



REVIEW

Building bridges between the solidarity economy and popular education: towards a more just and equitable society

Tendiendo puentes entre la economía solidaria y la educación popular: hacia una sociedad más justa y equitativa

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ABSTRACT

Solidarity economy and popular education are interconnected fields that promote social justice, equity, and democratic participation. This study, using a qualitative methodology, employed bibliometric search equations in databases such as WOS, Scopus, and SciELO, covering the period 2000-2023. A documentary review using PRISMA was conducted, selecting 192 documents, including 94 research articles, 68 institutional documents, and 30 reviews. The results highlight that democratic participation in the solidarity economy faces barriers such as inequalities in skills and training. Popular education fosters critical awareness but encounters challenges like preexisting power relations and resistance to change. The economic sustainability of these initiatives requires innovative business models and continuous education. Moreover, the scalability and replicability of these models depend on their adaptation to different socio-economic contexts. It is concluded that integrating solidarity economy and popular education strengthens resilient and just communities. However, their implementation requires sustainable strategies, continuous training, and adaptation to local contexts. The incorporation of information technologies can enhance their impact, though challenges persist in digital access and technological literacy.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development; Collective Economy; Social System; Sociology of Education.

RESUMEN

La economía solidaria y la educación popular son campos interconectados que promueven la justicia social, la equidad y la participación democrática. Este estudio, basado en una metodología cualitativa, utilizó ecuaciones de búsqueda bibliométricas en bases de datos como WOS, Scopus y SciELO, cubriendo el periodo 2000-2023. Se realizó una revisión documental mediante PRISMA, seleccionando 192 documentos, de los cuales 94 fueron artículos de investigación, 68 documentos institucionales y 30 revisiones. Los resultados evidencian que la participación democrática en la economía solidaria enfrenta barreras como desigualdad en habilidades y formación. La educación popular fomenta la toma de conciencia crítica, aunque enfrenta desafíos como relaciones de poder preexistentes y resistencia al cambio. La sostenibilidad económica de estas iniciativas requiere modelos de negocio innovadores y educación continua. Además, la escalabilidad y replicabilidad de estos modelos dependen de la adaptación a diferentes contextos socioeconómicos. Se concluye que la integración de la economía solidaria y la educación popular fortalece comunidades resilientes

y justas. Sin embargo, su implementación demanda estrategias sostenibles, formación continua y adaptación a contextos locales. La incorporación de tecnologías de información puede potenciar su impacto, aunque persisten desafíos en el acceso digital y la alfabetización tecnológica.

Palabras clave: Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible; Economía Colectiva; Sistema Social; Sociología de la Educación.

INTRODUCTION

The solidarity economy and popular education are two interconnected fields sharing common principles and objectives, centered on social justice, equity, and democratic participation.^(1,2) Both emerge in response to the limitations and exclusions created by traditional economic and educational systems. The solidarity economy is understood as a set of economic practices and principles focused on social and economic inclusion, based on cooperation, reciprocity, and self-management. This form of economy arises as an alternative to the capitalist model, which tends to prioritize profit and competition over human needs and collective well-being. The solidarity economy is expressed through diverse organizational forms, such as cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, and social enterprises.^(3,4)

A key principle of the solidarity economy is democratic participation. In solidarity organizations, members actively participate in decision-making, ensuring that all have a voice and vote in matters that affect them. Moreover, solidarity and equity are core principles aiming to reduce inequalities and promote collective well-being. Sustainability is also essential, promoting economic practices that respect the environment and guarantee the long-term viability of communities.^(5,6)

Similarly, popular education is an educational approach focused on empowering individuals and communities through participatory and critical educational processes.^(7,8) This methodology was extensively developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who advocated for a liberating and emancipatory education, contrasting with traditional educational models that tend to be oppressive and alienating.^(9,10) Popular education is characterized by its focus on the collective construction of knowledge, in which educators and learners learn together in a dialogical process. This approach challenges traditional power relations in education, promoting a pedagogy of questioning rather than a pedagogy of answers.^(11,12) Consciousness-raising is another central element, aiming to elevate participants' awareness of their socioeconomic and political reality and mobilize them to transform it.^(13,14)

The research question posed in the article is: How can the solidarity economy and popular education be effectively integrated to promote social justice, equity, and democratic participation in communities, and what are the main challenges they face in practical implementation? The article is structured with an introduction, followed by a qualitative methodology, results, discussion, and brief conclusions supported by the references that substantiate the arguments.

