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Political embeddedness of the solidarity economy

Between normalization and differentiation in the public sphere

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Turning the question around

Policy → SSE

What policy does to SE organizations

- Isomorphic pressure and the policy paradox (Enjolras, 2009; Nyssens et al., 2006)
- Mission drift and cooptation in partnerships with the state (Barinaga, 2020)
- National trajectories of institutionalization (Jang, 2017; Roy et al., 2015)

SSE → Policy

What SSE organizations do back

- How organizations act back on the institutional environment that governs them (Eynaud et al., 2019)
- Collectively, at the meso level of the field
- Politically, in the public sphere

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do SE organizations respond collectively and politically to the institutional pressures of public procurement, and what do these responses reveal about their democratic function in the public sphere?

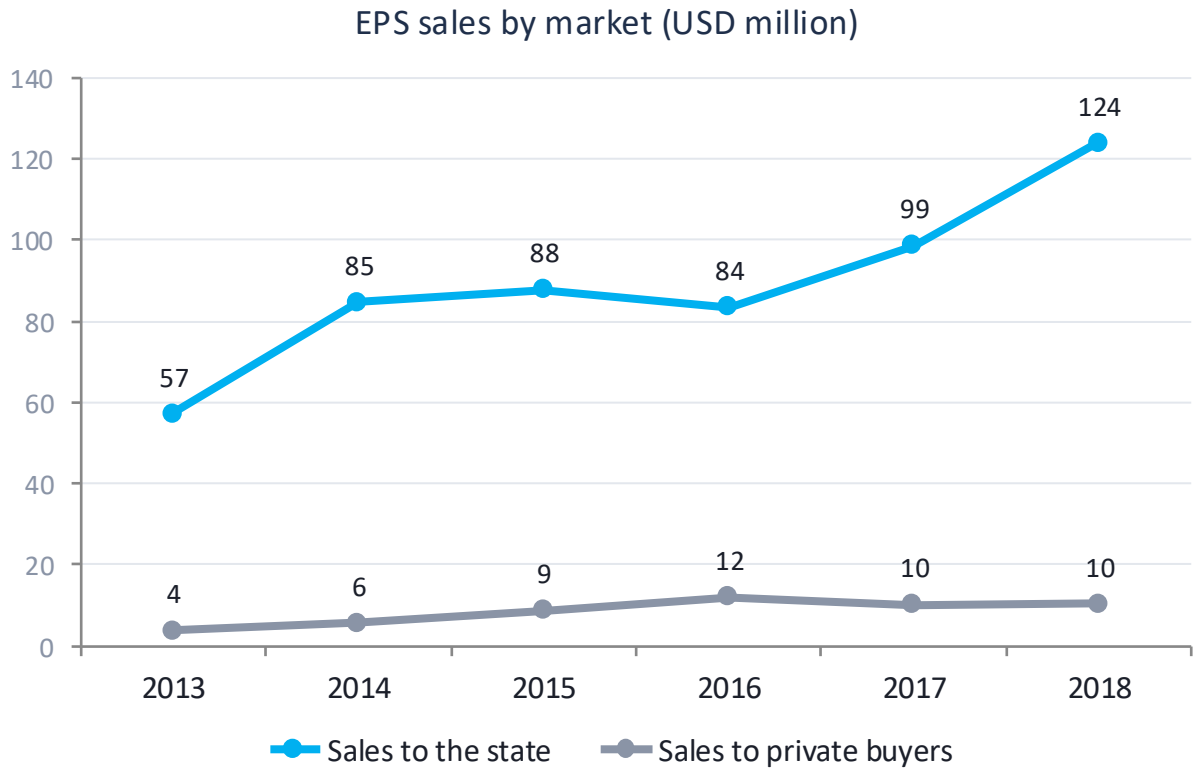
Ecuador: when the state becomes the market

