

## Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy 2009, Tokyo: Civil Society Steps Up Efforts towards Alternative Economy

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## **Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy 2009, Tokyo: Civil Society Steps Up Efforts towards Alternative Economy**

There is an economic model that encourages local social entrepreneurship initiatives, builds a smaller-scale and independent economy, expands social networks, and promotes grassroots-based initiatives towards sustainable development. These ideas are summed up in the concept of the solidarity economy.

### **WHAT IS THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY?**

“Solidarity economy” has gradually gained currency in today’s international scene. This term, which was first coined in the annual World Social Forum (2001 to 2008), an open forum for global justice and alternative globalization movements, is rapidly spreading in several regions of the world, including Latin America and the EU. The concept of solidarity economy, which is in itself proposed by civil societies across the world, endorses a civil monitoring of the “failure” of the market economy. One of the main objectives of the solidarity economy is to supervise the transparency and accountability in the behaviour of governments as well as in the functioning of the market. The solidarity economy demands that the government carry out public policies and that private corporations take social responsibility for their economic activities. Furthermore, it encourages various non-profit activities in civil society, including social and community enterprises, fair trade, the non-profit organizations’ (NPO) activities, civic finance, local currencies, and environmental protection. Thus, the solidarity economy serves as a platform for practising alternative socio-economic activities. Chief among these are the revitalization of local economies and the creation of employment through the democratization of local communities; the promotion of human capital training, gender equality, and social inclusion; as well as the advocacy for the human rights of migrants and overseas residents, whose number is growing in the age of globalization, and of the people who are often characterized as “the weak.”

## THE FIRST ASIAN FORUM FOR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN 2007

The solidarity economy has already produced a significant outcome in Latin America, Africa, and the EU. In Japan as well as other Asian countries, a number of related activities have recently been organized and practised spontaneously. However, apart from the occasional World Social Forum, substantive communication among practitioners of the solidarity economy and those who are interested in it is still absent from the Asian continent. This is why the first Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy (AFSE) was held in Manila, the Philippines, in October 2007.

The chief organizer of the first AFSE was the Coalition of Socially Responsible Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Asia (CSR-SME Asia). Mr. Ben Quinones, who was CSR-SME Asia's leading organizer, aimed at promoting the solidarity economy not only in the Philippines but also in other Asian countries. "CSR-SME Asia" is the self-explanatory name of an entity that began germinating in Kuala Lumpur in 2000 and is now a full-blown organization that has facilitated business dialogues through five Asia-wide conferences involving over 700 individuals representing 100 entities from 15 Asian countries. CSR-SME Asia was in the midst of preparing the Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy of October 2007, which would be held in Manila and preceded by an electronic forum. Over six years of background work as well as real-life experiences and their evaluation, among others, would be feeding this notable event. Since 2004, CSR-SME Asia had organized a series of consultative workshops in the Philippines with local SMEs, savings groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, and fair-trade organizations, to lay the groundwork for a multi-stakeholder process that would bring together socially responsible producers, consumers, investors, and service providers in an integrated supply chain advancing the principles and standards of an alternative economic system called "Bayanihan Compassionate Economy" (BCE). *Bayanihan* is a Filipino word that denotes "solidarity," help, and caring for each other.

The initial target of this initiative was 150,000 members from around 5,000 Bayanihan Financial Centers (BFCs) established in over 600 towns and cities of the Philippines. The BFCs are autonomous, informal solidarity finance institutions owned and managed by the people themselves. To enable these BFCs to do business with each other and support solidarity-based economic initiatives, CSR-SME Asia worked out the establishment of the Bayanihan Banking Window (BBW), a banking facility that addresses the basic liquidity problems of non-bank development finance institutions (DFIs), that is, a temporary excess or lack of liquidity. Some 20 partner organizations met on January 31, 2007 to discuss the BBW as a mechanism for intermediation of funds among DFIs. A BBW fact-finding tour commenced in February 2007 and culminated with the Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy in October of the same year. This tour was meant to build trust and confidence among the prospective partners so as to provide a stronger foundation for concrete partnership proposals among DFIs.

In October 2007, approximately 700 people, mostly from Asian countries, took part in the first Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy. AFSE 2007's most remarkable outcome is that it allowed various Asian solidarity economy activists to communicate with one another. The significance of this event is also attested by the fact that it marked the launching of a series of meetings between social entrepreneurs and socially responsible investors, which eventually opened a new dimension of the solidarity economy. On the closing day of AFSE 2007, it was decided to hold a second forum in Japan in 2009 and a third one in India in 2011.

## **THE SECOND ASIAN FORUM FOR SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN TOKYO**

In anticipation of the Asian Forum for Solidarity Economy 2009 to be held in Tokyo, Japan, a preparatory committee was formed on 25 April 2008, with a view to make the second AFSE a real success. Our aim was to secure the sharing of various Japanese solidarity economy experiences as well as the collaboration with civil societies in other Asian countries, holding regular progress meetings.

