

Expanded abstract

Social and solidarity economy and transformative economies. Scope and tensions in the Basque Country

Objectives

Transformative Economies question the foundational bases and everyday practices of the current economic model in multiple areas, but there is no single precise classification or a single accurate roadmap on what they are and what they should do. Specifically in the case of the Circular Economy, there is controversy in the literature about its transformative scope depending on the specific approaches it could adopt. The objective of this article is to shed light on this controversy. To do so, the research questions are: How to define and what are the typologies and characteristics of Transformative Economies? To what extent can the Circular Economy be placed within these Transformative Economies? What criteria help to evaluate the transformative scope of Circular Economy initiatives? What tensions do the initiatives face from their everyday practices?

Methodology

To answer these questions, we compare two different approaches of the Circular Economy through case studies in the Basque Country, one approach more typical of institutions (and conventional companies working with them) guided by criteria of efficiency and competitiveness, and another approach closer to Social and Solidarity Economy networks guided by sufficiency.

First, a systematic bibliographic search was carried out in academic databases such as SCOPUS and WoS. The bibliography analysing both topics together is very scarce, so we selected and reviewed some relevant articles from each field that could serve to establish a dialogue with the other field.

Second, to address the case studies, first, the relevant actors potentially representative of different approaches were identified, on the one hand, public institutions, and on the other, SSE networks. Then, for the case of the institutional approach, we carried out an analysis of institutional plans and publications; and for the Social and Solidarity Economy approach, we carried out semi-structured interviews with members of a well-known and established network such as REAS (Alternative and Solidarity Economy Network). Specifically, our analysis is based on three rounds of semi-structured interviews with Social and Solidarity Economy actors.

Findings and conclusions

Various sources encompass the Transformative Economies around four large groups: (i) Feminist and gender-based economies; (ii) The agroecological and food sovereignty movement; (iii) The commons; (iv) The Social and Solidarity Economy, the cooperative movement and ethical finances. In turn, they can be respectively associated with four schools of heterodox economic thought: feminist economy; ecological economy; community economy; social and solidarity economy.

To classify and delimit the Transformative Economies we have followed, as other authors have previously done, three criteria: (i) Sufficient elaboration of a conceptual framework that supports each category. (ii) Existence of a vocation of social movement, or of influencing society and public policies. (iii) Existence of a set of practices, projects and experiences of doing economics in a different way. In general, the key criteria to evaluate the transformative scope pivot on two axes. On the one hand, in the area of sustainability, taking into account the greater or lesser degree of eco-social commitment of each initiative. On the other hand, regarding the functioning of power, taking into account the gradual distinction between a hierarchical and concentrated power relations and decisions, and a horizontal and distributed operations. In addition, a series of strategies and policies must be combined, such as: Regulate; Redistribute; Resize-Decentralize-Relocalize; and Decommodify.

Regarding the location of the Circular Economy within the Transformative Economies, we find that those Circular Economy experiences oriented towards competitiveness do not tend to question the capitalist model, or infinite economic growth, so they would not fit within the Transformative Economies. Here we can locate the proposal of the Basque institutions, represented by IHOBE's and Basque Government's strategy. Meanwhile, the circularity practices of the Social and Solidarity Economy, oriented towards sufficiency, do question the capitalist model and do put limits on growth, so they would fit within the Transformative Economies. Here we can locate the case study we carried out on the experiences of REAS-Basque Country.

Regarding the most common tensions faced by these initiatives, we find the following: (i) Tensions derived from interactions with public institutions (formalisms, legalisms, registries, dependence on subsidies, depoliticization, etc.). (ii) Tensions derived from the search for economic viability within a competitive framework (price and cost competitiveness, working conditions, marketing and consumerism, etc.). (iii) Tensions derived from decisions on growth or scaling (types of growth, types of services given, proximity of the project, etc.). (iv) Tensions derived from the need to maintain "livable" dynamics and organizations (reconciliation, self-exploitation, gender equity, plurality and diversity, etc.). It is important to keep these tensions in mind, not as a problem that needs to be solved, since they are intrinsic and will always re-emerge in one way or another, but as a challenge that should be identified, recognized, revisited and reconsidered periodically.