2007 Inclusive procurement starts with school uniforms (“*Hilando el Desarrollo*” program)

2008 Constitution recognizes the popular and solidarity economy (EPS); Buen Vivir

2011 Organic Law of the Popular and Solidarity Economy (LOEPS)

2015 SERCOP creates consultative councils with SSE providers



10× sales to the state vs. private buyers in 2018

Source: IEPS (2019), in Ruiz-Rivera & Lemaître (2026)

Starting point: an institutionalization paradox

Access criteria to procurement

Installed capacity	Territorial scope	Associativity	Positive discrimination

PRESSURE towards technification, formalization and professionalization

“Policies designed to support alternative economic models inadvertently reproduce the market rationalities they seek to transcend.”

Ruiz-Rivera, M., & Lemaître, A. (2026). The institutional paradox of a substantivist conception of the economy in public policy: Insights from public procurement for solidarity economy in Ecuador. Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics, apce

S

This paper: from the policy side to the **organizational side of the interaction**





Analytical lens: political embeddedness

Political embeddedness (Lemaître, 2009)

The process through which SSE initiatives move beyond managing their own socio-economic activity to engage in collective action that defines the conditions of their existence in the public sphere, including the policies that govern them.

Where? Invited vs. popular spaces

Spaces convened by authorities who set the terms, vs. spaces created by collective action itself (Cornwall, 2004; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Visser et al., 2021).

How? Responses to institutional complexity

Accommodate, negotiate or resist; identity filters which responses seem legitimate (Oliver, 1991; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011).

Double tendency: institutionalization expands the reach and resources of SSE organizations, while threatening the plurality of their goals and practices.

Organizational ethnography, 2015-2019

3

fieldwork stays, 2015–2017, plus follow-up to mid-2019

31

grassroots organizations (coops,, and community-led associations) across different institutional trajectories

18

with procurement contracts, 7 studied in depth

33

interviews used (from a corpus of 64)

Direct observation

- Pichincha consultative council (April 2017)
- Preparatory meeting of provincial Chambers (March 2017)
- General assemblies; SERCOP socialization visit

Documents

- LOEPS, SERCOP resolutions and catalogue sheets
- Accountability reports of SERCOP, IEPS and SEPS
- CONACEPS minutes; press and radio

Analysis inspired by grounded theory: iterative coding in MAXQDA, triangulation across sources, anonymized interviewees

Where organizations meet the state

Four spaces of interaction

Socialization workshops
one-way, before each cycle

Advisory spaces
technical and legal compliance

Service diffusion
credit, training, assistance

Consultative councils (2015-...)
the most institutionalized: providers, users and officials

69
councils in 2017

≈10,000
participants

7,836
of them SSE suppliers

Source: SERCOP (2018, pp. 28–29), accountability report for 2017

"What SERCOP does in the councils is basically to present results ... with the objective of receiving citizen feedback."

