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# Convergences between the Social and Solidarity Economy and Sustainable Development Goals: Case Study in the Basque Country

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the potential of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) to foster the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Local public policies play an important role in supporting both the SSE and SDGs. We select a case study of four SSE projects of a local development agency in the Basque Country, where the SSE has a considerable presence through diverse forms and experiences. We address how these projects, which are implemented in a coordinated and transversal manner, contribute to many specific targets within SDG goals number 8 (growth and decent work), 12 (sustainable consumption and production patterns), and 5 (gender equity). However, some limitations have also been identified: (i) trade-offs, in both SSE and SDGs, between economic growth and other aims centered on environmental sustainability; and (ii) avoidance of handling issues, which limits a systemic transformation.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Social Economy; Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE); sustainability; local development; Basque Country

## 1. Introduction

Since their approval in 2015 by the United Nations (UN), the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda have become a benchmark for public policy at different levels. The SDGs present an interconnected list of goals aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet, and guaranteeing prosperity for all. However, they are not exempt from problems related to: their theoretical foundations; internal inconsistencies due to trade-offs between objectives; appropriate measurement of targets; and excessive orientation toward economic growth to the detriment of ecological sustainability [1–4].

For its part, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has been consolidated as a reference in debates related to the creation of alternative ways of understanding economic well-being and doing business [5]. Faced with the logic of capital and its accumulation, the SSE seeks to build relationships of production, distribution, consumption, and financing based on justice, cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual aid. It is about placing people and their work at the center of the economic system, providing markets with an instrumental role in the well-being of all people and the expanded reproduction of life on the planet [6–8].

The UN has identified the need to advance the systematic analysis of the SSE's contribution to the SDGs from a critical perspective [9], considering the challenges and limitations faced by both the SSE experiences and the public policies aimed at the SDGs. For that purpose, the case of the Local Development Agency Beterri Buruntza (ADLBB) of the Basque Country is studied here.

The objective of this article is to investigate to what extent the SSE contributes to the achievement of the SDGs, in the context of local public policies for the promotion of SSE. To that end, we try to answer the following research questions: What is the relationship between SSE and SDGs? What are the impacts of the SSE initiatives fostered by local policies on the achievement of SDGs? What are the challenges/limitations that both approaches face to achieve transformative change?

There are still few articles addressing the links between SSE and SDGs in case studies based on real experiences, and each of them sets out from different approaches, focuses, or objects of study [9–14]. So, we are contributing to the literature with one more case that involves a novel approach with its particular characteristics regarding the initiatives under study. With respect to the initiatives that are the object of the analysis, some studies focus solely on enterprises [12,13], others on public policies or the general regulatory framework [14], while we look at the link between both of them—that is to say, local SSE specific public policies with the direct participation of enterprises in co-governance projects. Furthermore, our case brings together different kinds of enterprises: from traditional industrial cooperatives to different kinds of social enterprises, including work integration social enterprises (WISEs).

With respect to our focus, our analysis is based on a critical standpoint regarding the challenges and limitations already pointed out by both the SSE literature and the internal coherence analyses of the SDGs. This approach is also novel because other studies starting from the SSE simply take the SDG framework for granted, since the 2030 Agenda has already been approved internationally. However, we raise questions about: the internal (in)coherence of the SDGs—partly similar to the tensions faced by hybrid organizations of the SSE; the ambivalent role of economic growth, since it fosters socioeconomic goals but it could damage the environmental goals; or the implementation of policies that do not sufficiently indicate possible conflicts, and therefore fall short in their transformative potential.

In Section 2 below, we first review the literature on both SDGs and SSE, identifying some of the challenges and/or limitations that both approaches face; secondly, we address some central points linking SDGs and SSE. Section 3 presents the case study and the methodology. Section 4 comprises the analysis and discussion of the results; we point out the impacts of the SSE initiatives on achieving SDGs in our case study, especially regarding goals 2 (hunger and food), 5 (gender equity), 8 (growth and employment), and 12 (sustainable consumption and production patterns). Finally, we conclude that there are clear synergies between both approaches (SDGs and SSE), so local policies aiming to foster SSE are also desirable to pursue the SDGs. At the same time, both approaches face challenges/limitations to advance toward sustainable, fair, and equitable societies.

## 2. Theoretical Framework SDGs and SSE

### 2.1. SDGs: Economic Growth, Social Development, and Ecological Sustainability Imbalances

In 2015, the UN proposed a new sustainable development agenda based on 17 SDGs, aimed at ending poverty (economic sustainability), protecting the planet (environmental sustainability), and guaranteeing prosperity for all (social sustainability) [15]. The SDGs cover a wide range of topics (see Table 1). All these goals are supposed to foster changes in an integrated manner in the three dimensions of mainstream interpretations of sustainable development: social, economic, and environmental.

**Table 1.** United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals.

| Objective | Title                                    | Description   |
|-----------|--|---|
| SDG 1     | No poverty                               | End poverty in all its forms everywhere   |
| SDG 2     | Zero hunger                              | End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture   |
| SDG 3     | Good health and well-being               | Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages   |
| SDG 4     | Quality education                        | Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all  |
| SDG 5     | Gender equality                          | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls   |
| SDG 6     | Clean water and sanitation               | Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all  |
| SDG 7     | Affordable and clean energy              | Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all   |
| SDG 8     | Decent work and economic growth          | Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all  |
| SDG 9     | Industry, innovation, and infrastructure | Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation  |
| SDG 10    | Reduced inequalities                     | Reduce inequality within and among countries  |
| SDG 11    | Sustainable cities and communities       | Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable   |
| SDG 12    | Responsible consumption and production   | Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns  |
| SDG 13    | Climate action                           | Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts   |
| SDG 14    | Life below water                         | Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development   |
| SDG 15    | Life on land                             | Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss |
| SDG 16    | Peace, justice, and strong institutions  | Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels           |
| SDG 17    | Partnerships for the goals               | Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development  |

Source: UN (2015).