The committee's representatives worked in various cooperatives, mutual benefit associations, labour unions, NPOs/NGOs, social enterprises, as well as fair trade, civic finance, and other civil organizations. The preparatory committee also called for the participation of local community business workers as well as any groups or individuals with an interest for non-profit activities. AFSE 2009 needed to muster a much more active participation and a commitment to develop the solidarity economy, not only in Japan and Asia, but also on a global scale.

We also organized fact-finding trips to study some applications of the solidarity economy in Japan as part of the preparation process for AFSE 2009. As in any other country, Japan has various instances of the solidarity economy. Some of them occur in rural areas, although people are suffering from the depopulation and the decline of agriculture. Japan also has a very unique peoples' movement, the consumer cooperatives, who have been trying to support Japanese farmers, to solve environmental issues, etc. The movement has now become an important base for the Japanese solidarity economy. We tried to present some of their activities on our website in anticipation of AFSE 2009.

## **A CASE STUDY OF THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN JAPAN**

I would like to present an example of the solidarity economy in Japan, that is, the workers' collectives which we discovered during one of our fact-finding trips in the city of Atsugi, Kanagawa Prefecture. The workers' collective project in Atsugi was initiated in 1982 by 128 women. It has progressively expanded its network, based on "civic capital," i.e., capital financed by local citizens for the benefit of citizens. The evolution of this movement is now seen as a history of the cooperative process of organizing people's basic conditions of living. In what follows, I introduce the

trajectory of several workers' collectives from Atsugi and evaluate them in light of the empowerment of local civil society.

Atsugi, a city with a population of 220,000, is located in the centre of the Kanagawa Prefecture, in the Kanto region of Japan. The city is the site of the famous Tomei highway interchange, while surrounded by an excellent natural environment including four A-level rivers and vast parklands. It has attracted corporations and research institutes for a long time, and the local government, having benefited from a high amount of corporate tax, boasts fiscal conditions that have always outperformed those of other comparable local municipalities, with an annual fiscal index ranked among Japan's top ten. It is commonly observed that in Japan, civic activities are carried out by non-local men and women. However, the case of Atsugi undermines this preconceived notion. The main actors of workers' collectives in Atsugi are highly localized residents, i.e., the women who have settled in the city with their families. In addition, Atsugi's population is much younger on average than that of most of Japan's local municipalities. According to 2005 statistics, the senior population's rate in Atsugi stands at 14.6% and the average age of the local population is 37.8 years old. However, the demographic growth has come to a halt after 2002, and it is estimated that the city will become an aging community in a few years.

Also of note is the inconvenience of the city's transportation system. Atsugi used to be a place where universities from the Tokyo area built new campuses. However, after a few years of operation, these institutions decided to resettle in other cities, due to the poor transportation facilities. As a matter of fact, Atsugi, despite its vast territory, has only two train stations, both located in the outskirts of the city. The residents usually rely on the local bus network for their everyday activities. What makes things worse, however, is that buses are often involved in chronic traffic jams. Therefore, the goal of one of the first workers' collectives was to launch a transportation service for seniors or disabled people. The workers' collective projects in Atsugi have developed in several phases. Following is a brief list of 13 projects, in a chronological order.

1. The Seikatsu (Life) Club Cooperatives' Atsugi Branch (1982). In 1982, the Atsugi Seikatsu Club Cooperative was formed by 128 members who had moved from Yokohama.
2. Civic politics (1986). A civic politics network was organized in Atsugi as part of the grand Kanagawa network movement initiated by the Seikatsu Club Cooperatives.
3. Sachi, a housekeeping and care management civic enterprise (1990). The Sachi workers' collective was founded by the Atsugi Seikatsu Club, in response to the need for the care management of children and seniors. This enterprise was well received among the cooperative members who needed someone to look after their children while they worked outside.
4. Participation of workers' collectives in public welfare policies (1993). With the cooperation of the local government, the Seikatsu Club Cooperative introduced an in-house senior care management centre in Atsugi. This was a pioneering enterprise in Japan at that time.
5. The Crayon Nursery School for the care management of disabled children (1997). The Crayon workers' collective was initiated as an unauthorized nursery school. In the course of

its activities, Crayon has narrowed its target to supporting the care of disabled children, which few if any authorized nursery schools offered in the city.