METHOD

The methodology used in this study adopts a qualitative approach, structured into two complementary methods. First, a search equation using the bibliometrics of the analytical categories “Solidarity Economy” and “Popular Education” was devised. This process spans a time window from 2000 to 2023 and was carried out by consulting nationally and internationally recognized databases and indexes such as WOS, Scopus, SciELO, Redalyc, and DOAJ^(15,16,17) (table 1, table 2).

Afterwards, a documentary review supported by PRISMA was performed.^(18,19,20,21)

Research question: a question centered on the connection between the solidarity economy and popular education over more than two decades was formulated.

Documentary investigation: a thorough search was conducted on platforms including Scopus, WOS, Redalyc, and Dialnet, using specific search equations to select relevant documents. A total of 192 documents pertaining to the analytical categories of interest were found.

Selection criteria: Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to filter the documents, ensuring an equitable identification of the analytical categories of interest.

Data extraction: Relevant data from the selected documents, including research articles, institutional documents, and reviews, were systematically recorded. In total, 94 research articles, 68 institutional documents, and 30 reviews were selected.

Merging search equations: The Vantage Point program was utilized to ensure a comprehensive and effective search of data platforms.

Analysis and synthesis: Significant trends, patterns, and relationships between the solidarity economy and education over time were identified.^(22,23,24,25,26)

Table 1. Example of search equation for solidarity economy

Database	Search Equations
WOS	Topic: (“ECONOMÍA SOLIDARIA OR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY”) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, AHCI, ESCI. Time period = All years Topic: (“ECONOMÍA SOLIDARIA OR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY”) Refined by: Publication years: (2016 OR 2017 OR 2010 OR 2013 OR 2015 OR 2012 OR 2009 OR 2011 OR 2014 OR 2008 OR 2020 OR 2021 OR 2022 OR 2019 OR 2018 OR 2006 OR 2005 OR 2004 OR 2003 OR 2002 OR 2001 OR 2000) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, AHCI, ESCI. Time period = All years Topic: (“ECONOMÍA SOLIDARIA OR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY”) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, ESCI, AHCI, SSCI. Time period = All years
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“ECONOMÍA SOLIDARIA OR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY”) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“ECONOMÍA SOLIDARIA OR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY”) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2022) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) OR ... OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2000))

Table 2. Example of search equation for popular education

Database	Search equations
WOS	Topic: (“EDUCACIÓN POPULAR OR POPULAR EDUCATION”) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, AHCI, ESCI. Time period = All years Topic: (“EDUCACIÓN POPULAR OR POPULAR EDUCATION”) Refined by: Publication years: (2007 OR 2016 OR 2017 OR 2010 OR 2013 OR 2015 OR 2012 OR 2009 OR 2011 OR 2014 OR 2008 OR 2020 OR 2021 OR 2022 OR 2019 OR 2018 OR 2006 OR 2005 OR 2004 OR 2003 OR 2002 OR 2001 OR 2000) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, AHCI, ESCI. Time period = All years Topic: (“EDUCACIÓN POPULAR OR POPULAR EDUCATION”) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, ESCI, AHCI, SSCI. Time period = All years
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“EDUCACIÓN POPULAR OR POPULAR EDUCATION”) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“EDUCACIÓN POPULAR OR POPULAR EDUCATION”) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) OR ... OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2000))