However, this breadth and dispersion of topics means that the SDGs can be classified as an extensive “shopping list” of 17 goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators [16], where the objectives and indicators related to the social and economic aspects predominate over those on the environment. According to Diaz-Sarachaga et al. [17], of all the indicators contemplated in the UN official monitoring framework [18], 53% are from the social sphere, 24% economic, 12% environmental, and 11% from governance.

Although they have been designed as an interdependent and integrated set of objectives, the SDGs have been criticized for the potential incompatibilities and negative interactions between the different objectives and indicators [2]. Among the main criticisms are: (i) lack of a common theoretical foundation and lack of explanations on how they can be achieved [1,19]; (ii) unequal characteristics of objectives; for

example, some objectives should be considered means, rather than ends or objectives in themselves [2]; (iii) incompatibilities or negative indirect effects among different objectives, mainly between objectives of economic growth and those concerning global ecological sustainability [20,21]. All of which would make it impossible to achieve all goals by 2030 [4,17,20].

These substantive inconsistencies, in turn, translate into the operationalization or the measurement of progress. Of the 169 targets, only 49 (29%) are well developed, 91 targets (54%) could be more specific, and another 29 targets (17%) still require significant work [1]. These inconsistencies also carry over to the composite indicators that attempt to measure the overall progress of the SDGs.

As a global index, the largest benchmark is the SDG-Index produced by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network for each country [22]. The SDG-Index values all the SDGs equally. However, the calculation method based on the arithmetic mean of each subscript would indicate that a perfect substitution among the different dimensions is assumed, which presents other types of problems [23]. Furthermore, the concrete results for countries all over the world offer a panorama in which the SDG Index ranking mimics the conventional pattern in which higher levels of development imply greater ecological footprints, again exacerbating the contradiction between economic development and ecological sustainability [3].

For our case study, the analysis of interactions between SDG 8 (growth and employment) and SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production) is particularly relevant, because they are two very significant objectives for analyzing the contributions of the SSE to the SDGs. In fact, they are two of the SDGs most cited when analyzing the links between SSE and SDGs, alongside that of gender equality (SDG 5) [9,24]. In this context, the latest follow-up report by the UN [25] states that progress on SDG 12 fosters all other SDGs but does not provide any data or explanation in this regard. In contrast, Pradhan et al. [21] found that SDG 12 is the goal that is most commonly associated with trade-offs regarding the achievement of other SDGs. At the same time, SDG 8 does not appear in any of the synergies, despite both SDG 8 and SDG 12 sharing an indicator related to material efficiency. In fact, no country in the world shows significant progress in both indicators simultaneously, and only four countries—Cuba, the Dominican Republic, India, and Panama—have achieved at least one “yellow” (acceptable progress) (The Sustainable Development Solutions Network, in addition to calculating the numerical indices of the SDG-Index, also rates the progress of each country with respect to each of the 17 goals of the SDGs on a four-color scale, from the best to the worst: green, yellow, orange, and red) mark concurrently in both SDGs 8 and 12 [22].

Thus, underlying the SDGs we can find the old discussion about the (in)compatibility between economic growth and ecological sustainability. The SDGs defend “sustainable” economic growth, especially for the most impoverished countries, but do not offer a clear justification that supports the need for growth at the global level [4]. Growth could be justified for poor countries, but only on the condition that the new income will be redistributed in favor of the most deprived people. However, beyond a certain threshold, more growth is not necessary to achieve the SDGs, and this can even lead to negative effects. According to Hickel [4], reducing global inequality is the only reasonable method to meet the social development goals of the SDGs without violating environmental sustainability goals.

The UN follow-up report itself recognizes that the standard of living of rich countries depends on natural resources extracted from poor countries and that the material footprint grows faster than eco-efficiency in their use [25]. On a finite planet, the increased demand for natural resources of some countries inevitably reduces access opportunities for other countries, thus exacerbating the challenges of inequality and equity [3]. A vision persists in the SDGs that economic growth is necessary to reduce inequality and poverty, but this vision is increasingly being contested [26,27] in favor of redistributive approaches.

Beyond the internal theoretical inconsistencies, it also seems that the different actors involved lack a common focus on how the SDGs can be operationalized. Nonetheless, it is said that achieving the SDGs would require profound and structural changes in all sectors of society [28], and that to be truly transformative the SDGs must capture systemic and structural barriers to change. However,

a narrative of that change is missing, both in terms of how the goals achieve broad social change outcomes, and how this change takes place [1], or how this affects power relations between actors [29].

The 2030 national agendas that each state has been designing often harbor the illusion that top-down leadership from governments alone can tackle the problems. However, as the UN's own declaration clearly acknowledges [15], the SDGs need to mobilize new agents beyond the state and the public sector, such as private companies and civil society. Multiple sustainable development perspectives are needed to respond to the various reasons and logics of change [30]. This is precisely where local public policies and participatory governance come into play, in which agencies, municipalities, private companies, social enterprises, and cooperatives, as well as other social actors, can offer a shared vision—not necessarily a unified one—of the required changes in the territory.

The construction of this shared vision is not, however, achieved without problems. The policy-makers and bureaucrats responsible for the SDGs at different levels tend to follow a strategy that avoids conflict (inter-ministerial or policy coherence) and prefer to focus simply on non-conflicting synergistic actions [16]. However, sustainable development also requires imposing some limits (global natural limits) [31,32], and therefore entails potential conflicts about relatively scarce resources or competing interests. However, any discussion about the political (re-distributive) conditions for sustainable production and consumption are absent in the SDGs [33]. Therefore, the UN agenda subtly reinforces the power dynamics that sustain the same status quo from which underdevelopment, poverty, inequity, and exclusion have originated [29].

This dynamic is particularly manifested in the key role assigned to businesses (private companies) in the 2030 Agenda. Businesses are treated as if they were inherently good, per se, for the common welfare, instead of them pursuing their own benefit; no criteria are included to distinguish between the positive or negative roles of businesses for sustainable development [33]. Given this, the role of the SSE's actors becomes central, because the hallmark of their activity is an economy oriented toward the common welfare of the people rather than profit-making, and the ability to reconcile different aims (economic and social).