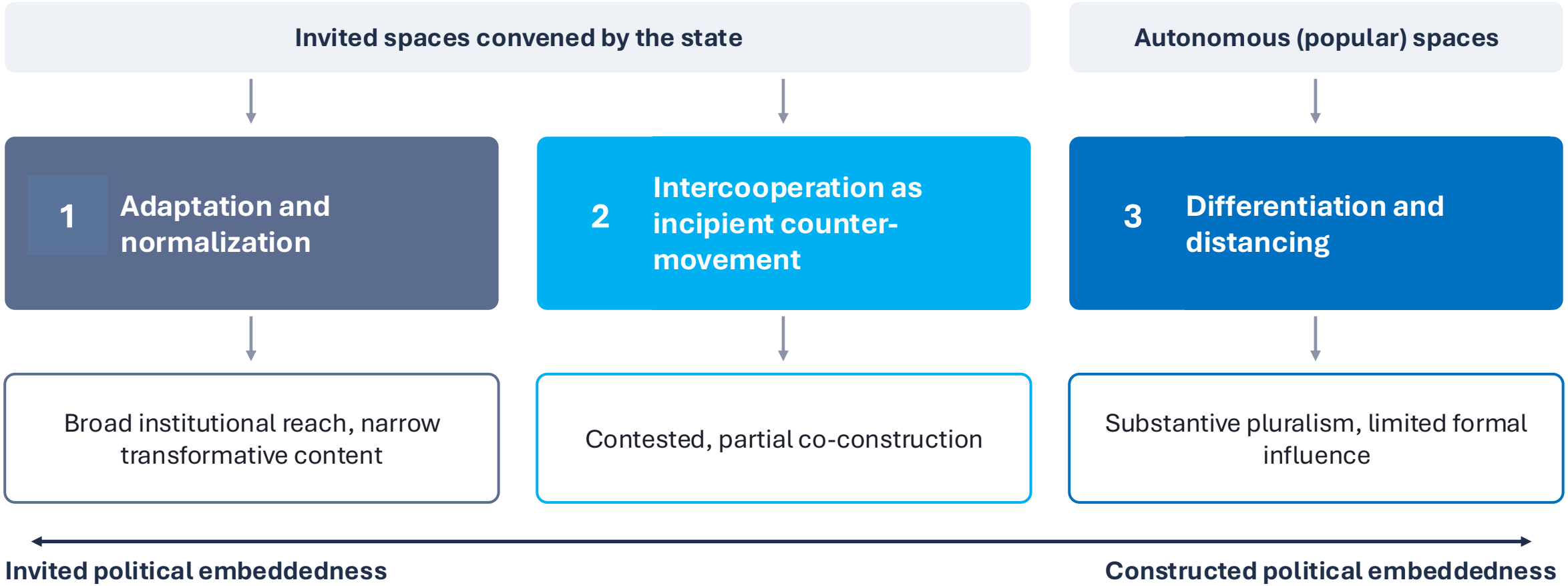
SERCOP advisor, February 2017

"They always give us instructions, but they rarely ask us if we agree."

Association president, March 2016

8 of 11 organizations valued the councils as spaces of dialogue, but the agenda is set by the convening entity and convocation targets SEPS-registered organizations.

Three strategies of political embeddedness



Conditioned by institutional trajectory · dependence on procurement · collective identity · political moment

1 Adaptation and normalization

Provincial SSE Chambers and their confederation (CONACEPS)

“It was born with us”

SERCOP advisor, February 2017

- Leaders elected at a SERCOP council (late 2016)
- SERCOP lawyer handled the registration
- Temporary office space for six months
- For members, a real quest for voice: alone, “we are not heard”

Symbolic denaturalization

“Just as there are chambers of commerce, of industrialists, why would there not be a chamber of the SSE?”

CEPSP president, March 2017

Political denaturalization

“The least we can do, compañeros, is to lend our support as a united and strong sector to compañero Lenín Moreno.”

