GE’s Charter for a Social and Solidarity-Oriented Economy of the Geneva Region.

certification. While good governance and transparency in operations are also criteria for such forms of certification, they stop very short of challenging the profit motive (which was a central question for this study), they do not clearly address the quest for limits and sufficiency, and they do not deal with the need of transformation of the whole economic system. Besides, they have a growing presence in Western Switzerland and could be competing with the SSE’s social image, but they are very marginal in the Basque Country, which constitutes a difference between the two contexts.

Among these values and principles, two are worth highlighting for the purpose of our article. First, the ‘ecological limits’ principle, within which, for conceptual simplification, we have included what REAS-Euskadi calls the ‘Nature’ value and the ‘Sustainability’ principle and what APRES-GE calls the ‘Ecology’ value and the ‘Respect for the environment’ principle. Thus, APRES-GE and REAS-Euskadi are committed to building an economic system that respects the interdependence of ecological limits and socio-economic processes. Both put forward environmentally friendly practices in a consistent effort to apply an ethic of

Table 5
Data analysis structure: from 1st order concepts to themes and aggregate dimensions.

1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Alternative economic understanding; challenge production & consumption systems; democratization of the economy; food & energy sovereignty proposals. Rethink economic activity; Refuse non-ethical activities; Reduce consumption and use of materials. Profit is not a priority; seek viability but not maximum profitability. Avoid consumerism; recognize limits and planetary boundaries Meet human needs not endless wants; consumer engagement; active citizenship; consciousness-raising and awareness. Collaborate among equals; Networking; Cooperate towards similar values and aims. Create jobs and local sustainability over profit; fair economic distribution; intrinsic social mission; commitment with and service to local communities Ecological improvements costs are too high; ecological aims do not pay for economic viability Environmental concerns are not readily available to everyone; circular restructuring may affect jobs We foster cooperation and collaboration but ...; cooperation is not easy; cooperation and competitive behaviours coexist.	Transforming the economic system as a whole Prioritize more transformative Rs: Refuse, Rethink, Reduce Limited profit as core distinctive driver Minimize overall consumption Needs over wants: conscious consumer engagement Fostering cooperation & collaboration Maximize social and ecological aims Limits to prioritize ecological over economic aims Tensions in balancing social and ecological aims Limits to collaborative dynamics within competitive contexts	Integral social circularity approach Sufficiency-driven Business Model: People & Planet over profit Implementation tensions & limits

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

sufficiency, and sustainable production and consumption towards circularity.

Second, the ‘limited-profit’ principle: SSE actors call for a shift towards an economy that affirms the predominance of people over capital. To achieve this goal, REAS-Euskadi upholds the non-profit principle, which means that all the profits must be reinvested and not distributed, while APRES-GE advocates the principle of limited-profit instead, so that some profits could be distributed. This is an interesting difference. As noted above, the profit motive is not a black or white issue but is better understood as a continuum along which many different situations can coexist. The main question is not to dramatically forbid profits, but to set a limit to profitability, and consider how much is enough. Both approaches are indicative of a strong value of the SSE in terms of confronting dominant economic thinking: the pursuit of profit and capital accumulation should not be the ultimate goal of economic activity.

Other values and principles of the SSE (such as solidarity, equity, cooperation/collaboration, autonomy, work etc.), are also echoed in CE literature as integral parts of the CE’s social dimension (Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020, Walker et al., 2021). These principles correlate directly with different themes that have emerged in the literature, but which are beyond the scope of this study, such as: the question of the ‘local’ (local communities, local economy); employee engagement; ethical business practices, ethical consumer behaviour; fair income distribution; social inclusion and equity; participation and local democracy, among others.

4. Results: approaching CE strategies from SSE principles and practices

Table 5 below summarizes our findings and illustrates some of the concepts, themes and dimensions that are relevant to both the Swiss and Basque cases. The following subsections are structured according to these dimensions and explain some of the main contents.

4.1. The CE within the SSE: an integral social circularity approach

Across the two cases of Western Switzerland and the Basque region, our interviewees do not agree on a single definition of the CE, but they do share a common understanding on strong sustainability around closing, slowing and narrowing material cycles locally. They claim that they were already engaged in core activities of the CE (reduce-reuse-recycle) before the mainstreaming of the CE during the last decade. Regarding how circularity is understood and put into practice, we underscore three interrelated findings:

First, actors in the SSE see the Rs as a way of transforming the

Table 6
Circular Rs practices in SSE entities.

