

Audit and proposals for RIPESS Europe

March 2014

Introduction

This document was originally written as part of a collective process of reflection carried out by the international working group of the Catalan Network for Solidarity Economy. It follows a tradition that began after the Founding Congress, and before the CoCo meeting that was held in Lisbon where XES put forward a set of criteria for defining the functions of the Coordination Committee (rotating functions, decentralisation, sharing of functions, openness, balance and representation). At that point in time, we already suggested establishing temporary limits on how functions would be carried out (Coordinator, communication, Treasurer), as these functions should be networks' responsibilities and not just individual ones, and as each of these could be carried out by several member networks who were able to take part in the CoCo meetings. Following the document that was sent out by the General Coordinator in November 2012, XES carried out a further audit of the European network based on the possible nature of a lobby, and put forward priorities that were presented after the Congress that took place in Lille in July 2013.

This document was shared with all the CoCo members, and they were requested to express their opinions. It was then presented, discussed and modified and finally accepted by the Coordination Committee of RIPESS-Europe at the meeting that was held in Toulouse in February 2014.

Additional input has been incorporated into the present document.

Audit of RIPPESSE-Europe: strengths and weaknesses

This audit is not an attempt to carry out a full-scale audit of RIPPESSE-Europe; rather it aims to highlight some important characteristics that have marked its evolution.

- The international context is difficult, and is characterised by a neoliberal offensive and economic slow-down that is having a particularly strong impact on the outlying countries of Europe; it is aggravating working conditions, drastically reducing citizens' rights as well as those of social and solidarity economy organisations.

- At European level this translates into financial and monetary recession, limiting public expenditure, and a situation where governments and banks are imposing increasingly hard conditions on citizens. Poverty and unemployment are increasing. Small-scale structures that are most in need of support are finding it increasingly difficult to access State and European funds.

- The European institutions share the dominant economic approach, and are not able to reorganise the Structural Funds of experimental programmes in a way that takes social considerations into account, prioritising themes and creating confusion around concepts such as social entrepreneurship, responsibility and social innovation. The upcoming European elections will take place in a climate of increasing alienation and there will probably be a very high rate of abstention. Even if social economy has achieved a certain degree of legitimacy, solidarity economy has been almost totally ignored and marginalised by the European authorities. Nevertheless RIPPESSE-Europe's vocation is to become the expression of the assembled solidarity economy movement in Europe. In order to achieve this, it needs to play a more proactive role. The legitimacy of our network is such that it can represent the whole of the European solidarity economy movement. It is time to undertake initiatives to build a more global strategy between the various networks.

- It also appears that activists and social and solidarity economy organisations are not interested in the way the European Union works, and that they perceive it as futile to engage in a collective approach at European level; this is all the more true as local issues require urgent attention and take up all their available energies.

- All this has negative repercussions on RIPPESSE-Europe: even if some networks are expanding, some are in a difficult situations that threaten their very existence; some have even disappeared and we find it difficult to identify people who feel it is important, useful and necessary to dedicate time and effort to commit to a European approach. Our observations also indicate that the most solid networks are that that have a regional or local rather than national field of action – the former show a greater degree of cohesion and have greater human and technical resources available. Some sectors do however break with this pattern and are present at European or even global level; this is particularly true of the food sovereignty sector. In Barcelona there were 21 members. We have had difficulty in increasing this number. This is a rather modest quantitative result. There is an on-going important lack of presence of Scandinavian, Baltic, Slav or English-speaking membership... Nevertheless we are delighted to say that Swiss and German networks have joined the dynamics, as well as the desire of the Hungarian network to expand and include other Eastern European networks.

- **The Coordination Committee (CoCo)** has tended to work more like a well-meaning group of men and women volunteers than an organisation that is trying to coordinate and promote European social and solidarity economy. All too often, occupied by the urgency of our daily affairs, and with significant absences, we have not been in a position to build our specific style of working or a collective responsibility for undertaking tasks. We too often tended to expect that the General

Coordinator, who has expressed his fatigue on several occasions, would provide the momentum and dynamics that are in fact everyone's shared responsibility. We also expected the Executive Secretary to take responsibility for fund-raising, whereas this should be a collective undertaking, even if the Executive Secretary did play a specific role in this case, as most members are already facing their own difficulties in raising funds for their own structures. (The exception to this was the project drafted by XES at the end of 2012, even if this was turned down).

