

The Story of Social Economy in the Basque Country

Direction

**Marta Enciso Santocildes
Aitor Bengoetxea Alkorta
Leire Uriarte Zabala**

Publisher

Aitziber Mugarra Elorriaga

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Dykinson, S.L.

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Solidarity-based economy in the Basque Country: narrative

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11.1. INTRODUCTION

A solidarity-based economy arises as a proposal to revitalise certain elements that, in different social economy experiences, it is believed have degenerated. In a certain way, this could be understood as a way to re-politicise social economy and “bring it back” to its founding principles, since its promoters believe that, in the maturation process for different social economy experiences internationally, this evolution has leaned toward standardisation with capital companies, to the detriment of their differentiating characteristics. Special focus is placed on the need to revitalise participatory, democratic, and fair distribution practises internally. More externally, there is talk of the need to reposition social economy in terms of the community and the region, since beyond acting as more democratic and fairer business realities, social economy should play a more driving role in social transformation processes, proposing development models that are alternative to the capitalist model, in concordance with their values, such as cooperation, solidarity, participation, social justice, etc. (ETXEZARRETA ET AL, 2012)

The protagonism of social transformation is key for the solidarity-based economy, as stated in the *Declaration for a Transformative Solidarity-based Social Economy*¹ (Bilbao, October 2018): “Solidarity-based social economy aspires to build a socioeconomic system that places people, communities, and their environmental surroundings at the heart of all its processes. A system whose

¹ Under the 4th *Global Social Economy Forum* 2018 meeting, held in Bilbao.

objective is to guarantee the sustainability of life in all its aspects, and to promote fair, inclusive, democratic, and sustainable well-being for all people (women and men) and peoples all around the world. This is why (...) we are raising our voice to denounce capitalism, which commodifies and threatens our lives and the life of the planet. Heteropatriarchal capitalism that foments discrimination against women and excludes diversity. We commit to working with other social movements to transform the economy through alternative and social initiatives in financing, production, commercialisation, and consumption. By transforming the economy, we transform regions and communities, and thereby promote a new cultural, social, and political model.”

Definition

There is no consensus on the definition of Solidarity-based Economy, although most experts recognise that the concept combines three complementary dimensions: the first, which is more theoretical, underlines the critical view of the current economic model, advocating “building an alternative paradigm,” the second is focused on developing practises based on alternative and transformational values and principles, and the third highlights the specific type of company necessary to do so: democratic, participatory, self-managed, and collective. (PEREZ DE MENDIGUREN ET AL, 2015; GÓMEZ ET AL, 2016; VILLALBA ET AL, 2019)

While other social economy families are expressly legally recognised by the Law 5/2011, this law does not expressly reference the solidarity-based economy². Even so, the solidarity-based economy in the Basque Country is identified as a social economy subsector (ASKUNZE, 2016), bringing together many different organisations (cooperatives, associations, and foundations, but also limited liability companies) that seek to promote the “economy at the service of people,” as well as “life sustainability.” As such, it comes as no surprise that, historically, many of these initiatives came from production sectors that were beneficial to the environment (with activities related to recycling, ecological agriculture, etc.), or with a special focus on “human communities struck by economic crises” at risk of social exclusion (for example, Work Integration Social Enterprises), or as a result of the collaboration of a group of people interested in testing “another way of viewing work and obtaining economic resources based on cooperative, social, and solidarity-based principles” (ASKUNZE, 2007). Today, the solidarity-based economy still boasts an important presence in these fields.

² This lack of specific countrywide regulation contrasts with regulations in European and American countries.

In short, what unites them is not their legal form, but rather the principles and values “to govern society and relations amongst all citizens: **fairness, justice, economic brotherhood, social solidarity, and direct democracy,**” as set forth in the *Social Economy Charter*, whose last revision in 2011 sets forth the following cross-cutting principles:

Illustrations 91. Cross-cutting principles of REAS

- Autonomy as a principle of freedom and exercise of co-responsibility.
- Self-management as a methodology that respects, involves, educates, equals opportunities, and makes empowerment possible.
- A liberating culture as the foundation for creative, scientific, and alternative thought that helps us to seek, research, and find new ways of living together, producing, enjoying, consuming, and organising policy and economy at the service of everyone.
- The development of people in all their dimensions and capacities: physical, mental, spiritual, aesthetic, artistic, sensitive, relationships, etc., in harmony with nature, above all imbalanced economic, financial, warlike, consumerist, transgenic, and anomalous growth as is being pushed in the name of a “fictitious” development.
- Rapport with nature.
- Human and economic solidarity as the principle for our local, national, and international relations.

