

**transformative  
social innovation  
theory**

**RIPESS**

**TSI**

**Narrative**

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## About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

## About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This report provides a very short summary of a full case-study report that includes in-depth case-studies of the *Intercontinental network for the promotion of the Social and Solidarity-based Economy (RIPESS)*. Both, the full case reports and this summary, were guided by four empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. The four questions concern:

1. the overall development of the local cases and the transnational network(ing);
2. how they relate to different types of change and innovation (incl. social innovation, system innovation, game- changers, narratives of change and societal transformation);
3. how actors are empowered and/or disempowered in and by the local cases and the transnational network(ing), including topics such as governance, learning, resourcing and monitoring;
4. what are other relevant emergent issues with regard to understanding the dynamics of transformative social innovation.

This summary document focuses on the first three questions. It presents – in a highly reduced and generalised format – the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the full case report, which is available via [communication.transit@ihs.nl](mailto:communication.transit@ihs.nl). Both the full case report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

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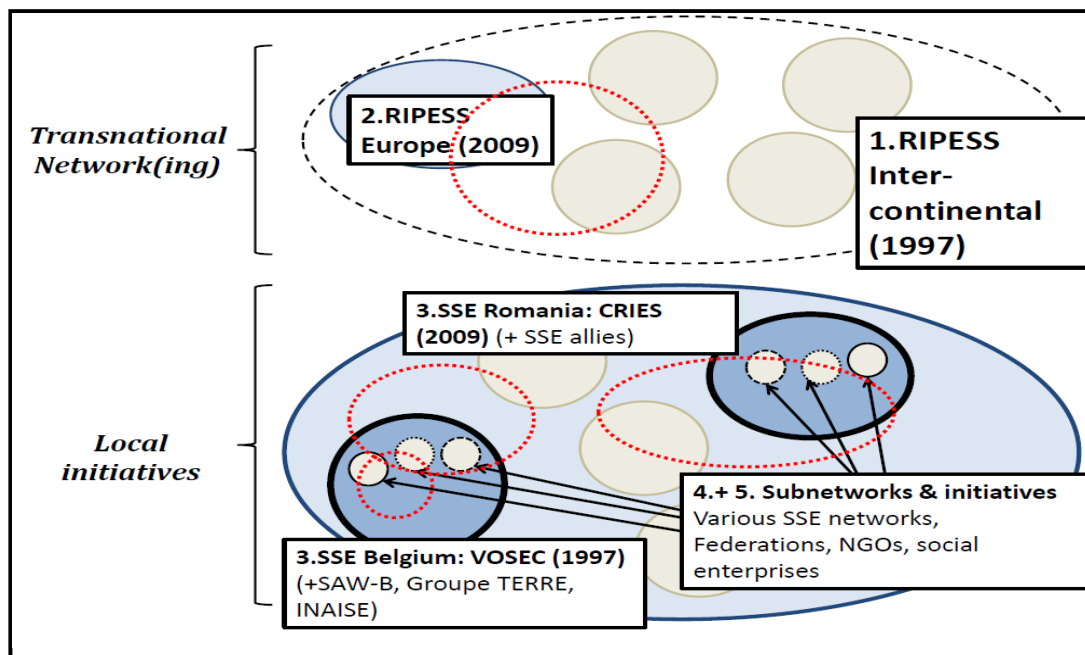


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## 1 RIPESS Development

RIPESS, Intercontinental network for the promotion of the Social and Solidarity-based Economy (French acronym, R for Réseau=Network) is near impossible to catch in a single case study that does justice to its diversity and vastness. The figure below sketches RIPESS as a network-of-networks, comprising diverse sectors or fields of social innovation activities, which are organized on intercontinental, European, national, regional, local levels.



The figure captures several striking features of RIPESS development:

- 1) RIPESS is first of all an **intercontinental network**, which seeks to bridge the divide between the global North and the global South as an 'inter-réseau' that unites various Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) initiatives. This intercontinental network predated the formation of the European network, which seeks to align the differing forms in which SSE exists within Europe.
- 2) RIPESS is very much a **multi-level network**. Below the transnational levels (1+2), the 'local initiatives' (3) are still aggregate national network levels. RIPESS EU members VOSEC and CRIES have also themselves been set up as bridging networks, as 'hubs', 'nodes' or 'inter-réseaux' that connect different other SI organizations, individuals and federations (4+5). The relevance of this further branching becomes particularly clear from VOSEC, a 'federation-of-federations' that was intended to – yet eventually failed to remain – a unifying interlocutor for the Flemish social economy sector. Also CRIES is not just an initiative or organisation, but also a hub in a 'social innovation field'.
- 3) RIPESS operates within more encompassing **ecologies of innovation**, surrounded by and intersecting with other networks that somehow engage with SSE. Various other initiatives (Transition Towns, Credit Unions, Time banks, Fablabs) share at least some of its spirit and objectives. As indicated by the red-dotted ovals, RIPESS tends to be one of the network structures that its members (of members) are embedded in (Social

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Economy Europe, ENSIE as insertion/social employment network, recycling sector, cooperatives' sector, etc.).