## 2.2. SSE and Its Own Particular Tensions

The SSE is a relatively new conceptual umbrella that emerges from the amalgamation of two previous terms: Social Economy and Solidarity Economy. Its origin lies in the Social Economy, which proposes a “different way of enterprise” traditionally linked to cooperatives, mutualities, and associations that are guided by a series of principles: (i) primacy of people over capital (in decision-making and benefits distribution); (ii) self-management and democratic decision-making; (iii) solidarity (inside and outside the organization); (iv) priority of service to its members and the community above making profits [34,35].

The idea of Solidarity Economy is commonly regarded as a branch growing out of the common trunk of Social Economy [36], and it brings together concepts and ideas originating in both Latin America and Europe [37,38]. Even though there is no generally accepted definition of Solidarity Economy, it refers to a heterogeneous set of practices oriented to democratizing the economy [6,7]. By placing people rather than capital accumulation at the center of the economic system, Solidarity Economy represents both a theoretical attempt to construct an economic paradigm different to capitalism and a political proposal for social transformation [39,40].

We are aware of the contested nature of the term SSE [8]. However, we have chosen it for our study because despite being more diffuse, and probably thanks to that, it can include a broad variety of actors and actions, which is one of the characteristics of our case. While presenting both similarities and differences with respect to other trajectories [41], in the Basque Country we can find a variety of SSE families emerging during different waves. For instance, our case includes traditional industrial cooperatives from the first wave in the 1960-1970s; new social cooperatives and social enterprises, WISEs, emerging from the second wave from the 1990s onwards; and initiatives from a third and most recent wave or re-emergence, in which our case is situated, that links all kinds of previous experiences

through local public-private collaborative spaces. As Sepulveda pointed out for other cases [42], this emergence occurs in a context where, on the one hand, the supremacy of the free enterprise ideology is widespread, but on the other, there is a resurgence of critical economic thinking linked to social and environmental principles. In our case, we find industrial cooperatives from the traditional social economy oriented towards competitive market activities which mainly serve their members' interest, and social enterprises that serve a broader community interest and are able to identify and serve new social needs [41–44].

Despite different meanings nesting under the conceptual umbrella of the SSE, there is an inevitable ethical/normative reference to foundational principles and values that determine social aims and objectives beyond income generation, and, in a more or less explicit way, a commitment to social justice and the search for a social transformation of a systemic nature [8]. However, the entities within the SSE face their own tensions, due to their character as hybrid organizations which at the same time pursue more than one goal (social and economic), which can result in conflict between them [44,45]. Achieving social and environmental objectives, while also ensuring the income necessary to sustain such activity, increases the risk of creating a gap between foundational theoretical principles and actual practices.

The dynamics of competition in the market, and the need to operate within the framework of economic institutions designed from the perspective of capital, are a source of important tensions for the SSE experiences. In this sense, Utting identified both opportunities and tensions with the mainstreaming of SSE due to two main dynamics [11]: (i) instrumentalization, when the state or the market forces employ SSE to advance specific goals; and (ii) isomorphism, when SSE organizations assume behaviors of mainstream institutions with which they interact. Below, we review four examples of these tensions, limitations, or challenges that the SSE faces and which, at least to some degree, the initiatives of our case study try to overcome, as we will see later.

First, there is a concern that the growth in organizational size and complexity, the use of business management instruments designed for capitalist companies, or the primacy of mercantile values in relation to social ones may deteriorate the democratic quality of the organization. This is a recurring topic in the literature on governance models in cooperative-type organizations. The trend toward managerialism, heightened by a context that promotes market-based solutions to social problems, could result in organizations drifting away from cooperative transformative values [46–48].

For instance, the debate on how to extend/scale up the SSE without compromising its core values is a focal point. The controversies around the internationalization processes of the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation [48,49], the debates on the denaturation and demutualization processes in the social economy [50], and so-called cooperative degeneration [51,52] illustrate the limits of some of the growth models of this kind of enterprise. Nevertheless, the so called “degeneration thesis” has recently come under scrutiny. The argument is that degeneration is not inevitable and that cooperatives can also regenerate themselves [53,54].

Second, the ability of the SSE to address gender, race, and social class injustices is also limited in practice. With regard to gender, the work of feminist economists has highlighted patriarchal biases in the organizational logic and experiences of the SSE. This has initiated a debate on how to guarantee and distribute all the jobs and responsibilities related to the care and maintenance of lives that are worth living [55,56]. Furthermore, Borowiak et al. [57] raised the need to confront the privileges of race and social class within the SSE, since in the absence of a regional vision that considers the dynamics of spatial segregation by race and class, the experiences of the SSE in a region could end up replicating this segregation.

Third, there is a risk of depoliticizing the discourses of the SSE and deactivating their proposal for social transformation [58]. This manifests in the growing link between the SSE and the more managerial and reformist versions of the discourses around social entrepreneurship that Dey and Steayaert [59] call “the great narrative of harmonious social change”, avoiding any divergent conflict of interests. This narrative combines the harmonious achievement of financial and social objectives through strategies of double and triple bottom lines, which also include environmental objectives.

Fourth and finally, there are also challenges for the SSE initiatives regarding the economic growth versus the environmental sustainability of its proposals. We briefly discuss this fourth dimension in the following sub-section relating SSE and SDGs.

### 2.3. Linking the SSE and SDGs

To the best of our knowledge, there is not any one broadly acknowledged comprehensive and systematic framework for analyzing the links between the SSE and the SDGs. However, different sources in the academic literature already offer some interesting building blocks for this task, related to our first research question, which is the relationship between the SSE and the SDGs. First of all, we have to consider that the UN declaration itself points to the need of collaboration of all kinds of actors in order to achieve the SDGs [15]: “We acknowledge the role of the diverse private sector, ranging from microenterprises to cooperatives to multinationals, and that of civil society organizations and philanthropic organizations in the implementation of the new Agenda”. As we can see, the declaration mentions one of the actors of the SSE, the cooperatives, but it does not give any special role to them in comparison to other kinds of businesses. Besides, not even one out of the 169 targets of the SDGs mentions the SSE, social economy, social enterprises, or cooperatives.