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

This all takes specific shape in the form of six principles shared by all organisations that belong to solidarity-based economy, thus acting as the element that brings them all together, as we can see:

Illustration 92. Principles of Solidarity-based Economy

1. PRINCIPLE OF FAIRNESS
2. PRINCIPLE OF WORK
3. PRINCIPLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
4. PRINCIPLE OF COOPERATION
5. PRINCIPLE OF “NOT-FOR-PROFIT PURPOSES”
6. PRINCIPLE OF COMMITMENT TO THE LOCAL SETTING

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

Representation Networks

Solidarity-based economy in the Basque Country comes together in REAS Euskadi, which was born in 1997 as a network. Considering data³ from their Social Audit in 2020, they group 80 entities, of which one-third are cooperatives (26), another third associative (26), closely followed by Limited Liability Companies (many times, single-member) (23), and a residual presence of foundations (5).

In sectorial terms, 20% of organisations are in the healthcare and caregiving sector, followed by education and research (15%) and housing and environmental management (12.5%), with initiatives related to agroecology, renewable energies, socio-occupational integration, ethical finance, fair commerce, critical and transformative consumption, and more. They mobilise 22,521 people in the Basque Country, of which 3,255 are workers and who have obtained 144 million euros in income.

In turn, REAS Euskadi is part of REAS *Red de Redes* (Network of Networks), along with another 13 regional networks⁴, to which we can add another four sectorial networks: the *Coordinadora Estatal de Comercio Justo* (State Fair Commerce Coordinator), the *Mesa de Finanzas Éticas* (Ethical Finance Table), the *Unión de Cooperativas de Consumidores y Usuarios de Energías Renovables* (Union of Renewable Energy Consumer and User Cooperatives), and the *Asociación Española de Recuperadores de Economía Social y Solidaria* (Spanish Association of Social and Solidarity-based Economy Recovery Operators) (AERESS). In the Basque Country, they hold a close collaboration with Gizatea (Association of Work Integration Social Enterprises) and with Olatukoop. Internationally, they are part of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS).

Moreover, REAS drives 7 Social Markets (one of them in the Basque Country), seen as networks to produce, fund, distribute, and consume “differently,” open to collaborative work with consumers, other networks, and social movements, seeking to conjointly develop an alternative to the conventional market.

11.2. SOLIDARITY-BASED ECONOMY AS PART OF THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Both academia and solidarity-based economy itself recognise that solidarity-based economy “is born from the shared connection with Social

³ From 2019

⁴ Almost one per Autonomous Community, barring Cantabria, Asturias, and Castilla-La Mancha, as well as Ceuta and Melilla.

Economy” (PEREZ DE MENDIGUREN ET AL, 2009; ETXEZARRETA ET AL, 2012), and the principles that govern its practise bear this out.

Central role of people in Solidarity-based Economy

Solidarity-based Economy focuses its activity on quality of life and development of people, placing them at the centre of the economy and revising the concept of “work,” going beyond employment, broadening it, and including all activities, whether actually compensated or not, but necessary to caring for life.

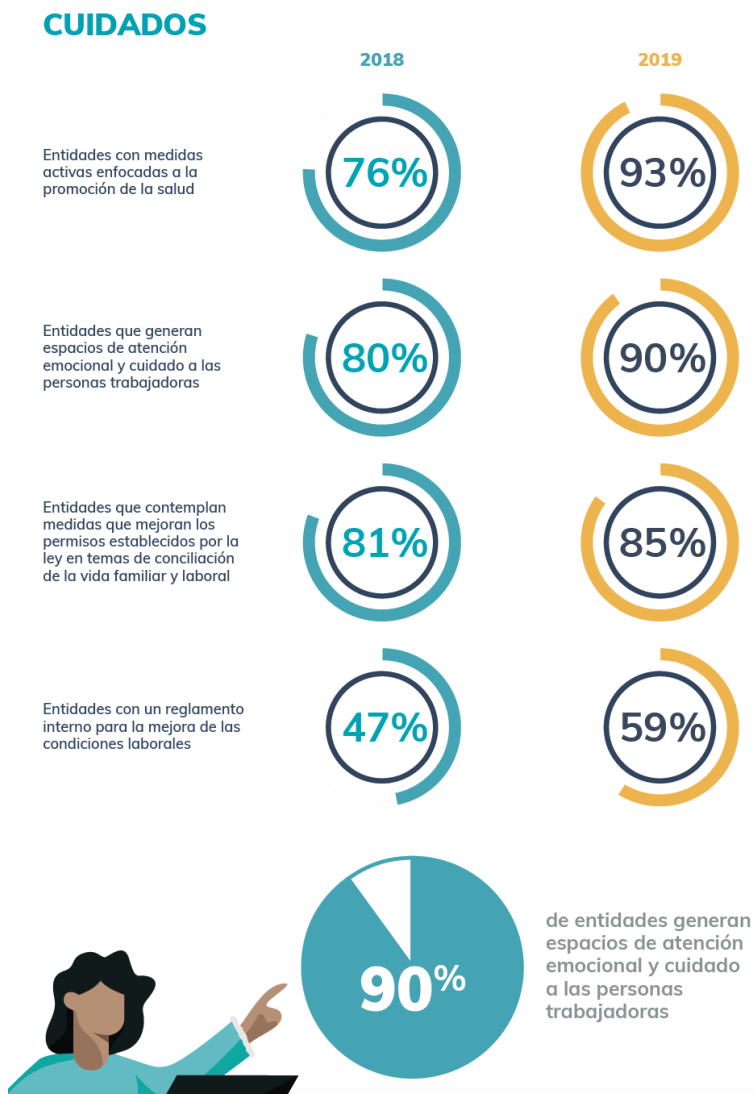
Illustration 93. Principle of Work in the Solidarity-based Economy