After the search and review, a documentary review supported by PRISMA was carried out.^(18,19,20,21) A total of 192 documents on the analytical categories of interest were identified. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to filter the documents, recording relevant data such as research articles, institutional documents, and reviews. Ultimately, 94 research articles, 68 institutional documents, and 30 reviews were selected. Through analysis and synthesis, various trends, patterns, and significant relationships between solidarity economy and education over time were identified.^(22,23,24,25,26)

Table 3. Triangulation of analytical categories and emerging categories

Analytical Categories	Description	Emerging Categories	Description
Solidarity Economy	Study of economic practices based on cooperation, solidarity, and sustainability.	Community Empowerment	Processes that strengthen communities’ capacities to manage their own economic initiatives.
Popular Education	Educational approach aimed at critical and emancipatory training, focusing on collective and participatory processes.	Collaborative Learning	Teaching methods that foster knowledge sharing and experiences among participants.
Social Inclusion	Strategies and policies to integrate marginalized individuals and groups into society.	Integral Development	Practices that promote holistic growth of individuals, including social, economic, and cultural aspects.
Public Policies	Analysis of government actions aimed at promoting the solidarity economy and popular education.	Social Sustainability	Initiatives ensuring the well-being of future generations through social justice and equity.
Socioeconomic Impact	Assessment of the effects of solidarity economy practices on improving community living conditions.	Economic Resilience	The ability of communities to adapt and thrive when faced with economic challenges.

The links between the solidarity economy and popular education are clear, as both fields promote participation, equity, and social justice.^(27,28) Popular education may be seen as a crucial tool for developing the solidarity economy by providing individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively participate in solidarity-based economic initiatives.^(29,30) Conversely, the solidarity economy provides a practical context in which the principles of popular education can be applied and experienced.^(31,32)

RESULTS

Participation and democracy: practical challenges

Democratic participation is a fundamental pillar in both the solidarity economy and popular education. However, its practical implementation presents numerous complex challenges requiring specific attention and strategies.^(33,34) In solidarity economy organizations, democratic participation means that every member has a voice and a vote in decision-making.^(35,36) This usually takes shape through horizontal structures and assemblies that promote equal power among participants. Nonetheless, the actual practice of democratic participation faces multiple barriers.^(37,38)

Initially, there is a diversity of capacities and commitment levels among members, where some may have more experience or skills in leadership and management, potentially creating imbalances in effective participation. Moreover, insufficient training in democratic processes can lead to ineffective decision-making, favoring the opinions of more vocal or experienced members and marginalizing those who are less confident or have fewer communication skills.^(39,40)

In the context of popular education, democratic participation is reflected in the dialogical process between educators and learners, in which both roles are interchanged and mutually enriched.^(41,42) However, there are also challenges, including preexisting power relations, distrust of participatory processes, and resistance to change. Further, popular education demands ongoing and reflective commitment to challenge and transform traditional power structures, which is not always easy to sustain, particularly in contexts where formal educational systems prevail.^(43,44)

A shared challenge in both domains is creating an inclusive, accessible environment for all members. This involves not only developing the skills required for participation but also adapting organizational processes and structures to accommodate diverse needs and contexts. For example, cooperatives and solidarity associations may need to adopt decision-making methods that include all members, regardless of their technical or educational skills.^(45,46,47)

Economic sustainability and continuing education

Economic sustainability and continuing education are critical components for the long-term success of solidarity economy and popular education initiatives. Ensuring financial viability while maintaining adherence to solidarity principles and promoting adaptive, continuous learning are interrelated challenges demanding integrated and strategic approaches.^(48,49) In the solidarity economy, economic sustainability involves an organization's capacity to generate sufficient revenue to cover operating costs, reinvest in growth, and meet social objectives. Cooperatives, social enterprises, and other solidarity-based organizational forms face the challenge of competing in markets dominated by capitalist actors who prioritize profit at the expense of equity and social justice. To mitigate this, it is essential for solidarity organizations to develop innovative and diversified business models that not only produce income but also align with their values.^(50,51)