ENTITY Activity Location	What they do: Applications of circular Rs	How they differ: Distinctive points of comparison to other, same-sector enterprises not in the SSE
SUSTRAIAK HABITAT DESIGN, Agriculture/ Food design services, <i>Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz.</i>	<p>Regenerate soil quality and rural ecosystems.</p> <p>Refuse hazardous components (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.)</p> <p>Reduce transport; local supply and commercial chains.</p> <p>Reduce dependence on foreign inputs (energy, machinery, grass, feed, etc.)</p> <p>Recycle: zero waste practices within the plot (fertilizers, seeds, etc.)</p>	<p>Regenerate rural communities as well (socio-territorial embeddedness).</p> <p>Rethink agrifood systems: seek food sovereignty.</p> <p>Recognize limits of each territory (relocate within bioregion, km0, resize and adequate practices to these limits, interconnected self-sufficiency among local territories).</p> <p>Redistribution: reintroduce barter and reciprocity; collective purchases; cooperatives.</p> <p>Diversify and combine ecologically and socially synergistic activities.</p>
GOIENER, Renewable Energy <i>Basque Country.</i>	<p>Reduce extraction of virgin materials (fossil fuels, components of renewable energy).</p> <p>Reduce impacts of (renewable) energy production and distribution.</p> <p>Reduce energy dependence: self-production and consumption.</p>	<p>Rethink energy systems: energy sovereignty. Relocate and decentralize systems, linking production and consumption in short circuits, reducing energy losses and reducing foreign extraction. Redistribution and demarketization: local communities produce and consume their own local energy.</p> <p>Refuse: do not use new rural lands for energy generation; prioritize small facilities over macro-projects (non-sustainable or non-equitable renewable energy projects).</p> <p>Reduce energy consumption: strong advisory services and campaigns to reduce overall consumption, not only costs. Analyse needs and resize (reduce) projects.</p> <p>Refuse some kinds of energy recovery or incinerators.</p> <p>Recover and rehabilitate small hydraulic power plants.</p> <p>Reduce CO2 footprint and compensate with local projects.</p>
LABORE, Cooperative supermarket, <i>Basque Country, Bilbao.</i>	<p>Reduce plastic packaging</p> <p>Reduce hazardous elements (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.)</p> <p>Reduce transport (local producers and consumers)</p> <p>Reduce food waste</p>	<p>Reduce consumerism and marketing.</p> <p>Refuse price competition among local producers. Pay fair prices to suppliers.</p> <p>Establish coordination mechanisms along the whole chain to solve these problems (caps to billings, assemblies, coordinated plans regarding quotas and turns, etc.).</p> <p>Revitalize local communities.</p> <p>Relocate consumption-production relationships. Foster consciousness in consumers regarding their local suppliers.</p> <p>Rethink agrifood systems: seek food sovereignty.</p> <p>Collaboration with other similar stores.</p>
REALISE, IT repair sector, <i>Switzerland, Geneva.</i>	<p>Reuse and Repair of computers and their components.</p> <p>Collecting, selecting and preparing for Recycling of computers.</p> <p>Reduce the need to extract new raw materials.</p>	<p>Focus is on job creation and training (work integration programs); labour intensive activities.</p> <p>Redistribution, through job creation for people in a situation of vulnerability.</p> <p>Ability to reuse, repair and recycle materials and products even when this is not profitable in the market for other companies, thanks to external public support for job creation and internal non-profit logics.</p>
MATERIUUM, Construction, <i>Switzerland, Geneva.</i>	<p>Reuse construction site materials, giving them new value.</p> <p>Reduce the need to extract new raw materials.</p> <p>Reduce material intensity of construction.</p> <p>Collecting and storing materials for Reuse.</p> <p>Sorting certain materials for Recycling by other enterprises.</p>	<p>Focus is on job creation; the cost of Reuse and Recycling must cover labour, there is no or limited profit on the material itself.</p> <p>Ultimate aim is to reduce final waste.</p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

economic system as a whole, rather than working on single products or services. SSE actors Refuse to do business in any sector that is not oriented towards societal needs, such as military-related or luxury goods. Moreover, in the sectors of activity they enter into, such as food and energy, they Rethink the whole supply chain system by delivering solutions that seek to reorient economic relations towards food and energy sovereignty strategies. For example, in the Swiss case, different actors in food provisioning will come together to ensure that systems of production and consumption are being transformed towards supporting local employment, fostering ecological production, and reducing packaging waste across supply chains. A local currency, the Leman, is also a way to bring together diverse actors in the region who share similar values. Similarly, in the Basque case, this attempt to transform the economic system towards energy and food sovereignty proposals with an integral local character is reflected in Rethink and Reduce strategies applied by SSE enterprises, whereby they collaborate with other institutional and

social actors embedded in the territory at small scales.