Second, most of the literature fixes the link between the SDGs and the SSE actors in their capacity to address and reconcile multi-objective and/or multi-dimensional aims. That is, the SDGs within the SD framework pursue social, economic, and environmental goals, and the SSE actors are in the “pole position” for pursuing that kind of goal, as entities that not only have economic objectives as their *raison d’être* but also other (social and environmental) objectives. Not without tensions, their character as hybrid organizations has led them to develop a series of characteristics and strategies to handle possible contradictions [44,45,60]. According to Azkarraga and Altuna, cooperatives already have a rich tradition in reconciling apparently contradictory logics, so the environmental concerns can become a renewed discourse in which to reformulate the cooperatives’ traditional solidarity principle in three directions required to achieve global environmental sustainability: trans-national, intergenerational, and inter-species solidarity [61].

However, it is also true that within these multiple objectives of the SSE those related to environmental sustainability tend to be the last on the list. In fact, this also happens with the SDGs, as we have already pointed out [3,4], even more so considering that the average improvement in the SDG-Index also represents a higher ecological footprint [3]. In that sense it can be said that the SDGs’ economic foundations are not far removed from mainstream trends, so the SSE initiatives working to foster them tend to keep the same unsustainable ground. It is worth pointing out that SSE initiatives worldwide could also follow different, alternative models to conventional development [62,63], which could also facilitate strengthening environmental sustainability concerns.

Third, previous studies linking SSE and sustainable development are of course still valid and applicable to the SDGs. In this sense, Hudon and Huybrechts [64] identified a series of elements of the social enterprises and social economy as a whole that contributed to sustainable development: (i) their social mission is aligned with societal challenges at the core of the vision of sustainable development; (ii) their organizational set-up and their democratic and participative governance processes; (iii) their multi-objective and multi-stakeholder structure makes them well equipped to combine the three dimensions of sustainable development; (iv) they help in emphasizing the social dimension of environmental problems, since many of the drivers of these problems are social or political; (v) collective decision-making arrangements could be more successful in maintaining self-governed, common goods organizations; (vi) at a systemic level social economy actors help to raise social conscientization and awareness about sustainable development issues.

In a similar vein, Macías [65] pointed out that Social Economy and Sustainable Development share the same path. He analyzed some recent legal developments with regard to each approach and addressed how they share some points in common: (i) they both emerge to react to unbearable situations (uneven and unsustainable economic models); (ii) both compromise local development,

social cohesion, and sustainability; (iii) commitment to the community as a principle to guide action; (iv) the search for quality employment.

Fourth, from an inductive approach, there is increasing evidence confirming how local SSE initiatives and social enterprises operate in a more sustainable way, sometimes directly related with many SDGs. Just to cite a few examples: (i) rural agrarian cooperatives maintaining the rural landscape [12]; (ii) new local sustainable energy cooperatives [66]; (iii) local agro-ecological food production [67]; (iv) the recycling and reutilization activities linked to WISEs, and solidarity economy organizations fostering the circular economy [10,68,69]; (v) solidarity economy local initiatives concerning the sharing economy, community currencies, and crowdfunding [70], etc. However, there are still few studies that analyze the concrete targets of the SDGs that these initiatives are fostering, a gap that we are trying to start to close in this text.

Fifth, it is worth considering that among the principles of the cooperatives and social enterprises is their commitment to the community. This often happens in local territorialized contexts, since location and geographical and cultural embeddedness is one typical characteristic of many of these experiences. In that sense, they can have a better awareness of environmental sustainability issues because they live in the very same territory and are directly affected [14].

Sixth and finally, Littlewood and Holt [13] proposed an analytical framework of the relationships between the SDGs and social enterprises focused more on the linking channels than on the content. In that sense, they analyzed how the social enterprises contribute to the SDGs along two axes: (i) whether they do so concentrated in one point of the value chain, or extended across the entire value chain; (ii) whether they do so focused on only one (or few) specific goals, or on multiple goals at the same time. In a review of seven enterprises they found evidence for each of the possible combinations.

### 3. Case Study and Methodology

#### 3.1. Case Study: ADLBB

In the case of the Basque Country, the local development agencies are municipally owned public entities that aim to promote economic activity and employment, and receive funding from multiple administrative hierarchies, ranging from the local to the European Union levels. These entities have a regional scope (several municipalities), and in the case of Gipuzkoa province, they have been covering the entire territory from the late 1980s to the present day. Although these agencies share the same objective of territorial development, they are significantly different in terms of their legal form, philosophy, practice, and in the composition of their technical teams, and their structures are closely related to the characteristics, specificities, and productive specializations of each of the territories in which they are located [71].

The ADLBB case, formed by the municipalities of Hernani, Urnieta, Usurbil, Lasarte-Oria, Astigarraga, and Andoain, is interesting as an object of study because it implements several projects that are framed within the SSE. This specificity is related to the multidimensional characteristics and conditions of the territory, in which a large number of social and economic agents follow this economic approach. The ADLBB projects that have as their final objectives the gradual social, economic, and territorial transformation of the region and that aspire to construct societies that are more just, ecological, equal, and inclusive in line with the SSE, are presented below.

##### 3.1.1. Project “Beterrri Km 0”

This project aims to progress toward food sovereignty in the territory. It has been running since 2014 and has the participation of 9 production entities from the first sector, supplying 4 public-collective dining rooms (a nursing home, two nurseries, and an elementary school), 13 restaurants, and 11 stores.