- 4) RIPESS aligns initiatives that are already existing. Exemplary for the more general diversity of transnational RIPESS, the comparison between Belgium and Romania shows the relevance of context. Their respective **national histories and path-dependencies** had their imprint on the respective RIPESS translations, manifesting their particular 'mainstreaming' dynamics for example.

## 2 Aspects of change and innovation

The social solidarity economy (SSE) implies a very broad cluster of social ambitions and envisioned social transformations. The following observations can be made:

- 1) The **broad diversity of purposes** within the network is a first relevant observation itself. It's about creating an economy in which human beings, rather than Capital, are put center-stage, and that implies various pursuits of solidarity-based economic relations, sustainable development, eradication of structural inequality, proper valuation of paid and unpaid work, balanced relations between the sexes, and social inclusion of marginalized groups.

- 2) RIPESS seeks to align, unite and act as political interlocutor for otherwise dispersed (transformative-minded) movements. The network is premised on a **narrative of change of critical mass, or 'united we stand, divided we fall'**. Another narrative of change is related to the 'game-changer' of economic globalization, namely that this economic globalization needs its counterpart in globalized solidarity.

- 3) SSE is an odd concept, born out of unification considerations. The solidarity economy is a radicalization, a particularly transformation-minded translation, of the social economy. From the perspective of the former, the latter is too much a matter of solidarity with the own group (as in the large banking or agricultural cooperatives), forgetting about solidarity with marginalized groups, future generations and nature, i.e. wider society. Also social entrepreneurship and micro-credit strategies tend to be mistrusted (reinforcing individualist entrepreneurship ideology), whilst 'social innovation' and 'social business' are often seen as shallow, instrumentalizing appropriations of alternative economies by EU. RIPESS actors are clearly very much **concerned about processes of mainstreaming**.

- 4) Both Belgian and Romanian local initiatives (levels 3-5) involve many activities in 'insertion', i.e. activities towards the social inclusion of marginalized groups (ethnic minorities, people with psycho-social problems or disabilities, unemployed) – through subsidized employment (Belgium) or through capacity-building and participation processes (Romania). This 'insertion' displays the particular **transformative goal of social inclusion**. Both in Belgium and in Romania, actors involved tend to consider insertion as part of broader transformative ambitions, though.

- 5) Relevant **game-changers** that unite the Belgian and Romanian local initiatives are the **fall of the Iron Curtain** (and associated hegemony of a particular kind of capitalism) and the **EU monetary-political unification** (harmonizing conditions for alternative economies). The recent **economical crisis** is a third one.

- 6) Finally, the concepts and activities related to SSE are sometimes socially innovative, but often they seem rather restorative – seeking to restore the workplace democracy, the inclusion of marginalized groups and the embeddedness of production that are seen to have become lost (or even remained unrealized promises throughout) in

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the evolution towards neoliberalism as End of History. This **restorative-protective rather than innovative** orientation of RIPESS is striking, as it also underlines its political-ethical, value-driven constitution as a movement.

## 3 Aspects of (dis)empowerment

The first and main observation on the empowerment is that this **differs greatly between the Belgian and Romanian local initiatives** (levels 3-5). **Especially regarding governance and financial resources**, there are striking differences in levels of mainstreaming of SEE. In Belgium (Flanders) a whole social economy policy sector has emerged, VOSEC mediating between social innovation initiators on the one hand, and government on the other hand (making the system-innovative shift towards the 'active welfare state'). By contrast, such institutionalized solidarity has developed very differently for the Romanian (and Eastern European) context. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Ceausescu regime, a social-economical transition started. Importantly, wholesale rejection of all characteristics of the communist model also included cooperative forms of associations. CRIES emerged in a situation where spontaneous social and solidarity economy initiatives were almost inexistent, and the cultural, ideological, and administrative conditions remain unfavorable – much unlike the socialist/communitarian ideology that allowed the Belgian/Flemish SE sector to flourish.

On the international levels, RIPESS has not become a very influential political factor – also as it more a radical political movement than a sector lobby (such as Social Economy Europe, or the cooperatives' sector). However the UN has recently set up a task force on the SSE concept, which does testify to its international impact as a cross-cutting approach to major global challenges (sustainability, structural global inequality). This limited impact is in a way in accordance with the fact that **the international networking is quite 'thin'** – there are fairly little resources disseminated by or travelling through the network, and the levels are not very tightly connected.

Main ways of empowerment for the overall network are monitoring and social learning. Second, RIPESS does **considerable monitoring of the SSE field**, seeking to develop itself as knowledge hub for it (through an extensive website, working groups that chart, delineate and map the field). Third, social learning and especially **awareness raising** is an important form of empowerment for the network that is essentially a political movement. Especially the higher-level networks ensure political representation of not always very visible activities, whilst the lower-level networks similarly undertake awareness-raising, training to social entrepreneurs, activists and members of vulnerable groups.

Fourth and finally, the case brings out the puzzle of **who to empower**. Actors on different levels struggle to position themselves in the promotion of SSE: RIPESS EU understand how regional and sector networks are the most relevant alignments, VOSEC sought to empower the sector but in ways found to be disempowering by many of its constituent members, and CRIES seeks to be a resource centre but actually finds itself in the position of SSE promoter.