Accordingly, the main challenge will be the implementation of a ‘full SSE system’ described as follows: ‘We must promote exchanges between our organizations to strengthen them, but the real challenge is to transform other mainstream companies that have very insufficient ecological and social commitments, through the good practice examples of the SSE’ (I.WS3). This suggests a link to the political dimension of the SSE, as actors and initiatives seek to broaden their scope of action towards the democratization of the whole economy, and in this way try to establish the institutional conditions that would avoid cost-shifting from the economic dimension to social and ecological dimensions (Moreau et al., 2017). These initiatives aspire to counterbalance the hegemonic market economy: ‘The most important thing is to get out of the market economy, to propose another economy, everything else will follow’ (I.WS6).

Second, there is a strong focus on the more transformative aspects of

circularity, such as Refuse, Rethink and Reduce, rather than the less ecologically efficient act of Recycling. Here again, the focus is not solely on single products, but systems of production and consumption. 'As SSE actors, we Refuse some sectors of activity; we also Rethink the whole model and the economy from our own principles; and we also try to Reduce consumption in general and our own use of resources' (I.BC10). In the Swiss case, the example of re-useable containers for different food and beverages is a way to Reduce the dependence on single-use products, despite the up-front costs of investing (time and money) in containers, as well as the ongoing costs of storing, cleaning and tracking containers. 'The investment in time is not profitable for these small entities, but they do invest because they share the same values. Once the re-useable container system is in place, no doubt other larger actors will also join this effort' (I.WS.10).

In the Basque case, following food and energy sovereignty proposals, SSE actors Rethink how to connect the local production and consumption of energy, without affecting local availability of land for agriculture, and they thus Refuse to occupy agricultural land for the installation of photovoltaic facilities, as is occurring elsewhere with for-profit renewable energy companies. Besides, SSE networks connect local, traditional and small-scale agroecological producers with other local stores, and collaborate with local institutions beyond the SSE such as hospitals and school canteens, so as to Reduce the negative impacts of transport. The aim is to Revitalize local communities through socially embedded collaboration, where other principles beyond for-profit food sales are valued. SSE actors do not try to grow at any cost, but seek to Reduce overall production and consumption in society. They actively engage in consciousness-raising campaigns with this aim, and also apply this ambition to their own activities, even if that means a Reduction in sales.

Third, both previous findings relate to the limited profit principle as a core distinctive driver, which is at the heart of the SSE. In the Swiss case, re-using materials found on construction sites might be unprofitable for clients, who might even pay more for these services; it is the investment in local employment and the reduction of final waste that is emphasized, above the profit motive. Moreover, entities might profit from exporting construction materials to China for refurbishing and resale, but will not do so – as their aim is to support a local economy. In this case, Recycling that is profitable is not privileged. Thus, Re-use, Reduce and local employment are given more importance than profitability. As a Swiss actor explained 'Limiting the use of resources also means limiting profitability' (I.WS5).

Actors in both networks criticize the primacy of the profit motive in the current mainstream spread of the CE, which is seen as a main point of differentiation with the SSE, which puts forward social and ecological values: 'We [WISEs] have already been practicing these activities, and the reuse of waste, but what is now the objective? [We] do it to empower people and now others do it for the business' (I.BC8). This concern echoes what other researchers have signaled as competing narratives between the SSE and the CE in France due to recent legislative changes (Leipold et al., 2021). For instance, a tension might be recognized between the SSE network's view of the CE and the official institutional approach of the Basque government, with the latter's focus on economic performance and competitiveness (Bassi et al., 2021). There is also a critique about a depoliticized view of the CE transitions, and about the distance between discourses and actions already identified in the case of the EU policies (Calisto-Friant et al., 2021), which finds an echo amongst some SSE actors in Geneva as well.