- We consider that work is a key element in the quality of life of people, of the community, and of the economic relations between citizens, peoples, and States. This is why REAS conceives of work in the broad institutional and social context of participation in the economy and the community.
- We affirm the importance of recovering the human, social, political, economic, and cultural dimension of work to develop personal capacities, producing goods and services to meet the true needs of the population (our needs, the needs of our immediate surroundings, and the needs of the general community). For this reason, for us, work is much more than employment or an occupation.
- We see that these activities can be conducted individually or collectively and can be compensated or not (volunteer work), and the worker may be hired by another or assume ultimate responsibility for producing goods or services (self-employment).
- Within this social dimension, we must highlight that without the contribution of caregiving work, fundamentally carried out by women, our society could not sustain itself. This work is still insufficiently acknowledged by society and is not fairly distributed.

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

With this principle, they defend both the policy dimensions of work (in terms of “full access to social opportunities to obtain resources” and rights as the worker) and the economic dimensions (in terms of decent compensation and quality employment) for everyone, also for those with “accumulated difficulties,” since decent work is a “factor for inclusion and social integration” as well as a “pillar for the self-esteem of people related to all dimensions of their lives.” They devote a space in their annual assessment and social audit processes (NAVEDA, 2016; REAS-EUSKADI, 2018) to assess each entity’s actions, both on these issues and in relation to the other principles to plan their improvement.

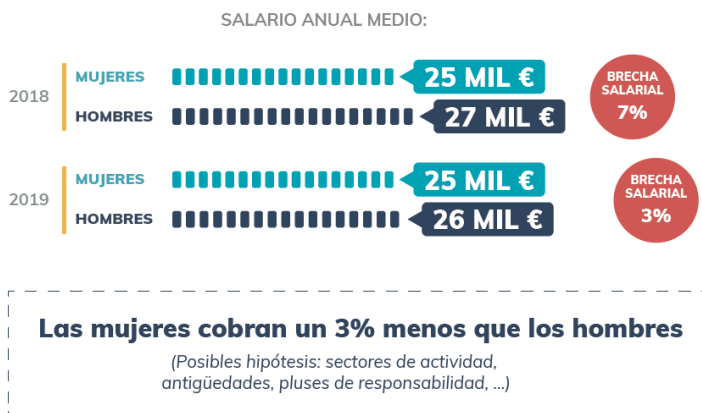
Illustration 94. Caregiving actions with the worker collective in REAS-Euskadi



Source: REAS-Euskadi(2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Illustration 95. Salary equality in REAS-Euskadi

IGUALDAD SALARIAL



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Democratic nature of the Solidarity-based Economy

The democratic nature of these entities, on one hand, is connected to the principle of fairness, “with mutual acknowledgement of differences and diversity based on equal rights” and real opportunities for all.

Illustration 96. Principle of Fairness in the Solidarity-based Economy

- We consider that fairness introduces a principle of ethics or of justice in equality. This is a value that acknowledges all persons as subjects of equal dignity, and protects their right to not be forced into relationships based on domination, regardless of their social condition, gender, age, ethnicity, origin, capacity, etc.
- A fairer society is a society where all people mutually recognise one another as holding equal rights and possibilities, and one that takes differences between people and groups into account. For this reason, it must fulfil the respective interests of all people in a fair fashion.
- Equality is an essential social objective where its absence entails a deficit in dignity. When related to acknowledgement and respect for difference, we call it “fairness.”