Meanwhile, continuing education is essential for preserving relevance and effectiveness in both solidarity economy and popular education.^(52,53) In an ever-changing socioeconomic and political environment, members of solidarity organizations and participants in educational processes must have the skills and knowledge necessary to adapt and thrive. Popular education, with its focus on critical awareness and participation, plays a crucial role in offering a framework for continuous learning and community empowerment. Likewise, continuing education should encompass not only technical and management skills but also abilities in democratic leadership, conflict resolution, and sustainable practices. Furthermore, making education accessible and adaptable to participants' diverse needs and contexts is vital. This may involve flexible training programs, the use of educational technologies, and the promotion of collaborative learning communities.^(54,55)

However, the implementation of continuing education faces multiple barriers. The lack of financial and human resources can limit organizations' ability to provide high-quality training programs. Additionally, resistance to change and organizational inertia can hamper the adoption of new educational approaches.^(56,57) Overcoming these obstacles requires fostering an organizational culture that values learning and innovation while committing to continuous improvement.^(58,59,92)

Scalability and replicability of solidarity models

The scalability and replicability of solidarity economy and popular education models represent critical, multifaceted challenges.^(60,61) Extending these initiatives beyond their original contexts is essential for expanding their social and economic impact. However, effectively undertaking this expansion requires addressing inherent barriers stemming from cultural, economic, and social differences among communities.^(62,63)

Scalability refers to the ability of a model to grow and adapt to larger numbers of participants or broader geographic areas without losing effectiveness or straying from its core principles. In the solidarity economy, this involves preserving democratic participation, equity, and sustainability in a growth context. Business models must be designed to be flexible and adaptive, enabling solidarity- and cooperation-based principles to be

maintained as the organization grows.^(64,65) One effective strategy for scalability may involve adopting federated structures, in which small autonomous units are interconnected within a larger network, sharing resources and knowledge while preserving local autonomy.

Replicability, meanwhile, refers to the ability of a model to be reproduced in different contexts with successful outcomes.^(66,67) Identifying which essential elements must be preserved to maintain the model's integrity, while adapting other aspects to suit local circumstances, is crucial. For instance, successful agricultural cooperatives in one region may serve as models for others, but certain agricultural techniques, governance structures, and market strategies should be adapted to local conditions.^(68,69)

A central challenge to scalability and replicability is the heterogeneity of socioeconomic contexts. Differences in infrastructure, resource availability, educational levels, and organizational cultures can impact how effectively solidarity models are implemented in new settings. Hence, a thorough contextual analysis is crucial prior to attempting replication, including an assessment of local needs, existing capacities, and potential cultural or structural barriers.^(70,71) It is also important to establish support and mentoring mechanisms for new initiatives. This may include ongoing training, access to knowledge-sharing networks, and the availability of financial and technical resources. Parent organizations can play a vital role in mentoring and training new initiatives, ensuring they not only adopt the model but also develop the capacity to adapt and sustain it over time.^(72,73)

Information and communication technologies (ict) in the solidarity economy and popular education

The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into the solidarity economy and popular education represents a significant opportunity to enhance efficiency, reach, and impact. However, effective ICT implementation faces various obstacles, ranging from infrastructure and unequal access to technological training and cultural resistance.⁽⁷⁴⁾ This line of research focuses on evaluating and overcoming these barriers to maximize the potential of ICT in these contexts.