- **The thematic working groups** that were created in Barcelona in 2011 and reformulated in Lisbon in 2012 have carried out little or no work; and what work has been done, has been just prior to the congresses (Barcelona, Lille). This can be explained by the difficulties created by a lack of resources, language difficulties, and general dynamics. Thus far these groups have produced few results.

- With a few exceptions and apart from the Newsletter, there has been little contact between the CoCo and the members of **all the member networks**. The initiative of organising meetings with local networks whenever a CoCo meeting takes place, as has been the case since Paris in April 2013, helps to overcome this weakness to some extent. The field trips carried out by the ex-Executive Secretary to certain networks (Hungary, Romania, Catalonia, Northern Italy and Southern France) unfortunately did not produce the expected outcomes.

- Thus far, the CoCo's work has been too self-centred, without any genuine strategic plan, and is not based on any overall theoretical reflection. The bilateral transnational relationships, relationships with other European networks (EAPN, ENSIE, Social Economy Europe etc.) as well as with social movements have not been developed. The exception to this is the Food sovereignty sector and issues of climate change, where a joint theoretical approach as well as inter-networking and shared advocacy have taken place, as in the case of CAP negotiations in Europe, or the collective for Climate Change, as well as within the United Nations Civil Society Mechanism of the Committee for World Food Security and Nutrition... these three examples are illustrations of strong networking with different social movements.

- We took part in several meetings organised by the European Parliament, but did not attempt to **establish a regular dialogue with the EU institutions**. While not seeking to build a lobby, it is important to become better known, be visible and build links with a civil servant (preferably within DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) who would be sympathetic to RIPESS-Europe's ideas and who could keep us updated on programmes, tenders and strategic orientations.

- As it was not a strategic priority, **RIPESS-Europe has not taken any position on European Institutions' decisions** either of a general nature (competitiveness, structural funding reform...) or of a more specific nature (the status of European cooperatives, services of general interest etc.). We have merely built a connection with just one MEP who supports solidarity economy. Nor have national networks made themselves known to their country's MEPs. In terms of building relationships with the European Institutions, it is true that without being in Brussels every day, that we could improve our relationship with intermediaries. Our attempt to favour contact and inter-cooperation between members is a relative failure. There has been little exchange between members and where this has taken place, it has largely been outside the framework of RIPESS-Europe. We would also like to remind you that apart from the organisers, no member was able to mobilise an MEP for our Congress.

- **Network fundraising activities** have been almost totally limited to the FPH (Foundation for the Progress of Humankind), who have supported us. This enabled us to fund the salary of the Executive Secretary and to cover certain additional

expenses (CoCo travel, interpretation, etc.) The intermediate report to the FPH (activity and financial reports) was submitted as requested. Additional funding was raised for both the Barcelona and the Lille Congresses. This, combined with the participants' contributions enabled us to show a profit on the profit and loss account.

- **Relations with RIPESS International** have been maintained, and we participated in building the programme for the Congress that was held last October in Manila. Four representatives of our network took part. We also participated in the Second Forum in Santa Maria in Brazil, as well as organising several workshops during the World Social Forum in Tunisia. XES was instrumental in maintaining the relationship with the Moroccan network, REMESS as well as with other solidarity economy members present in countries of the Mediterranean Basin. At both the Congress of Barcelona and Lille representatives of certain African countries took part, as well as the Coordinator of RIPESS-Intercontinental. We also participated in the Conference on social and solidarity economy organised jointly by the ILO and UNRISD, both of which are Geneva-based UN Agencies, as well as in the follow-up activities. We are participating as observers in the newly created process of the UNTFSSE (United Nations Task Force for Social and Solidarity Economy).

- The **Website and social networks** have been regularly updated and 8 quarterly newsletters sent out. For the moment the newsletters contain mainly information on the networks' activities, and it is sent out to almost 3000 addresses, essentially those in the INEES database. It has not been possible to expand this database to include data from other networks, and no significant discussion has taken place on the Newsletter as a whole. An editorial that is written by the General Coordinator provides a certain degree of overall coherence, but the potential of the Newsletter is not fulfilled.