Source: REAS (May 2011) Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles

In its commitment to transformation, the solidarity-based economy in the Basque Country is tightening bonds with Feminist Economy to “build inhabitable organisations.” To this end, it has started up the BIZIGARRI process in REAS-Euskadi to create an “organisational change in favour of gender fairness.”⁵ With this, they have proposed that by 2022, “they incorporate feminism into the identity definition” and make progress “in driving feminist practises,” becoming “an organisation with fair, interconnected, and creative structures that are able to influence the entity, and with a co-responsible, cohesive, and horizontal work team that is attentive to caring for people.” (REAS-EUSKADI, 2019, p.12)

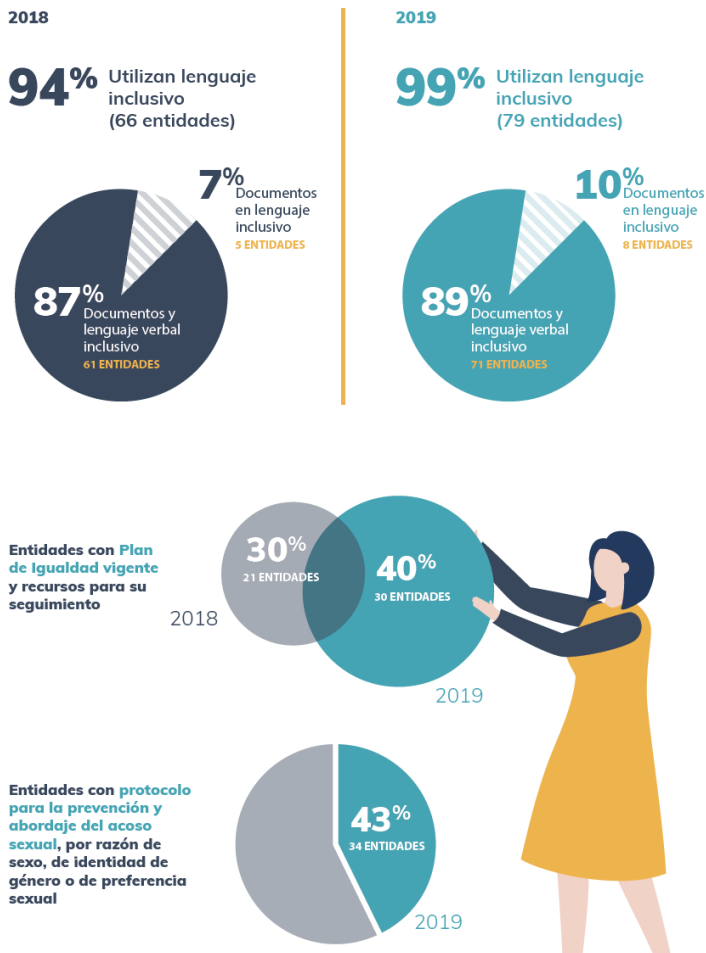
In fact, this aspect is already one of the key criteria to belong to the Network, in valuing caregiving work, fundamentally conducted by women, requiring minimum conditions in employer and permanent contracts, and providing schedule flexibility for work and family-life balance, amongst others⁶.

⁵ Decree 197/2008 of 25 November on aid to cooperative entities to promote organisational change processes in favour of gender fairness, defines this as “reflective actions within the organisation to transform existing manners of doing and thinking, in order to eliminate gender inequalities that occur in any of the organisation’s operational spheres.”

⁶ In fact, ever since it began, differentiated data have been collected in terms of gender, but the Social Audit in 2018 was the first time that a feminist reading was given to this audit.