6. Sumire (Violet), a delivery workers' collective, which gave rise to preparations for the founding of the Welfare Club Cooperative (1997).
7. The WE recycling shop (1998). Inspired by the UK-born fair-trade NGO Oxfam, the Seikatsu Club Cooperatives launched their own NGO, the WE, a recycling shop which aims to support the self-reliance and autonomy of women in Asia. The WE shop has over 55 branches in the Kanagawa prefecture, and the Atsugi branch has the best sales figures of them all.
8. The Popolo Service House, set up through an initiative of NPO Momo (2000). The year 2000 marked the foundation of Momo, an NPO named after Michael Ende's well-known novel. Aiming at consolidating local social capital, this NPO introduced the Popolo Service House, a senior housing service centre. Normally, in Japan, senior houses are built in sparsely populated cozy suburbs. However this often gives rise to a feeling of isolation among seniors. Contrary to this prevailing tendency, the Popolo Service House was built in the downtown area, so that seniors in need of care could communicate with their families and friends on a daily basis. As a policy, Popolo does not discriminate people who need care. It accepts anyone, regardless of age or disability. It has a capacity of 40 residents, in addition to two short-stay rooms and one daily service centre.
9. Carry Joy (2001). Carry Joy had been part of the Asahi care centre. In response to growing needs, it became an independent NPO in 2001. Carry Joy offers transportation services to seniors and disabled people.
10. The authorized ViVi nursery school, founded at the initiative of NPO Kodomo Mirai Juku (Learning Centre for the Future of Children) (2003). In July 2000, cases of child abuse were discovered in an unauthorized daycare center called Smile Mom, in Yamato, Nara Prefecture. Following this incident, the national government reinforced the regulations and surveillance of unauthorized nursery schools. In response to this, the NPO Kodomo Mirai Juku opened an authorized nursery school, ViVi.
11. Nanairo-no-Tane (Seed of Seven Colours), a workers' collective for child welfare (2003). In 2003, Kodomo Mirai Juku launched an authorized child welfare centre, Nanairo-no-Tane. This centre aims to help primary school children to learn various living skills outside the school, including foreign languages, science, music, and cooking. Nanairo-no-Tane is a small-scale child welfare centre, only accommodating 25 children as of 2005.
12. The Centre for Cultural Diversity and Friends (2004). This NPO aims to teach the Japanese language to non-Japanese residents, especially housewives of foreign origin. In addition, this learning centre provides English, Chinese, and Korean lessons, attracting Japanese students as well.
13. Ton Ton, a daily care service for disabled children (2004). Ton Ton was founded by the Kodomo Mirai Centre (Centre for the Future of Children). This workers' collective aims to provide in-depth services for heavily disabled children.

## **WHY DO WE CONTINUE TO WORK ON CIVIC ENTERPRISES?**

One of the reasons for continuing these civic enterprises is that it is difficult to carry out citizen-oriented social policies from the perspective of local administration alone. Just as citizens know their daily needs better than municipal officers, so the solutions should be invented and practised by those citizens. This strategy of aggregating social demands at the grassroots level leads the national and local governments to formulate social policies that are truly fitted into the context of local civil society. Another reason is that there has been a long-standing problem with regard to the improvement of gender equality in local society. It is certain that in its past activities, the Seikatsu Club Cooperatives have successfully organized the communal management of products while simultaneously stimulating various non-economic activities including environmental activities (e.g., recycling), peace movements, and the locally based mutual aid. They have not, however, improved gender equality in the household and the working place. In Japan, women are always condemned to make a choice between working and child-bearing. Once they choose the latter, it is extremely difficult for them to go back to the job market. So there has been an urgent need to provide a cooperative system for supporting housewives' social activities by introducing child welfare centres.

The aforementioned civic enterprises in Atsugi have supported various forms of civic activities and enterprises in other local municipalities. They have shared their civic financing, staff training, and management methods. In addition, they offer financial support to civic activities outside Atsugi and consolidate a network of interregional cooperative activities. These enterprises are exchanging information and working on the development of collective learning programs and advocacy. The challenges that this network is facing can be summarized in two points. First, Atsugi's human support network needs to consolidate and enhance its capacity as an intermediate organization having an impact on the local municipality. Second, the network needs to train the next generation of leaders, so that the civic enterprises mentioned in this essay continue to develop in the future.

## **THE AIMS OF AFSE 2009**

We have already discussed and defined the meaning of solidarity economy itself and AFSE 2009. The solidarity economy is an alternative framework for economic development that is rooted in the principles of solidarity, equity in all its dimensions, participatory democracy, sustainability, and pluralism. The solidarity economy framework seeks transformation rather than band-aid solutions, yet it rejects one-size-fits-all blueprints. It is neither abstract theory nor pie-in-the-sky utopianism. Rather, it pulls together and builds upon the many elements of the solidarity economy that already exist. Some are new innovations, some are old. Other elements have yet to be realized or even imagined, and the journey of creation is ongoing.