Finally, in Table 6 we summarize some of these findings based on both the first and the second rounds of in-depth interviews, in the second of which we aimed to further explore key findings: first, we check how each SSE entity simultaneously implements many Rs in their activities, including some of the more challenging Rs in relation to mainstream economic dynamics, that is, Refuse, Rethink and Reduce. Second, we look at how these Rs are applied and could illustrate possible differences between SSE initiatives and other actors in their same sectors, as noted in the third column.

4.2. Sufficiency-driven business model characteristics

SSE practices meet many of the characteristics of CBMs and the more specific approach of the SBMs. Here we will address just four of these characteristics:

- (I) SSE initiatives are committed to minimizing overall resource consumption, which is in line with their 'ecological limits' principle: 'to Reduce is the most important thing, Reduce the consumption of energy even if there is conflict with our own growth possibilities' (I.BC7); 'Less is more, do not grow unnecessarily' (I.BC1). By aligning themselves with the priority of Reduction, they foster a strong sustainability view of the CE, in which limits on the use of materials and energy are acknowledged. Thus, some kind of sufficiency levels are implicit, seeking to meet human needs within planetary boundaries by curbing excessive consumption levels.
- (II) SSE networks seek conscious consumer's engagement, which is guided by the aim of satisfying human needs through conscious sales and responsible consumption at the level of grassroots initiatives and self-reliant communities (Clube and Tennant, 2023), rather than promoting endless wants through aggressive marketing. This in turn helps to moderate/minimize overall resource consumption, and it is definitively facilitated by the limited-profit principle: 'We are trying to raise awareness to be able to rethink the way we consume' (I.WS5); 'It is a cooperative store, all members [...] are sensitized directly, they know the farmer, the bakers, the level of awareness is very important' (I.WS7); 'Our clients are *consomm'acteurs* [consumer-actors], they commit to, reinforce and manage the distribution network' (I.WS8).
- (III) SSE initiatives seek to maximize social and ecological dimensions over the economic one, or at least, work for a balance between economic, ecological and social dimensions. This orientation is derived from their original social mission, and it is definitively facilitated by their limited-profit principle: 'We [WISEs] always prioritize creating another insertion job, over other issues, even if we do not need all the hours of that position' (I.BC6); 'The social objective is paramount, also by law we are non-profit'; (I.BC3); 'Although we are less profitable, we reduce margins and pay [more to] our farmers and thus we value their practices' (I.WS6).

In this sense, APRES-GE broadens the vision of corporate responsibility by considering business activity as a form of mutualization where objectives of common good and equity are shared: 'When we start to make profits, we increase salaries by 15%, and we try to provide better pension funds' (I.WS2). Following this vision, the fair distribution of profits must account for the social and environmental sustainability of human activities in a context of commitment and accountability: 'Reasonable profitability is the cornerstone of the ability to have a deep ecological and social commitment. A true commitment means investing a significant portion of profits in improving societal impact and reducing ecological impact' (I.WS3). This deviation from the profit maximization imperative helps foster sufficiency and non-growth models, since instead of striving for growth, firms can strive to uphold their social or ecological aims (Nesterova, 2020).

- (IV) SSE initiatives tend to engage with all the stakeholders through collaboration and cooperation. We analysed SSE networks that involve a variety of sectoral activities and tend to collaborate in a common social and environmental purpose that goes beyond profit seeking, which are characteristics of its social embeddedness. 'We always prioritize collaboration within REAS or between related social enterprises, for example, if we do not manage to agree on a contract in our company, we make a proposal to another related organization' (I.BC6). 'When there may be competition between local traditional farmers in selling their

agro-ecological products, we seek mediation mechanisms based on cooperation' (I.BC2). 'We are part of the SSE because we are not in competition; cooperation and exchanges are an integral part of who we are' (I.WS3). Actors in the SSE tend to cooperate with other actors who share similar values, thus advancing efforts to achieve circularity through networking.

4.3. Implementation limits and tensions between and within the SSE and CE

SSE practices are themselves not without tensions and contradictions (Utting, 2018; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020a, 2020b). SSE actors are committed to developing viable alternatives to the current hegemonic economic model: 'The economy must be rethought to be at the service of the community and not an economy that is a goal in itself in order to make money' (I.WS6); 'We do not think about prices but about the impact of the products' (I.WS9). But, at the same time, there are tensions and limits in the implementation of normative SSE principles to achieve a 'different economy'. These tensions might emerge between any of the three dimensions: social, economic or ecological. The social imperative and normative values do not automatically bring greater environmental sustainability, and contradictions between the different aims can be found.