Illustration 97. Actions for Equality in REAS-Euskadi

LENGUAJE NO SEXISTA

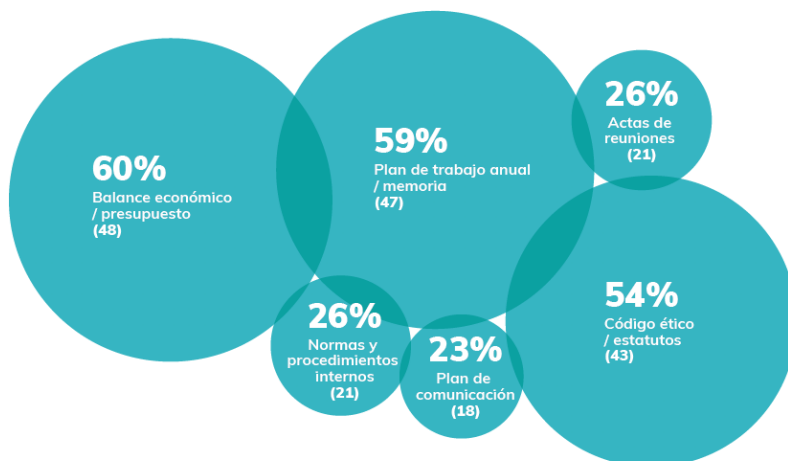


Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) Social Audit 2019

Fairness also requires “participatory operation and with assemblies open to all members and workers, where all relevant decisions to be made are consulted.” To this end, solidarity-based economy entities are transparent with their information, advocating “accessible, clear, and frequent information” so that people may “know, opine, and participate with knowledge of reality and take opportune measures that favour the common good.”

Illustration 98. Public information and transparency (I) in REAS-Euskadi

Entidades con información pública disponible sobre:



Source: REAS-Euskadi(2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Illustration 99. Public information and transparency (II) in REAS-Euskadi

TRANSPARENCIA



ENTIDADES QUE HACEN PÚBLICOS LOS SALARIOS (40 de 64)

*A las 16 entidades con 1 o ninguna persona trabajadora, esta pregunta no aplica.

Source: REAS-Euskadi(2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Illustration 100. Participation and transparency in REAS-Euskadi

PARTICIPACIÓN

EN EL PLAN DE GESTIÓN Y PRESUPUESTO ANUAL



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

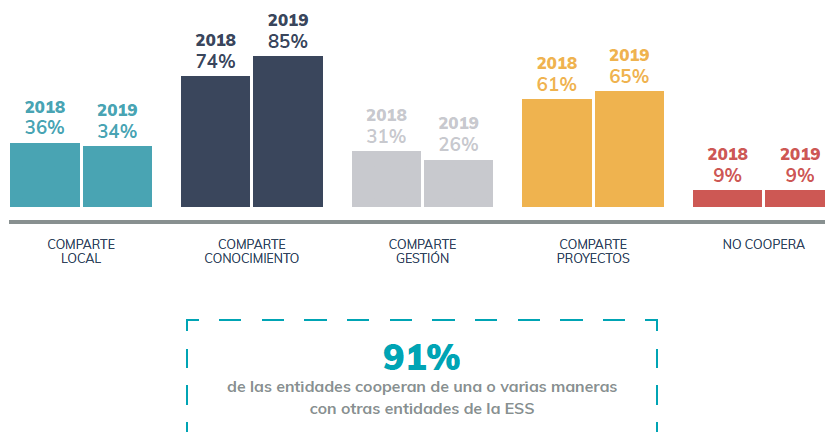
This democratic function is not limited to the confines of each entity; rather, they advocate for a culture of cooperation, “promoting cooperative enterprises and a model with horizontal, participatory, democratic, and trust-based networks” with everyone who shares these values. We have already seen that this principle has been widely developed by the Solidarity-based economy in the Basque Country.

Illustration 101. Principle of Cooperation in the Solidarity-based Economy

- We seek to favour cooperation instead of competition, inside and outside our organisations related to the Network, seeking collaboration with other entities and public and private bodies...
- We seek to collectively build a societal model based on harmonious local development, fair commerce relationships, equality, trust, co-responsibility, transparency, respect, etc.
- We begin with the notion that Solidarity-based Economy is based on a participatory and democratic ethic, that it seeks to foment learning and cooperative work between people and organisations, through collaboration processes, conjoint decision-making, and the shared undertaking of responsibilities and duties, all while guaranteeing the utmost horizontal structure possible while respecting the autonomy of all, without creating dependencies.
- We understand that these cooperation processes must be spread to all spheres: local, regional, and autonomous community, nationwide, and international, and must normally take shape through Networks where these values are lived and encouraged...