The project acts on both supply and demand in a coordinated manner. The project performs a territorial analysis to identify unused land and allocate it to new young producers and offers training



courses in agroecology and management based on circular economy principles, to increase farm productivity and sustainability.

In terms of demand, all publicly owned dining rooms have been identified, and social and environmental clauses that prioritize the consumption of local production will be included in the new tenders. In addition, a brand and badges have been created to publicize the stores that sell local products to increase the consumption of such products and improve the positioning of the stores that offer them.

### 3.1.2. “Social Employment” Project

The main objective of this project is the social and labor inclusion of people at risk of exclusion. It has been running since 2015, and includes participation by 280 beneficiaries in socio-labor insertion processes, 15 public sub-entities, and 11 companies. The project establishes inter-institutional coordination mechanisms in the region because the divided administrative structures would not allow the complexities of the exclusion processes to be addressed.

Under this new structuring, there are two main fields: (1) constitution of a socio-labor insertion company in the environmental sector, aimed at creating employment for young migrants; (2) improvement of care services for the population in general, and the elderly in particular. To this end, coordinated strategies have been established among the equality services of each town, intercultural associations, and the feminist movement. The objective of this process is the constitution of a comprehensive care cooperative that would serve dependent people while offering a decent work structure, and access to regularization for migrant workers who already work in this sector (sometimes without legal contracts).

### 3.1.3. “KoopFabrika” Initiative

This is a service for the creation, incubation, and consolidation of cooperative companies that aims to strengthen the economic fabric and is at the service of social needs, as well as being democratic, sustainable, and inclusive. The initiative has been running since 2016, and two universities, a network of cooperative companies, and three local development agencies are participants. It has resulted in the creation and consolidation of 37 cooperative companies and the training of 144 entrepreneurs.

The initiative operates at three levels: (1) Creation, training, and tutoring—it offers theoretical (in SSE) and practical training (in business management), as well as personalized support throughout the entrepreneurial process, in addition to facilitating rooting in the territory through various actions aimed at promoting cooperation among local enterprises. (2) Incubation—many of these recently created companies are being incubated in Iturola, a public co-working space, which is explicitly intended to create links between the different economic and social agents present in the territory. (3) Consolidation—the creation of a “transformative social economy network”. These companies tend naturally to cooperate, create networks, and connect with the territory. Thus, it is a model that opens up opportunities for public-cooperative collaboration in pursuit of joint action between the public administration and the economic and social fabric.

### 3.1.4. Articulation around “Eraldaketa Nodoa”

“Eraldaketa Nodoa” aims at creating a process of public-private coordination (with cooperatives, social enterprises, and social agents) from which to manage the transformation of the region and extend the different SSE projects that are already underway in the ADLBB (Beterrri km 0, Social Employment, KoopFabrika), in coordination with the social responsibility projects of these agents themselves. “Eraldaketa Nodoa”, which started in 2018, has seen participation by 15 enterprises and a vocational training center. The objective is to progress toward the constitution of a “SSE Local System” that goes beyond the promotion of individual projects in isolation.

The social responsibility actions of the private agents coordinated from “Eraldaketa Nodoa” are divided into five areas: inclusiveness, sustainability, local development, communication and cultural

creation, and technological sovereignty. The actions are of various types, such as labor insertion processes, collective consumption groups of local products, circular economy and energy efficiency, local social market directories, and communicative dissemination in the local language.

In short, this “SSE Local System” is characterized by innovation, sustainability, equity, and inclusion. The “KoopFabrika” initiative is a leader in social innovation; the “Social Employment” project is clearly committed to equity and inclusion, while the “Beterri Km0” is dedicated to local sustainability. All this is articulated in a local system through the “Eraldaketa Nodoa” initiative.

### 3.2. Methodology

The methodology followed for the case study consisted of two facets. On the one hand, a bibliographic review of the academic literature was conducted in the field of both the SDGs and SSE. An extensive analysis of the internal documentation of the ADLBB projects was also performed.

On the other hand, fieldwork was carried out involving a qualitative inductive approach, comprising three different techniques: semi-structured interviews, discussion groups, and participant observation. The semi-structured interviews and discussion groups were conducted with both institutional agents and representatives of enterprises involved in different projects, which are presented in the following Table 2. The majority of the interviewees met three characteristics: (i) long experience in their enterprise, also at the management level; (ii) being in charge of social responsibility initiatives within their organizations; (iii) they were the person designated/elected by their enterprises to participate in the ADLBB projects. In some cases the opinions of interviewees may seem quantitatively unrepresentative with regard to number of employees in their enterprises, but we would like to underline that they are qualitatively representative insofar as they are the only persons designated by their organizations (each enterprise) for the task of participating in the ADLBB projects. In that sense, they are also quantitatively representative since we have interviewed almost all the participants. The participant observation was put into practice throughout the process thanks to the direct collaboration of one of the ADLBB technicians, who has been in charge of the projects since their inception in 2014.

**Table 2.** Participating enterprises and interviewees.

| Enterprise             | Activity Sector                      | Workers | Participation in Projects                            | Interviewees <sup>1</sup> /<br>Discussion Groups | Position        |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|--|--|-----------------|
| Agintzari/<br>Zabalduz | Work integration<br>Social inclusion | 120     | Social Employment<br>Eraldaketa Nodoa                | M. G.  | working partner |
|                        |                                      |         |  | J. G.  | working partner |
| Antza                  | Industry (printing press)            | 15      | Eraldaketa Nodoa                                     | M. E.  | working partner |
| Elhuyar Fundazioa      | Social innovation Consulting         | 90      | Social Employment<br>Eraldaketa Nodoa                | J. A.  | CEO             |
| Emun                   | Social innovation Consulting         | 86      | Eraldaketa Nodoa                                     | I. B.  | working partner |
| Fagor Automation       | Metallurgical industry               | 60      | Eraldaketa Nodoa                                     | M. S.  | working partner |
| Fagor Ederlan          | Industry (automobile)                | 550     | Beterri km0<br>Social Employment<br>Eraldaketa Nodoa | R. T.  | working partner |
|                        |                                      |         |  | A. G.  | working partner |
| Ingutek                | Environmental engineering            | 2       | KoopFabrika<br>Eraldaketa Nodoa                      | F. A.  | working partner |