The following are some of the tensions that emerge among SSE actors when it comes to: prioritizing the ecological dimension over the economic one; balancing the social and ecological dimensions; and maintaining cooperation and collaborative governance dynamics. First, regarding prioritizing the ecological dimension, improvement in environmental performance can be hindered by high costs of implementation: 'We have a policy of reducing CO₂, at least up to the elements that we cannot change at the moment because this is beyond our financial means' (I.WS3).

Second, regarding the social dimension, the reconciliation of SSE and CE criteria includes not only the functioning of companies, but also the challenge of job creation and issues concerning affordable and more sustainable living standards: 'The introduction of CE principles like reduction, and the elimination of unnecessary activities [...] will lead to the loss of numerous jobs. We must think about the field of job creation, otherwise we will cause a civil war' (I.WS3). Studies on the apparel value chain show that job reduction is likely to happen in production activities outside Europe, while job growth could happen in reuse and recycling activities within Europe (Repp et al., 2021). Similarly, the question of high prices in ecological food production can have different effects: paying higher prices benefits producers in social and economic terms, and could foster environmental sustainability by promoting biodiversity and organic production, for example. However, higher food prices might also affect social equity negatively, by making such food less affordable to all consumers.

Third, tensions also emerge regarding the collaborative dynamics within a competitive context. For instance, there can be competition among SSE organizations when trying to access scarce resources, such as public funding: 'I have seen practices far removed from SSE principles when participating in public procurement processes' (I.BC5). This implies that in a context in which some SSE initiatives build upon scarce public funding to expand their strategies, they could become dependent on this resource, and sometimes compete with other SSE initiatives for these public tenders, instead of cooperating to present a shared proposal. Even if cooperation tends to prevail, it coexists with competition to some extent – as SSE actors often operate within broader market dynamics and economic pressures. Changing public procurement policies is seen as fundamental for further supporting the SSE in the Basque and Swiss contexts, and for an effective circularity policy design (Witjes and Lozano, 2016).

5. Discussion: policy implications of the SSE for a more circular society

We now turn to two areas where relevant policy implications or business insights can be derived from our findings regarding limits and sufficiency: a) sufficiency policies and eco-social welfare measures, and b) the question of scalability and broader market interactions.

5.1. Towards sufficiency policies or eco-social welfare measures

Current mainstream CE practices tend to enhance environmental efficiency but do not necessarily introduce caps or limits to overall resource use and consumption, and may therefore be insufficient for orienting human activities within a 'safe operating space' of planetary boundaries. Continuous economic growth may not be a feasible option (Capellán-Pérez et al., 2015; Hickel and Kallis, 2019), and eco-efficiency may not be sufficient for achieving a sustainability transition (Bimpizas-Pinis et al., 2021). Sufficiency measures are needed, at both a micro and macro level, understood in the IPCC 6th assessment report as 'avoiding demand while meeting needs' (Saheb, 2021). These could be defined as eco-social welfare measures for the 21st century (Koch, 2022).

The notion of 'meeting needs' or achieving wellbeing within safe operating spaces is essential, as sufficiency policies entail substantial changes in production and consumption patterns (Toulouse et al., 2019; Sandberg, 2021), which would certainly meet resistance if associated with loss of quality of life. The notion of 'consumption corridors', or upper and lower limits to consumption, is a promising paradigm for policy-making, as it suggests that human needs can be met within limits (Fuchs et al., 2021). Similarly, the notion of a 'safe and just operating space' that includes meeting social foundations without bypassing planetary limits, or the doughnut model (Raworth, 2017), is also a paradigm shift that is being explored at the local level, by cities from Amsterdam to Geneva.

SSE principles, with their normative focus on wellbeing at the individual and collective level – through, for example, prioritizing local consumption-production loops, along with cooperation and collaboration measures – are well suited for bringing about a more salutogenic and positive approach to sufficiency measures. A limited-profit motive which acknowledges sufficiency can be a major lever for maintaining economic activity within planetary boundaries and achieving wellbeing, something that is supported by our respondents in both Western Switzerland and the Basque Country: 'You have to limit profit and dedicate all efforts to positive environmental and social impacts' (I.WS1). In our case studies we have seen many of the sufficiency strategies indicated by Niessen and Bocken (2021) for achieving Reduce-Rethink-Refuse options within 'less distance' between production and consumption, such as: awareness-raising; demand reduction services; moderating sales; questioning consumption; short-distance promotion; and support for self-sufficiency.