CEPSP president at the Chamber's launch, before the 2017 run-off

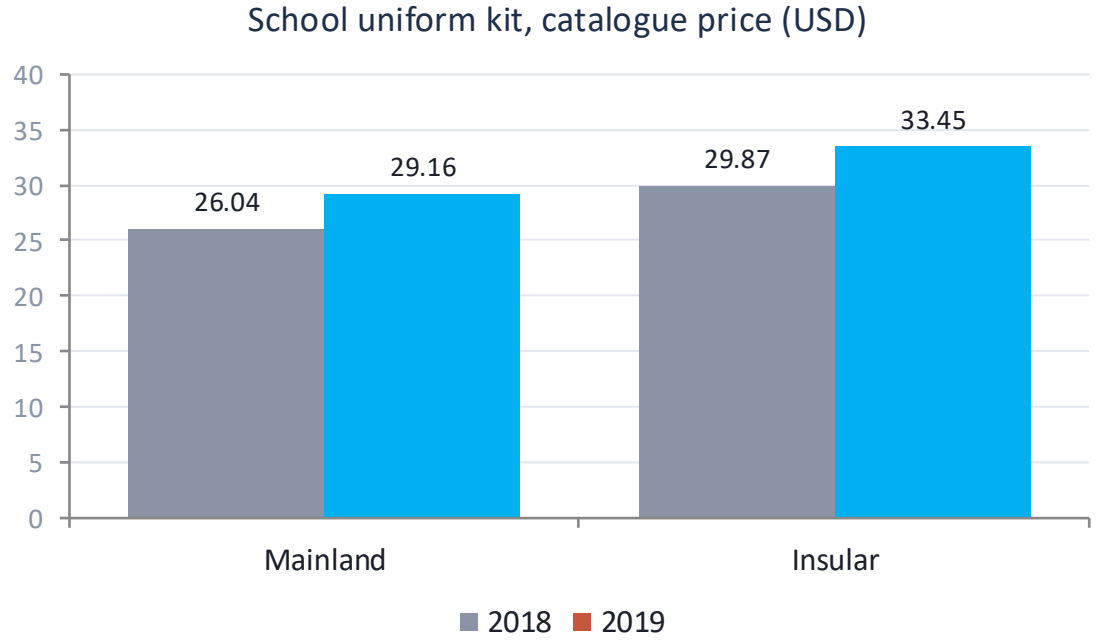
Agency, but structurally aligned with the governmental priorities that granted recognition

2 Intercooperation as incipient counter-movement

CONACEPS list of demands to SERCOP (2018)

1. **Joint review of prices**
2. Accessible procurement regulations
3. Payment within 30 days
4. Purchase orders over two years
5. Institutional follow-up agenda

Beyond prices
Peer-based competency certification with SETEC (2019-...); consultation on a “Somos SSE” label



+12% after a participatory cost review (Feb 2019)

Source: CONACEPS minutes, 2 February 2019

Why incipient? One instrument at a time, contingent on governmental goodwill, carried by the actors most exposed to cooptation

3 Differentiation and distancing

From a community organization (OCom2) of 28 smallholder farmers (Cotopaxi), to the UCABANPE

22 → 9

childcare centres supplied after conversion to catering

–63%

monthly contract revenue (USD 30k → 11k)

88

community funds now linked in the UCABANPE

2013: supplies fresh produce to childcare centres → 2014: converted into a catering provider → 2017: assembly leaves procurement → **Community savings fund, then UCABANPE**

"Yes, public procurement supported us … But at what cost? We had to give up too much; they kind of forced us to be what we are not."

UCABANPE director, April 2017

MESSE: ideological variant, critical of the SSE law from the outset

Distancing ≠ exit: fairs, movement networks, community finance

Four tensions: the limits of invited embeddedness

01

Descending construction of political subjects

Ascending purpose, descending founding impulse: invited spaces validate more than they negotiate.

02

Cooptation and clientelist risk

When access may depend on political alignment, alignment becomes insurance.

03

Filtered pluralism

Formalization is the price of recognition; trajectories outside the registry are left out.

04

Fragmentation

Spaces meant to give the sector one voice organize it by proximity to the state.

Not whether to engage with the state, but on what terms

Invited vs. constructed political embeddedness

Constructed: organizations build their own inscription in the public sphere (Lemaître, 2009)

Invited: inscription granted, framed and partly shaped by the state (with Cornwall, 2004; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Visser et al., 2021)

Agency is not abolished. Its terms are set elsewhere.

Meso level of the field

The boundary between normalization and transformation is negotiated collectively.

Co-construction and cooptation coexist

Not opposite ends of a continuum: they can live in the same representative body.

Collective responses are possible, but unevenly available

Dependence pushes towards adaptation; pre-LOEPS identities make distancing possible.

Conflict and **cooperation coexist** in the same spaces and organizations.

Thank you

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