The preparatory committee defined the aims of AFSE 2009 in Japan as follows:

1. To promote the solidarity economy in Asia as an alternative to the neo-liberal and market-oriented economy that is still dominant in this continent.
2. To promote national mechanisms for the solidarity economy and to develop the Asian models of the solidarity economy in every Asian country.
3. To promote collaboration among actors of the solidarity economy in Asia and in other continents in order to initiate an Asian Alliance of Solidarity Economy which will act as a hub for all the organizations that aim at participating in the solidarity economy in Asia.

Local or grassroots development, social cohesion and equity, responsible stewardship of natural resources, and sustainable growth were just a few of the major themes that resonated with hundreds of Asian civil society activists, who called for a more socially responsible and compassionate economy during AFSE 2009, held from November 7 to 10 in Tokyo and attended by some 500 participants from various countries. It was one of the largest international gatherings advocating an alternative, or solidarity, economy.

The forum was attended not only by scholars or researchers but also by numerous grassroots practitioners and representatives from fair-trade, social-business or non-profit organizations from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Nepal, India, the Philippines, and Japan. South Korea joined for the first time along with participants from leading solidarity economy organizations in France, Canada, Luxemburg, and Australia. At the first Asian forum in 2007, socially responsible investment, enterprise, and fair-trade micro-financing had been among the main themes for discussion. This time the themes were expanded to include more relevant topics, as we will see below.

## **THE FRUITS OF AFSE 2009: EVALUATIONS BY PARTICIPANTS AND ORGANIZERS**

It was a great pleasure for us to meet all participants from Japan and abroad during AFSE 2009 in Tokyo. During this forum we learned many lessons and shared many experiences. In the last session on the second day, the draft of a statement of commitment was presented as a conclusion to AFSE 2009 and discussed among all participants. Finally, we adopted a final version of the statement and decided to hold AFSE 2011 in Malaysia. Yoko Kitazawa, an independent scholar and co-president of the Japanese preparatory committee, summed up the forum as a great chance to build “the alternative.” She described the solidarity economy as being a reality now for a growing number of people—the answer to the market-driven, profit-greedy economy that has been largely blamed for the massive financial crisis that hit the world in 2008 and exposed the most disadvantaged sectors of society to increased suffering. She also pointed out that the thematic discussion had had a much broader coverage with the inclusion of new topics such as solidarity tax levy and social welfare for the elderly, the handicapped, and the unemployed.

“We learned a lot at this forum,” said Ila Shah, manager of the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India, a pioneering microfinance organization that has been active for nearly forty years and boasts one million beneficiaries. In her speech during the plenary session on “Solidarity Economy from the Asian Perspective,” she said her organization had gone beyond financing to

include social security and health care, among others. “The Tokyo experience was very enriching,” said Professor Denison Jayasooria of the Institute of Ethnic Studies, National University of Malaysia. He pointed out five key aspects which could serve as a helpful reminder of a memorable experience in promoting the solidarity economy in Asia.

First, a number of the speakers provided a comprehensive introduction to the theoretical and historical development of the solidarity economy, especially the context in which it emerged. Among those who developed this theme were Dr. Yoko Kitazawa and Prof. Jun Nishikawa. However, maybe we did not devote enough attention to this very important aspect, which will be done in due time, especially at the next Asian Forum. Second, the dimension of practice, through sharing of experiences and case studies, was the most important contribution of the Tokyo gathering. A number of regional or national experiences were discussed, in particular by Martine Theveniaut from the EU, Ben Quinones from the Philippines, and Jang Won Bong, who described the Korean national model. In addition, the many stories from Malaysia, India, Nepal, and Japan added reflections on models and experiences. In the long run, we should also develop a framework for documentation, analysis and lessons learned in this area.

The third aspect relates to institutional development of the organizations involved. This was well illustrated by the presentation on social finance and social investment by Bernd Balkenhol, of the International Labour Organization, and Ms. Viviane Vandemeulebroucke, of the International Association of Investors in the Social Economy (INAISE). In addition, a new step forward was the social performance management tool presented by Ms. Micol Pisrtell of MIX. The ethical aspects discussed by Ms. Edith Sizoo were also a critical component of the program. However, there was not enough time for in-depth discussion and adoption of these concepts by Asian Forum partners as an operational framework.

The fourth dimension is policy, including advocacy and lobbying the governments for a conducive policy environment which will facilitate the development of the solidarity economy and especially social enterprises. The policy and legislative framework in Korea provides institutional state support. Likewise, the policy changes in Japan also warrant further study and reflection. These can serve as helpful developments within the region for other Asian countries to emulate. More focus must be given towards policy advocacy and public policy issues in the future.

Fifth, AFSE 2009 provided tremendous opportunities for sharing, encounters, and networking among a diverse group of academics, grassroots leaders, civil society activists, development workers, policy makers, organizational leads, and international representatives. This took place during formal sessions but even more during informal meetings. The Forum provided an opportunity for all to network with one another, thereby enabling us to experience the richness and diversity of Asia.