- To conclude this audit, we could qualify the current phase of our young European network (it was founded in Barcelona in September 2011) as that of becoming organised. In effect, following the initial enthusiasm of the Founding Congress, we now need to find the most appropriate forms of governance for our network, to adapt the objectives and the means, establish our strategy and priorities. The time has come to demonstrate that the European network is something that is necessary, that it can provide added value, and answers, and express itself on European issues, coordinate and bring together the efforts of the members, open to others, and build alliances to grow the European solidarity economy movement, and succeed in building social change.

Some proposals for the future of RIPESS-Europe

The much-needed revitalisation of RIPESS-Europe should be the result of activities of all the network members to undertake European and transnational work, as well as of the activities of the current working groups and fresh dynamics that can be created by the current members of the CoCo. In order to strengthen the European network, we need to be more visible, and move forward at a different pace, limit our weaknesses, consolidate our strengths, and reorganise our way of working. Current limits need to be acknowledged, but we need to develop and implement the proposals that were outlined in the guidelines for action developed by the General Coordinator, and presented at the Lille congress. This document proposes the following axes for work in 2014:

1. Strengthen relationships between the CoCo and local, regional, inter-regional, national and sectorial networks, as this would provide greater cohesion to RIPESS-Europe.

This can be done as follows:

- 1.1 When network members organise activities, it is important that they have the reflex of inviting at least one CoCo member. This is a way of consolidating the feeling of belonging and commitment to a European network as well as underlining the importance of the European dimension. There are also regular tenders that make it possible to raise funding. We should facilitate CoCo meetings with country networks where the meeting is taking place. It would even be possible to imagine that networks invite and organise an international event during CoCo visits, such as seminars, press calls, interviews with public authorities...
- 1.2 **The communication policy:** The website needs to be changed and to become more interactive, with feeds from members and existing documentary centres. It is also essential to rethink the role that the newsletter plays in both the internal and external communication of the network. We wish to make the following two proposals: firstly that the newsletter become not merely a tool for sharing network activities (networks already have their own newsletters that do this), but also that it become a means of expressing the ideas of the European network. This would imply the need to include opinion pieces that illustrate shared positions of the network. Publication should therefore be expanded to include not merely news items but also political and strategic articles. These can be written by network members or, if necessary by publishing articles or requesting contributions from people who are not necessarily members of the network. The second proposal concerns those who receive the Newsletter. For the moment it is sent out essentially to those addresses that are in the INEES database. This needs to be expanded, and to include addresses of people from all the various networks. Their permission will be required to do this. Another point that needs to be improved is that of feedback: reporting back on activities enables improved communication which in turn also enables improved action to be taken as a network, thereby creating a virtuous circle

Furthermore **all network members should nominate a contact person** who will be responsible for ensuring the links between the network and the RIPESS-Europe newsletter, to ensure that there is good bilateral communication

- 1.3 **Promote bilateral transnational relations between networks** that have shared affinities or interests, such as the implementation of social audits, complementary

currencies, exchange of concrete experiences, popular education. These bilateral transnational relationships between networks should also aim to jointly build shared projects, especially those relative to economic cooperation between network members – as this corresponds to the added value of RIPESS-Europe. RIPESS-Europe should facilitate exchange.

1.4 Improvements to the General Assembly:

- Ensure documents are provided before the GA to enable proper discussion; they should be distributed to all members in advance of the GA, including the annual activity report and the financial report
- Dedicate more time to discussing strategic aspects of the network and limit formalities to those imposed by the law.
- Ensure that the annual activity report and the strategic orientation document are the result of the collective work of the CoCo.

1.5 Improve the definition of the identity limits of RIPESS-Europe by limiting conceptual ambiguities and more clearly stating our solidarity economy identity.

2. Improve the way in which the working groups function.

2.1 There needs to be a designated person within the CoCo who is responsible for the working groups and who would remain in contact with each of the five existing groups. The tasks could include: sending out the list of the participants in the Lille working groups, involve them in the progress of the working group, establish connections between the working group and the newsletter etc.