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

Illustration 102. Inter-cooperation (I) in REAS-Euskadi



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Business dimension of the Solidarity-based Economy

The Solidarity-based Economy advocates for economic activity (production, funding, distribution, and consumption) as an instrument at the service of life, and not capital and profit. This is highlighted in the corresponding Principle:

Illustration 103. “Not-for-profit” principle in Solidarity-based Economy

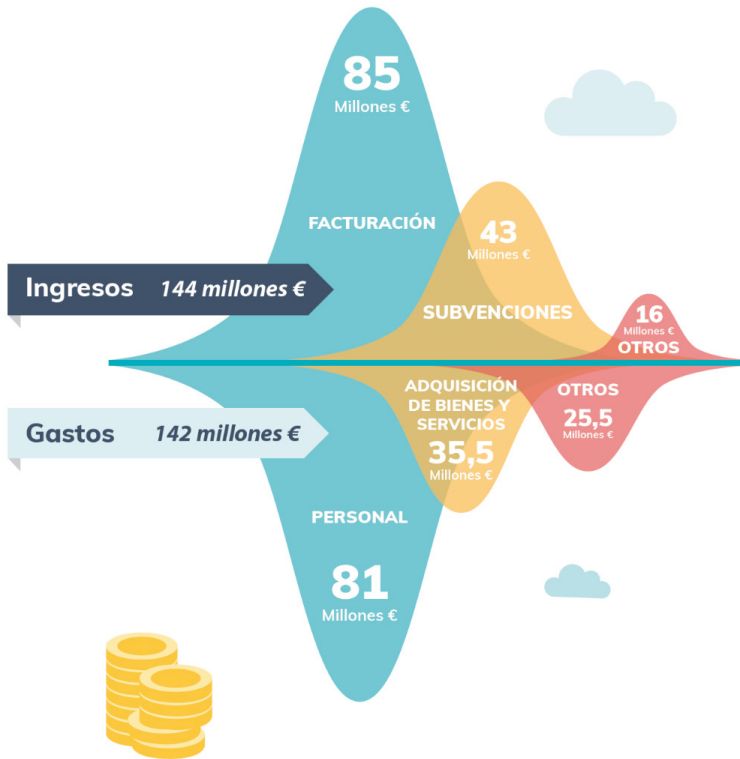
- The purpose of the economic model that we practise and seek to follow is the comprehensive, collective, and individual development of people, and the means to do so is the efficient management of economically viable, sustainable, and comprehensively profitable projects, whose profits are reinvested and redistributed.
- This “not-for-profit nature” is closely linked to how we measure balance sheets, which consider not only economic aspects, but also human, social, environmental, cultural, and participatory aspects, and the final profits and losses statement is comprehensive benefit.
- Our activities therefore devote possible profits to improving or broadening the social purpose of projects, as well as to supporting other solidary initiatives of public interest, thus participating in the construction of a more human, solidary, and fair social model.

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

Therefore, Solidarity-based Economy entities do not distribute profits, but rather reinvest them into these projects so that they are “economically viable, sustainable, and comprehensively profitable.” Moreover, they seek to produce “socially useful” goods and services, with an autonomous company model⁷ that is different from the conventional model. This “comprehensive profitability” combines economic, social, and environmental profits (BALLESTEROS ET AL, 2013) (along with human, cultural, and participatory aspects) to assess “any production initiative implemented to contribute desirable benefits without harming any other dimension, nor producer or consumer collectives.”

⁷ In fact, the Social Audit reserves a space to analyse diversification of each entity’s income as a guarantee for independence and autonomy.

Illustration 104. Income and Expenses in REAS-Euskadi



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Illustration 105. Profit distribution in REAS-Euskadi

REPARTO DE BENEFICIOS:

› **TOTAL: 1.524.000 €**



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Solidarity-based Economy's commitment to the community

Solidarity-based Economy seeks to establish “cooperative and non-competitive relationships,” also with the environment.

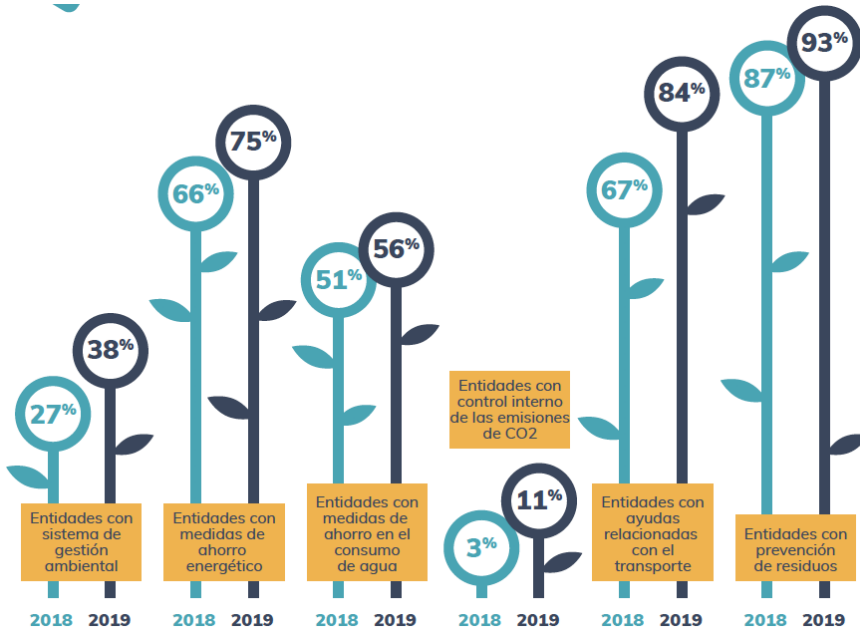
Illustration 106. Principle of Environmental Sustainability in Solidarity-based Economy

