

Solidarity Economy and Alternative Currency in Latin America

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From the very beginning of the millennium the call of the World Social Forum has gathered each year thousands of social organizations and movements of all kinds imaginable under the motto “Another world is possible!”. This way tens of thousands civil organizations gather in search of alternatives to the current world, to the current system, to the current way of life.

This need of Another World –better yet: of Other Worlds- is the certainty of the depletion of the hegemonic neoliberal system: if more than half of the world population is suffering of hunger and sickness this is due to the fact that the system is collapsed. It is urgent to look for alternatives.

The SOLIDARTITY ECONOMY movement in Latin America has been present in the World Social Forum with the proposal: “Another economy is possible!” In order to make another world possible it is necessary to start by changing the economical basis. We must change the whole economical system.

There is a real variety of proposals inside the SOLIDARTITY ECONOMY movement: starting with the very house we are living in (our body): supporting Alternative Medicine; supporting as well our family home: gender equality, cooperating in all kinds of subsistence chores and those for child and older people care. Finally, supporting our social environment: the solidarity to our neighborhood, city and nearest rural producers.

In order to “make possible a different economy” it becomes fundamental to change the system from its very roots. And in order to get to this point it is essential to have a financial proposal: **alternative** or **community money** also known as local, complementary or social money. This is the key for getting away from the financial hegemonic system and, at the same time, getting autonomy.

If we want to understand what community money is we must understand what the word money means generally speaking. Any kind of money is a symbol of the value that, being accepted by citizens of each country, is also accepted for different kinds of exchange. Money has also another function: it is a referent to establish necessary equivalences to exchange things of different value. The difficulty with money today appeared the very moment that, according to the rules of the capitalist system, everything became a commodity (human work, nature, even time) and, as a consequence, everything becomes susceptible to being bought by money. In other words, money that before was used to buy some goods turned to be “money for all kinds of goals”. This has

generated a non-stop willing of getting money for money itself. Originally, being a way to get what we needed, money became a goal. The one person who has more money accumulates more and more while those who can't do it pay a very high price for this.

How can we stop this endless race to accumulation in a world in which it is possible to buy everything through money? One solution is establishing some limits to the things we can get with it. What limits are these? In a consumers/producers community the value symbol decided and accepted by the members will be the so called "community" money. This money will do to get products inside the community. This would be the limit. If the group is too small, the offer would be so limited that it wouldn't be appealing to have money of our own; but if the offer of goods and services widens, in order to offer what is necessary for the everyday life, this value symbol would liberate local communities from the use of conventional money. This way we can suppose that if a community is in search for autonomy from the monetary system, this community can partially liberate from it by creating its own value symbol.

This is the reason why this kind of money is known with very different names: "**alternative money**", because it works instead of conventional money under certain circumstances; "**local money**", because it works in limited places; some others call it "**complementary money**" because it is used besides conventional money (this means this kind of money is not meant to substitute conventional money, at least not for the moment; at the beginning the two kinds of money, alternative and conventional, are going to be used depending the place in which the user is). There are even some people that called it "**non-money money**", because it does not work as the current conventional money (it doesn't generate interests, it doesn't accumulate nor speculates). It is also known as "**social money**", because it was created, released and controlled by social groups. We prefer to call it "**community money**" because it works in groups of people that establish face to face relationships and that are in search of building another kind of economy by restoring its original function (a way for exchange). The word "community" includes elements from other ways to call it: it is of local use; it is controlled by an organized social group that is not in search of accumulation but of distribution; it does not allow us to speculate and it is complementary to conventional money. However the most important characteristic is that the use of this kind of money stimulates reciprocity and helping attitudes that encourage solidarity communities.

How this thing happens? Controlling money makes possible an even distribution in which everybody has credit (essentially money is credit). It is accessible to everybody, even unemployed workers. The only condition is that he or she is able to offer a useful service or product to the community. Their products are bought by others because they trust the producer (not a trade). This way, wealth is created by the circulation of services and goods that are meant to satisfy actual needs. But we are talking about a solidarity wealth here, that works only if people is ready to let money go and are convinced it is useless to keep it or accumulate it because this money has an expiration date. The keyword is to use it in order to support small and micro producers.

Community money is sustainable due to many reasons:

1. It stimulates **wealth distribution** making possible that everybody has what is necessary for life;
2. It encourages a **limited responsible consumption**: it is meant to get only what the community produces. This way addictive and alienated consumerism is attacked as well as over-production.
3. It helps to preserve natural environment in two different ways: 1) If there's no over-production there's no predation, 2) Producers establish a compromise in taking care of nature: agricultural production is organic and comes from small farms; non-agricultural home made products generate very little trash, while containers and packages are recyclable and nature friendly.
4. Small producers buy one to the other and have a market for their products. This encourages people reciprocity and self-esteem –which capitalist market destroys to desperation and suicide.

Community currency wildly satisfies one of the fundamental human needs in the modern world: trustful and mutual helping relationships among people. In societies torn to pieces by violence, community currency might help by reconstructing the social web due to the fact that it makes possible to establish reciprocal and solidarity relationships. This empowers social groups by proving that things like financial and food autonomy are possible.

When families can get goods produced by others and are able to find a solidarity market for their products, they get back their hope that **another economy is possible** and their wish to fight for **another world**.