This approach is in stark contrast to the profit maximizing strategies of individual for-profit companies, and it would necessitate institutional conditions to allow its spread, such as collaborative governance or social requirements in public tenders, as we discuss below. Here again, the re-politicization of both CE and SSE practices is necessary, in the direction of recognizing the 'social embeddedness' of the economy. A growing body of recent literature on the CE has proposed this shift away from profit-seeking and towards a more normative approach to the CE (Mies and Gold, 2021; Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021) through a new culture of consumption and benefit redistribution and sufficiency (D'Amato and Korhonen, 2021). In short, the SSE networks studied align with the main ideas of the bottom-up sufficiency circular scenario depicted by Bauwens et al. (2020a): prioritization of high transformative Rs, and fostering local communities and short supply chains. The SSE may help to put CE efforts at the service of human needs, reduce inequalities and enhance social cohesion (Clube and Tennant, 2023; Schröder et al., 2019b, 2020).

5.2. Challenges for scalability and broader market dynamics

Within the SSE there is an ongoing debate regarding the scale of this approach as a whole and the scale of each enterprise. This leads to the question of how both SSE initiatives and CE practices can have a significant impact, addressing the dilemma of how to increase their economic impact without undermining their social and environmental objectives. For the Basque case, there is abundant literature on the experience of the Mondragon industrial cooperatives, with special interest in its internationalization and growth processes that have led to abandoning cooperative logics and principles in favour of profit-making ones (Bretos et al., 2020). The same can be said of the Swiss context, where two cooperative retail giants dominate the food distribution market and where cooperative members have lost any true power. Thus, there seem to be scale limits to expanding and mainstreaming SSE practices within a capitalist growth-driven system, and, of course, how to transform the economy as a whole remains a challenge. To deal with the risks of this so-called ‘mission drift’, academic work has identified scaling processes that do not involve organizational growth (Desa and Koch, 2014, Lyon and Fernández, 2012). Bauwens et al. (2020b) mention forms of ‘breadth scaling’ that include ‘scaling across’ via model replication and dissemination through other actors. In both the Basque and Swiss cases, scaling is facilitated through networks that bring together actors of the SSE towards sharing best practices and partnerships across supply chains. These forms of scaling represent dynamics of inter-organizational collaboration, such as ‘ecosystemic growth’ models (Han and Shah, 2020). The size of each initiative or social enterprise could remain within what is considered sufficient for properly attending to local needs, while it is the network that expands. As Bauwens (2021) observes, reconsidering the very meaning of doing business in this way may lead to keeping business operations small-scale and localized to serve the needs of local communities.

The literature identifies a series of key business and policy insights and recommendations as promising ways forward, which are already being put into practice in scattered and still incipient local initiatives (REAS, 2017; Martí and Pérez, 2020): (i) An integrated supply-chain approach within the SSE, and therefore the creation of ‘social markets’. (ii) Socially and ecologically responsible public procurement strategies that avoid economic cost as the main indicator of success. (iii) Policies that seek to operationalize consumption corridors (Fuchs et al., 2021), by placing upper and lower limits on the use of space, energy, or other resources. (iv) Public-cooperative partnerships to develop local agroecological and food sovereignty plans and networks, for instance to locally serve the canteens of public institutions. (v) Local partnerships among ‘anchor institutions’, as in the ‘Preston model’ (CLES, 2019), that seek to create ‘community wealth’ through a series of strategies such as: plural ownership of the economy, making financial power work for local places, fair employment, progressive procurement and socially productive use of land and property. The main quest here is not whether these initiatives locate themselves within the SSE (as social markets), or still operate within the capitalist market dynamics (as in Preston), but to analyse to what extent and in what ways they contribute to putting social and ecological aims ahead of mere profit seeking.

We see that these policy measures are well aligned with some of the themes that emerged in our results. For instance: the integrated supply-chain approach and social markets, could be seen as a first step towards ‘transforming the economic system as a whole’; the consumption corridors could be facilitated by ‘minimizing overall consumption’, ‘conscious consumer engagement’ and ‘prioritizing the more transformative Rs’; and the public procurement measures along with all forms of partnerships could be enhanced by ‘fostering cooperation and collaboration’.