- We consider that all our productive and economic activity is related to nature, which is why our alliance with her, and recognition of her rights, is our starting point.
- We believe that our good relationship with Nature is a source of economic wealth and good health for all. This is why we have the fundamental need to integrate environmental sustainability into all our actions, assessing our environmental impact (ecological footprint) in an ongoing fashion.
- We seek to significantly reduce the human ecological footprint of all our activities, moving forward toward sustainable and fair production and consumption methods and promoting the ethics of sufficiency and austerity.

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

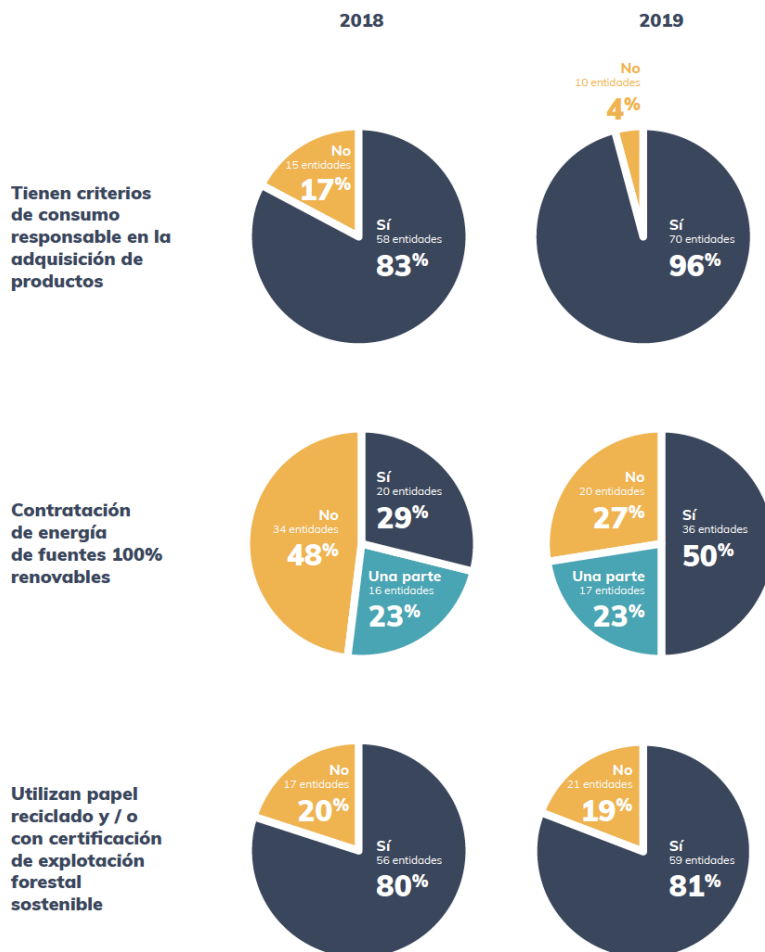
For this reason, they advocate for responsible consumption “as an attitude coherent with the two-fold ethical criteria of social fairness and environmental sustainability” and clean production, present in the sectors of renewable energies (Goienar), bioconstruction (Zurtek), recycling (Berziklatu, Kooperera), and agro-ecology (BalmasedActiva, ENHE, Ekoizan, Garbinguru, Goilurra, Ortutik Ahora, Sustraiak), in defence of food sovereignty.

Illustration 107. Environmental management in REAS-Euskadi



Source: REAS-Euskadi(2020) *Social Audit 2019*

Illustration 108. Responsible consumption in REAS-Euskadi



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

All Basque Solidarity-based economy experiences have a strong component of deep roots in their surroundings, of commitment to people, and commitment to their communities, especially with impoverished communities.