Table 2. Cont.

| Enterprise         | Activity Sector              | Workers | Participation in Projects             | Interviewees <sup>1</sup> /<br>Discussion Groups | Position        |
|--------------------|------------------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Karabeleko         | Agroecology                  | 7       | Beterri km0<br>Eraldaketa Nodoa       | O. A.  | working partner |
| Talleres Mitxelena | Metallurgical industry       | 30      | Social Employment<br>Eraldaketa Nodoa | A.T  | working partner |
| Tokikom            | Local media<br>Communication | 20      | Eraldaketa Nodoa                      | A. A.  | CEO             |
| Orona Fundazioa    | Industry (Lifts)             | 600     | Eraldaketa Nodoa                      | I. M.  | CEO             |
| ADLBB              | Public<br>Administration     | 5       | Eraldaketa Nodoa                      | O.Z  | Technician      |
| ADLBB              | Public<br>Administration     | 5       | All four projects                     | A.E  | Technician      |

<sup>1</sup> Name and Surname Initials in order to respect anonymity. Source: elaborated by the authors.

The fieldwork mainly took place at three different moments. First, in January 2019, when the most recent project “Eraldaketa Nodoa” was already running and was now facing a key moment in which to situate the needs, expectations, and interests of the participating enterprises. The second moment of the fieldwork was planned for June 2019, when a mid-term evaluation was held to analyze the strengths and the weaknesses of the ongoing process. Finally, the third and last fieldwork investigation took place in January 2020, at the beginning of the project’s second edition, when a general evaluation of its first edition was conducted and the participants were asked about the new annual planning and about which other enterprises could be invited to join the project.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results: The SDG Goals Fostered by the SSE Projects

The results of the convergence analysis between the main lines of action of each of the projects and the SDGs to which they contribute are presented below. Table 3 shows the direct relationships between the four projects and 9 general SDGs (2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 16, and 17) as well as the links with 19 specific targets out of the 169 contained in the SDGs. However, four SDGs can be highlighted in order of importance: numbers 8 (growth and decent work), 5 (gender equality), 12 (sustainable consumption and production patterns), and 2 (hunger and food). Although other weak relationships with the rest of the goals or other indirect interactions exist, only the strong and direct correlations are presented. The relative advances in each goal of the SDGs vary according to the different regions of the planet. In Europe, curiously, the aforementioned SDGs 2, 5, and 12 that drive the SSE initiatives in our case are found to have a score (63.2, 70.3, 59.2, respectively) lower than the regional SDG-Index average (76.4) [17].

**Table 3.** Summary of projects and linkages with the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

| Project           | Objectives   | SDGs' Specific Targets Concerned  |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Beterri Km 0      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Food Sovereignty.</li> <li>- Responsible public purchasing.</li> <li>- Creation of local markets.</li> <li>- Increase the productivity and sustainability of agricultural farms.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2.3: Double agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, [ . . . ] including through secure and equitable access to land, other resources, and knowledge.</li> <li>- 2.4: Ensure the sustainability of food production systems and the application of resilient agricultural practices that contribute to the maintenance of ecosystems.</li> <li>- 2.c: Ensure the proper functioning of essential food markets.</li> <li>- 12.2: Achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources.</li> <li>- 12.4: Achieve environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle.</li> <li>- 12.7 Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, following national policies and priorities.</li> </ul>   |
| Social Employment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create integrated socio-labor insertion itineraries.</li> <li>- Multi-scale, inter-departmental, and inter-institutional governance of social services and employment.</li> <li>- Creation of a WISE.</li> <li>- Constitution of an integral cooperative of care with migrants.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 5.4: Recognize and value care work and unpaid domestic work through public services and social protection policies.</li> <li>- 5.5: Ensure the full and effective participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels.</li> <li>- 5.c: Approve and strengthen policies to promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women.</li> <li>- 8.5: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including youth and people with disabilities, as well as equal pay for equal work.</li> <li>- 8.8: Protect labor rights and promote a safe and secure work environment for all workers, including migrants, in particular, women migrants, and those in precarious employment.</li> <li>- 10.2: Promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all people, regardless of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, or other condition.</li> </ul> |
| Koop-Fabrika      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Encourage entrepreneurship: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training in SSE and business management.</li> <li>- Tutoring and support.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2) Incubation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public co-working.</li> </ul> </li> <li>3) Consolidation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transformative social economy network.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 8.2: Achieve more economic productivity through diversification.</li> <li>- 8.3: Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, creation of decent jobs, entrepreneurship, and innovation, and promote the formalization and growth of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises.</li> <li>- 8.4: Progressively improve efficient production and consumption of global resources and aim to achieve decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation</li> <li>- 8.5: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including the youth and people with disabilities, as well as equal pay for equal work.</li> </ul>  |
| Eraldaketa Nodoa  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creation of a shared agenda for social transformation between public administration, companies, and the social and associative fabric.</li> <li>- Public policy co-construction for territorial development.</li> <li>- Coordination of corporate social responsibility initiatives.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4.4. Increase the number of young people and adults who have the necessary skills, in particular, technical and professional, to access employment, decent work, and entrepreneurship.</li> <li>- 7.2. Significantly increase the proportion of renewable energy in all energy sources.</li> <li>- 16.7. Ensure the adoption of inclusive, participatory, and representative decisions that respond to needs at all levels.</li> <li>- 17.17. Encourage and promote the establishment of effective alliances in the public, public-private, and civil society spheres.</li> </ul>  |

Source: elaborated by the authors.