2.2 The working groups need to have clear objectives with a one-year time-line, and to produce documents that will enable RIPESS-Europe to take shared positions on certain subjects. In effect, it is because they provide an added value to our practice in our networks that they will work properly. So the issue is not to which subjects are politically the most appropriate, but rather to identify what we are working on, and what we can share.

2.3 Provide the possibility to create new working groups if at least two networks request so, and open some working groups to membership from outside the CoCo.

3. Generate fresh dynamics within the CoCo

It is essential to establish the grounds for a more suitable way of working in the new phase of the CoCo, based on the following criteria:

3.1 Multiply the collective responsibilities within the CoCo and extend and share them with other members of the CoCo to build a collective voice, including what we communicate in our public relations. As well as the general coordination tasks, treasurer and communication, it is essential to create and designate people for other functions. We need at least 2 people (a man and a woman) for each function (rather than for each position), and we need to improve the definition of these functions.

3.2 Apart from the abovementioned functions, the CoCo meeting in Barcelona enabled a detailed organisational flow chart to be drawn for RIPESS-Europe. There are thus five working groups that have been established and are already working, as well as four structural or statutory functions (communication, general coordination, treasurer, relations with RIPESS-Intercontinental) as well as ten functions linked to current preoccupations: moderation of working groups, extension and expansion of the network, publication programme, strategic and theoretical development,

connections with other member networks, translation and interpretation, relationships with other social movements, institutional relations, fund-raising, salaried worker or human resources, (if and when there are any).

A consultative Committee is in the process of being defined.

To simplify the task of who does what, the two following functions will be associated:

The person responsible for ensuring the dynamics of the working groups will take responsibility for the five or six working groups.

The person responsible for Publication will also be responsible for communication.

The person in charge of relations with other members will be the same as the person in charge of the work group on State of the Art of SSE.

The person who is responsible for the working group on the question of limits of identity should be the same as the one work on theoretical and strategic development.

These tasks need to be shared between all members of RIPESS-Europe and not just members of the CoCo, although some do require specific development by the CoCo (those that are marked by *).

Definition of each of these functions:

Communication: *Website, *Newsletter, *Social networks, public relations with the press, *Spokespeople, *Internal communication (between members), publications.

Relations with member networks: *send out minutes to all member networks, *CoCo meetings with members of networks where the meetings are physically being held *support for working groups *facilitate and make best use of inter-cooperation, *undertake actions to enlarge (i.e. find new members), build country, sectorial, territorial relationships (East and North of Europe,...), agenda-sharing (proactive).

***General operation of the network:** have a realistic annual plan, annual report, organise the General Assembly, CoCo meetings (4 virtual and 4 physical every year), salaried worker or intern, translation/interpretation, administrative and financial tasks, participation in RIPESS-intercontinental Board meetings. Roadmap, expansion, inter-co-operation, economic co-construction, reporting back.

Theoretical and strategic development: Draft ideas, draw up a plan, actions in terms of objectives, build the system of alliances with other social movements and institutions, take positions, links with working groups, links with academia and the consultative committee.

Funding: *Membership fees, *overall funding and co-construction of collective projects within RIPESS-Europe to raise joint funding, *valorise the participation of CoCo members as part of the funding of RIPESS-Europe, *draft the budget, *fundraising.

3.3 Each person designated as responsible for one of the above functions will establish a work programme, drawing on his/her network and also on others that that can mobilise. This will be presented to the CoCo for approval. Those responsible will keep the CoCo regularly updated.

3.4 Other tasks considered as a priority by the CoCo (finding the requisite resources and financial plan, relations with other networks and European Institutions), can be carried out by all members of the CoCo.

3.5 Each time a member of the CoCo takes part in an international event and represents the network, they will write a brief report on their intervention.

3.6 Under certain circumstances all members of RIPESS-Europe may participate in CoCo meetings (they may request the right to speak but not to vote).

3.7 It is possible that in the absence of an expert within the CoCo, that a consultative committee be created; it will be composed of different experts in most of the fields of European solidarity economy.

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