Illustration 109. Principle of Commitment to the Local Environment in Solidarity-based Economy

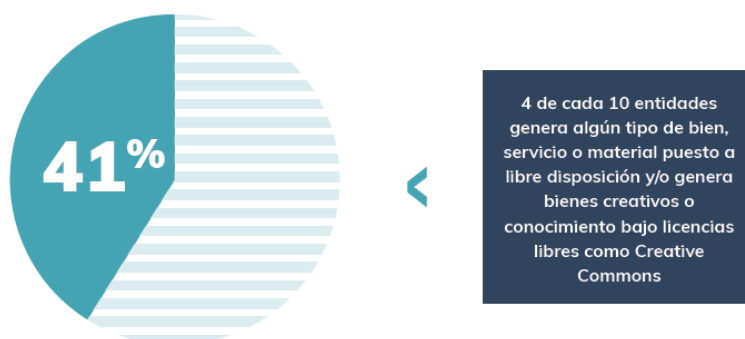
- Our commitment to the environment takes shape through participation in local sustainable development and community development in the region.
- Our organisations are fully integrated into the region and the social environment where they conduct their activities, which means involvement in networks and cooperation with other organisations in the nearby social and economic fabric in the same geographic area.
- We understand this collaboration to be a path, so that specific positive and solidary experiences can generate transformation processes in the structures that create inequality, domination, and exclusion.
- Our commitment to the local environment leads us to take shape in broader dimensions to seek out more global solutions, interpreting the need to continuously leap between micro and macro and local and global levels.

Source: REAS (May 2011) *Charter of Solidarity-based Economy Principles*

This commitment plays out as cooperation and collaboration⁸ on conjoint projects to “co-create shared initiatives” that encourage creating and strengthening the social fabric. In short, networks with transformation strategies, networks “in interrelation with different social movements that address multiple issues, as well as with different collectives who promote critical economic positions (ecologists, feminists, etc.),” that seek to have a significant political influence on the environment.

Illustration 110. Contribution to the common good in REAS-Euskadi

APORTACIÓN AL PROCOMÚN



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

⁸ What RAZETTO calls the “C factor.”

Within this context, solidarity-based economy is creating the social market as an alternative space for production, commercialisation, and consumption, but also as a political project for transformation and a paradigm shift “toward a more sustainable and responsible Alternative Economy model” that foment responsible consumption, but also responsible public procurement. To this end, they are combining four key elements: a desire to transform market conditions, combined with an involved community, both consumers and enterprises, shaped through a democratic process based on transparency, and that implements tools for visibility, commercialisation, and access to responsible consumption (CRESPO ET AL, 2014, p.103-104). In the Basque Country, the Social Market consists of a network with 76 entities under REAS EUSKADI and OlatuKoop. In 2016, it received the Basque Government’s Elkarlan Award for Projects that Co-Generate Public Value.

Illustration 111. Inter-cooperation (II): social market in REAS-Euskadi



Source: REAS-Euskadi (2020) *Social Audit 2019*

11.3. CONCLUSIONS

— **The Solidary-based Economy contains a proposal to transform capitalism**

This proposal is not limited to increasing distribution of profits, but rather for its organisations to generate profits by driving economic

activities based on principles such as cooperation, not-for-profit, reciprocity, inclusion, feminism, environmental sustainability, fairness, and commitment to the community and the region.

— **Solidary-based Economy is acknowledged as part of Social Economy**

Although not explicitly mentioned in Law 5/2011 on Social Economy, it is acknowledged that its origins lie in Social Economy and the principles governing its practise demonstrate this.

— **These are people-focused organisations, with special emphasis on inclusion**

Of note is their concern for building organisations, structures, and inhabitable methods of operation for both women and for men, placing life at the centre, and redefining work and caregiving. The Bizigarri process is proof of this, with a potential multiplying and transformative effect, not just for Solidary-based Economy.

— **The Solidary-based Economy applies the principle of cooperation and collaboration, building networks with democratic operation**

Social Economy organisations have a democratic operation, which transfers to all the networks that they weave, not just with their own organisations but also with other organisations and social movements, to build together a real and transformative alternative to the conventional economy.

— **It groups not-for-profit organisations that produce socially-useful goods and services that seek comprehensive profitability**

Solidary-based Economy entities do not distribute profits; rather, they reinvest them to create economically viable, sustainable, and comprehensively profitable projects that combine economic, social, and environmental benefits, without harming other dimensions and collectives.

— **Basque Solidary-based economy experiences have a strong component of deep roots in their surroundings, of commitment to people, and commitment to their communities.**

An example of this commitment is initiative around the Social Market.

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