We will now try to find some answers to our second research question, regarding the impacts of the SSE initiatives fostered by local policies on the achievement of the SDGs. First, it can be observed that the Beterri Km0 project is directly related to SDGs 2 and 12, that is, the promotion of food security (food sovereignty in our case) and sustainable agriculture, and sustainable consumption and production patterns. The Social Employment project is mainly related to SDGs 5 and 8, that is, gender equality, and the promotion of inclusive economic growth and full employment and decent work for all (including women, migrants, and youth). The KoopFabrika project is directly related to multiple goals of SDG 8, concerning the promotion of micro or small enterprises (cooperatives and social enterprises in our case), entrepreneurship, and employment. For its part, it should be recalled that the Eraldaketa Nodoa project is also a way of articulating more agents with the previous three projects (Beterri km0, Social

Employment, and KoopFabrika); therefore, all the already cited goals could also be included here. At the same time, this last project serves to contribute to new specific targets related to SDGs 4, 7, 16, and 17, which cover disparate topics, such as education and lifelong learning opportunities, sustainable energy, inclusive societies and institutions, and alliances for sustainable development.

Second, these achievements are attained in a transversal manner, that is, not through initiatives that are highly focused on one single target, but through projects that feed more than one objective and that are coordinated with each other. In this sense, the technicians of the ADLBB claim that this is not a coincidence but something that they have prioritized by looking for projects that create synergies and link more than one objective at a time [discussion group1]. These interactions are in accordance with the existing literature on SDGs that advocates strengthening the compound and synergistic effects of projects that have more than one goal [28,72]. These are not isolated projects, but rather an interdependent package, just as the SDGs are.

Third, we found that the ADLBB has implemented all kinds of policies or projects for the promotion of SSE—which later have a positive impact on the SDGs, namely: soft policies, both institutional and cognitive; and tough policies, both on supply and competitiveness and on the demand side [73]. There are also social innovation processes developed through new governance mechanisms and policy co-construction among multiple stakeholders [74]. The technicians [discussion group 2] underlined a common ground or guiding criteria that all the kinds of policies and projects that they foster have to meet in order to facilitate this co-construction. Among other criteria, they underlined: (i) the Public-Cooperative-Communitarian focus; (ii) Public interest located within the territory; (iii) Cooperation among stakeholders; (iv) Deepening objectives without harming others, thus prioritizing synergies; (v) Any created knowledge should have copyleft status and aimed at being transferable and replicable.

Fourth, it is worth noting an obvious aspect, that is, the existence of SSE proposals in our case study is prior to the adoption of the SDGs. Furthermore, in the case of the ADLBB the policies implemented did not initially have the SDGs as their intended purpose. Therefore, it should be said that the SSE does facilitate the implementation of the SDGs, not from an instrumental subordination, since this was not intended, but autonomously, because of the convergences between the two. In this sense, local institutions in the Basque Country are gradually aligning with the SDGs and are conducting studies on how their policies adapt to them. In 2018, the Basque Government presented the initiative “Euskadi Basque Country 2030 Agenda. Basque Contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. Furthermore, in 2019, the Gipuzkoa Provincial Council—the location in which the case study is based—presented “Progress Indicators of the goals of the 2030 Agenda in Gipuzkoa”. This is important considering that the interactions between SDGs are very context-specific and depend on the policy options that are implemented at each place [19]. However, the limitations in this field must be highlighted as well, such as the difficulty of the SDGs in operationalizing transformative agendas in the territory due to their “exogenous” nature, or the lack of real knowledge among many local stakeholders about the contents of the SDGs.

In sum, we can say that policies aimed at fostering local SSE initiatives are also a good strategy for achieving the SDGs locally: (i) they have positive impacts in many specific SDGs targets; (ii) projects are fostered in an integrated and synergistic manner, pursuing more than one objective or target at the same time, as the SDGs themselves intend; (iii) this contribution occurs in an unintended but clear way; (iv) through a variety of policies guided by social innovation and participative governance in the co-construction of policies.

#### 4.2. Discussion

Our results are consistent with many other studies: (i) in the first international conference on SDGs and SSE, held in Geneva in 2019 and sponsored by UNRISD, SDGs 5, 8, and 12 appeared as the most concurrent among experiences from around the world [9]; (ii) a research study among social enterprises in Spain also showed that the SDGs to which they thought they contributed most were

numbers 8, 4, 5, and 12 [24]; (iii) at the local level as well, Bastida et al. [14], in this issue of *Sustainability*, present SDGs 5, 8 as the more common.

We turn now to our third research question, regarding the challenges that both approaches (SSE and SDGs) face to achieve transformative change. When analyzing the contribution of SSE initiatives to the SDGs in different countries, we need to introduce a distinction between incremental change and transformative change [11,75]. Incremental change looks for partial gains in the objectives, focusing on the symptoms of the development problems, whereas transformative change focuses on the root causes and structural conditions of the exclusionary and unsustainable development that creates those symptoms. In a similar vein, other authors [67] differentiated between weak/strong sustainability and/or weak/strong social economy, depending on whether they address the outcomes of structural inequality or environmental degradation (weak) as against those that confront root causes and ideologies (strong). The UNRISD Flagship 2016 Report underlines the necessity to understand transformative change to foster social, ecological, and economic justice, and in that respect it underlines policy coherence and the creation of participatory spaces for the co-construction of policies in relation to social policy, care policies, and SSE as two key elements that are also fundamental for our analysis. It states that “while the potential of SSE in terms of transformative change seems evident, whether or not that potential is realized depends on overcoming a complex set of resources, institutional and political constraints ... these relate to questions of ... policy coherence, participation in the policy process ... ” (p. 127) [75]. We found that the ADLBB experience achieves incremental changes and also points in the direction of more structural changes, but still falls short in this effort.

First, we have seen that the SSE projects of the ADLBB seem to be able to partially harmonize the conflicting SDGs 8 and 12, combining economic purposes and environmental sustainability objectives. The literature on this field states that “... the greatest opportunity for SSE in the future lies in efforts to reorient economies toward ecological sustainability” [75]. However, this is not an automatic result. We found that the specific contents of both SDGs that are not in conflict with each other are promoted, that is, economic growth and overconsumption, and therefore global ecological impacts are not questioned, while collateral “micro” activities that can mitigate local impacts are implemented instead.