In both the Swiss and Basque case, there are similarities and differences in the relevance of these measures. In the Basque case, ‘solidarity collaborative networks’ or ‘social markets’ associated with the SSE have recently emerged (Askunze and Diaz, 2020; Arrillaga and Etxezarreta,

2022). A ‘social market’ entails enabling the self-sufficiency of SSE initiatives in their own circuits, while replicating best practices elsewhere (and locally), rather than creating bigger companies which tend towards internationalization. Similarly, in the Swiss case, the federating platform APRES places an emphasis on proposing comprehensive products and services, that would allow citizens to meet all their needs in the SSE, from housing to banking. Both in the Swiss and Basque case, actors emphasize the need for public and private entities to commit to socially and ecologically responsible public procurement strategies. In the Swiss case, there are also examples of (iv) public-association partnerships, in access to public land for housing cooperatives for example, or partnerships for supplying school food with local SSE agricultural actors.

In addition to the points above, actors in both the Swiss and Basque case support two other policy measures: (vi) They consider training, education and awareness raising to be a key concern for scalability, at all levels – form obligatory schooling, to professional training in key sectors. Further, (vii) the diffusion of a more social form of circularity could be enhanced through state funds aimed at sustainability transition programs and climate change mitigation initiatives, which are channeling increasing amounts of resources. Such funds are already being proposed in both Western Switzerland and the Basque Country, but the focus remains on ‘profitable’ pro-growth circularity – and more of an emphasis on solidarity principles and sufficiency is lacking.

6. Concluding remarks

This article has analysed how the SSE can inform the CE, building from these research questions: in what way does the SSE contribute to circularity? What are the implications of the principles and values of the SSE networks? Our results respond to that question as follows: First, the SSE brings a normative approach to reshaping the economy, with initiatives that converge around networks guided by a set of principles and values, as exemplified by the cases of REAS-Euskadi in the Basque Country and APRES-GE in Western Switzerland. Second, as our main contribution, we demonstrate that the limited-profit principle shapes a distinctive integral circularity view, and fosters specific characteristics of the Sufficiency-driven Business Models. Third, more specifically we show how circularity is applied by: seeking to transform the economic system as a whole; prioritizing the implementation of the more transformative Rs (Refuse, Rethink, Reduce); recognizing limited profit as a core distinctive driver; minimizing overall consumption; raising conscious consumer’s engagement (satisfying needs over wants), fostering stakeholders’ cooperation and collaboration; and maximizing social and ecological aims over economic profitability. Fourth, at the same time, tensions and limits remain at the practical and implementation level: limits to prioritizing ecological over economics aims; tensions in balancing social and ecological aims, and limits to collaborative dynamics within competitive contexts.

Based on the discussion above, we also identify relevant avenues for future research, which are connected to some of the limits of our own current investigation. First, further attention could be given to the implementation of combined CE and SSE practices in other sectors and contexts – beyond the focus on food-agriculture and environmental services. Second, it would also be relevant to study the implications for scaling strategies of SSE and CE networks, and the factors enabling the emergence of more territorial networks and ‘social markets’, organized as local SSE (eco-)systems. Third, further understanding the paradigm shifts necessary for reshaping the institutional conditions that could avoid social and ecological cost-shifting (Moreau et al., 2017), and promote limited-profit logics across the market as a whole. Fourth, linked to the critical question of how to support a just social transition towards enhanced social circularity, more participatory methods could also be experimented with, such as research-action to engage different CE and SSE actors in sharing their values and practices. Finally, beyond qualitative research, quantitative research regarding specific indicators to evaluate and measure sustainability performance for each initiative

are also needed, for instance through novel approaches like the Sustainable Development Performance Indicators suitable, but differentiated, for both SSE and non-SSE enterprises (Yi et al., 2022).

We are convinced that further reflection on the principles and practices linking the CE and the SSE will be fruitful. The future for evidence-based research into these two economic approaches is looking bright: although scattered and not yet systematized, there are many incipient experiences emerging, involving alternative local policies seeking to place people and the planet at the centre of reflections on a good life for all within limits.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Unai Villalba-Eguiluz: 1st author. **Marlyne Sahakian:** Conceptualization, Methodology, design, Validation, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Visualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition, 2nd author. **Catalina González-Jamett:** Conceptualization, Methodology, design, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, 3rd author. **Enekoitz Etxezarreta:** Methodology, design, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, 4th author.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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