One key issue is digital access and the digital divide. Evaluating ICT access in communities involved in solidarity economy and popular education projects is essential to identify existing digital gaps and the barriers that hinder equitable access. These barriers may include insufficient technological infrastructure, prohibitive costs, or geographic limitations. Addressing them is vital to ensure that all community members can benefit from ICT.^(75,76)

Training and digital literacy represent further important challenges. Analyzing training needs in digital competencies for participants in solidarity-based and educational projects enables the development of programs tailored to various digital literacy levels. Such programs should be inclusive and accessible, providing individuals with the skills needed to effectively use technological tools.⁽⁷⁷⁾

Additionally, adaptability and usability of technological tools require attention. Investigating how to adapt technological tools to the specific needs of solidarity economy and popular education initiatives is critical to ensuring that they remain intuitive, accessible, and relevant. This includes designing user-friendly interfaces and implementing technological solutions suited to the characteristics of each community context.^(78,79,93)

Furthermore, studying the impact of ICT on participation and democracy within solidarity and educational organizations is necessary. Evaluating how technologies can foster or hinder active participation and inclusive decision-making will help devise strategies for genuine democratic engagement. Although ICT can amplify everyone's voice, it can also create new forms of exclusion if it is not managed appropriately.⁽⁸⁰⁾

Sustaining and maintaining ICT infrastructure is another critical aspect. Exploring sustainable models for maintaining and updating ICT infrastructure in solidarity economy and popular education projects is essential for ensuring the long-term effectiveness of these tools. This includes financial planning for continued technical support and periodic updates of both hardware and software.^(81,82)

DISCUSSION

Connections between the solidarity economy and popular education are crucial for cultivating a supportive and cooperative culture, as well as for moving toward a more just and equitable society. Popular education not only trains individuals to be conscientious and responsible economic agents but also contributes to developing critical, committed citizenship.^(83,84)

Despite its potential, effectively participating in these processes requires resources, time, and continuous commitment, posing considerable challenges, particularly for organizations with limited resources. A significant issue is democratic fatigue, which can arise from an overload of decision-making and the complexity of participatory processes. This fatigue can undermine members' motivation and curtail active participation, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of both the solidarity economy and popular education initiatives.^(85,86,87)

To address these challenges and promote economic sustainability, diversifying funding sources is crucial. This entails not only generating revenue from the sale of goods and services but also seeking grants and donations, and joining fair trade networks. Moreover, organizations should contemplate creating reserve

funds and implementing solid financial management practices to ensure long-term stability. Strategic financial planning is essential to reduce risks and secure the economic viability of solidarity economy and popular education initiatives.^(88,89)

Another key factor is the need to promote popular education as a tool for bolstering social awareness and critical analysis within communities. This involves designing participatory, context-based educational programs to meet the specific needs of each community. In addition, it is vital to foster a culture of continuous learning and critical reflection that allows individuals to challenge existing power structures and work toward building more just and equitable societies.^(90,91)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The solidarity economy and popular education intertwine as pathways to a more just, equitable, and democratic society, nourishing each other to build resilient and conscientious communities. Nonetheless, implementing these models faces significant challenges requiring ongoing reflection and a commitment to innovation and adaptability. Addressing these challenges is pivotal for consolidating these models as viable, sustainable alternatives to traditional systems.

Economic sustainability and continuing education form the key pillars for the success of the solidarity economy and popular education. A strategic and holistic approach that integrates sustainable financial practices with adaptive and accessible educational programs is necessary. Only through this integrated approach can solidarity organizations and popular educational processes thrive, fulfilling their mission of promoting social justice and equity.

Achieving participation and democracy in the solidarity economy and popular education—while essential goals—poses significant difficulties. They require careful attention to skill development, the creation of inclusive environments, and the continual support of participatory processes. A continuous and reflective commitment to these principles is the only way to achieve genuine democratic participation, promoting social justice and equity, and helping to build a more just and equitable society.

The incorporation of ICT into the solidarity economy and popular education is vital for modernizing and enhancing these initiatives, making them more inclusive and effective. This research line aims to provide practical and strategic solutions to address technological challenges and maximize ICT's social impact in the creation of fairer, more equitable societies. Through bibliographic review, case studies, surveys, and interviews, as well as mixed-methods data analysis, a strategic framework can be developed to tackle these obstacles and foster effective ICT integration.

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