As an example, in our case two industrial cooperatives have shown their interest in replicating the model of the agro-ecological local diner for their workers within the enterprise, which in another of the participating enterprises is already giving local agro-ecological meals to 600 workers daily through the Beterri Km0 project [interviews 3,4]. This undoubtedly fosters environmental sustainability. However, this is done without altering the core industrial activity, which is linked to international supply chains in the automotive sector that has global environmental impacts.

Second, the four projects aim at overcoming some of the controversies over the SSE identified in the literature, thus trying to be more transformative: (i) the Beterri Km0 project tries to recover the value of sustainability that was often relegated among the principles of the SSE; (ii) the Social Employment project tries to address gender, race, and social class issues (intersectional inequalities), by promoting quality employment for migrant women and youth; (iii) the KoopFabrika project raises the issue of the democratic quality of SSE organizations and companies—partly because it does not focus on the individual growth of each company, but on the growth of the fabric and the network of SSE ventures that act collaboratively with each other; (iv) the Eraldaketa Nodoa project seeks to avoid the depoliticization of the SSE and promotes the mobilization of new agents through a participatory governance model with a vocation for systemic change. Among these issues, two especially (environmental sustainability and depoliticization related to a non-conflictive focus) also appeared as limitations in the SDG literature.

In this sense, various participants in the Eraldaketa Nodoa project [interviews 2, 6, 9] expressed the need to bond with other enterprises so as to strengthen their capacity to foster social transformation. This is in line with other similar experiences in which enterprises may not independently have the required capabilities, so they may choose to create appropriate architectures with other parties which possess the capabilities and instruments necessary to establish an innovative project [43]. However, despite pointing in the right direction, these achievements are still limited, since some of these

companies have suffered long processes of accommodation to competitive market dynamics that have led to externalizing costs rather than internalizing aspects of social and environmental responsibility, and they may have suffered a type of isomorphism toward management styles of capital companies instead of democratic self-management companies [48].

Third, it can be observed that the pattern by which the policies for the promotion of the SDGs focus on non-conflictive synergies is being reproduced in local SSE policies. They do not tackle the possible incompatibilities among the core objectives to avoid facing possible conflicting interests among actors [16]. The explanation might be that they are at the initial stages of this kind of common co-construction process in which alliances must be built and confrontation avoided.

Fourth, and related to the third, not all the projects promoted by the ADLBB are always clear about this comprehensive and transformative commitment, and there seems to be a lack of policy coherence. In addition to the four projects analyzed here, there are other minor projects that promote a conventional economic model. The articulation around transformative objectives has been achieved due to the specific commitment of certain key people within the ADLBB. In this sense, it is worth noting the possible contradictions and lack of policy coherence between local public policies, because some directly point to the transformation of the current economic structure, while other actions tend to delve into mainstream economic foundations that have economic growth and business profitability as their main objectives above other considerations. Utting [11] precisely pointed out that policy coherence is a key feature for achieving a more transformative change.

Again, these contradictions appear more clearly in the field of environmental sustainability. While it is true that partial improvements with a local impact are encouraged, nonetheless export activities are also encouraged in global industrial chains, which usually do not question global ecological impacts. These contradictions also emerge in the role that business and private companies can play within the SDGs [33]. On the one hand, there are large social economy cooperatives oriented to competing in international markets, and on the other hand, small enterprises focus more on strengthening local social markets, which deepen the construction of a “SSE Local System”.

Finally, it is also necessary to point out some limitations of our research: (i) regarding the case study we have to say that this is still an incipient process (the oldest project in the case study is only five years old), and there is still a long way to go; (ii) it represents a small local case study, nonetheless our results are in line with other cases and at the same time the literature argues that these convergences are context specific; (iii) it would be interesting to hear the voice of other actors (private capital companies, but also cooperatives and social enterprises that are not yet participating in the projects), or even more voices within each enterprise, especially in those with many employees.

## 5. Conclusions

The SSE and SDGs originate from different places and needs, and therefore follow different paths. While the SSE in the Basque Country has a long and diverse history, the SDGs are rapidly penetrating public–private governance agendas in the region. The SDGs set a broad list of social and economic development and environmental sustainability goals; however, they are also widely criticized. For instance, they suffer from internal inconsistency and measurement problems, and prioritize economic and social variables over environmental variables, to the point where a positive relationship between the SDG Index score and a greater ecological footprint exists. For its part, the SSE contributes values to create another economy that is more social, equitable, and ecological; however, it is also not without problems in practice—for example, regarding the risks of accommodation and assimilation (instrumentalization and isomorphism [11]) due to the inertias of competitive market dynamics.

The extent to which the SSE projects promoted by the ADLBB converge with the different objectives of the 2030 Agenda has been analyzed. Several points in common have been identified in practice, especially in goals 2 (hunger and food), 5 (gender equality), 8 (economic growth and employment), and 12 (patterns of consumption and sustainable production).

The projects studied are pieces of a “SSE Local System”, directed towards sustainability (Beterri Km0 project), equity and inclusion (Social Employment project), innovation and economic democratization (KoopFabrika project), thus committed to a transformative social economy. However, public policy strategies are in search of synergies, while avoiding entering into conflicting aspects, so the problem of fundamental incompatibilities between economic growth and sustainability are not solved.

Finally, we conclude that there are clear synergies between both approaches (SDGs and SSE), so local policies aiming to foster SSE are also desirable for pursuing the SDGs. Despite these interesting convergences, both approaches are independent in their origin, since SSE projects in our case existed prior to the SDGs concerns. The contribution of the SSE to the SDGs is unintended insofar as it was not planned, and so the two approaches could be autonomous. At the same time, both approaches face challenges/limitations in advancing toward truly sustainable, fair, and equitable societies.

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