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Integral Cooperatives as Prefigurative Organizations: Towards a Commons-Based Development Model

ABSTRACT

Integral cooperatives, as non-profit democratic enterprises that can accommodate any sector of activity, have been multiplying throughout Portuguese territory in the last few years in response to sequential crises, worsening of life conditions, and the realization that the capitalist system is at their root. These commons-based organizations prefigure an alternative to the neoliberal model of development, based on economic growth, the privatization of public services, market liberalization, and the promotion of competition. Focusing their goal on the direct improvement of life conditions, these integral cooperatives promote alternative value systems, communitarian means of production and distribution, the democratic management of common resources, and mutual support networks. This paper draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among two integral cooperatives—Rizoma (in Lisbon) and Minga (in Montemor-o-Novo, Alentejo)—and the ongoing engagement with the Portuguese Network of Integral Cooperatives. It unfolds in a thorough analysis of how such prefigurative organizations respond to societal challenges, defend themselves against economic coercion, and adapt to the needs of their members, but also how they shape individuals and communities in a transformative way, showing that another model of development—and organizing socioeconomic relations—is possible.

KEY-WORDS

INTEGRAL COOPERATIVES, ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT, PREFIGURATION, COMMONS, ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY, MUTUAL AID

JEL Classification: P13, O21, O44, O10, Z13, B55 | **DOI:** http://dx.doi.org/10.5947/jeod.2024.010

1. Introduction

This paper results from the intersection of two research projects engaged with the Portuguese Integral Cooperative Movement, focusing on distinct organizations and territories: Rizoma, in the capital city of Lisbon, and Minga, in the rural town of Montemor-o-Novo, Alentejo. These projects are articulated by a common research question: what development model is prefigured by Portuguese integral cooperatives, and how does it differ from the neoliberal model?

The interest in developing such a topic stem from the identification, in our respective fields, of a discourse that creates a counter-narrative to the mainstream definition of "development" as promoted by governmental organizations such as the United Nations, while presenting a different view on what the means and ends of collective action should be. In Lisbon, we saw "development" being materialized in the exponential growth of tourism, soaring housing prices, gentrification, mass evictions, the dissolution of neighborly ties, the worsening of labor conditions, and the increase in pollution at all levels. In Montemor-o-Novo, we saw the conversion of the typical Mediterranean ecosystem of Alentejo (*montado*), being turned into super intensive monocultures and power plants. Unsurprisingly, our interlocutors grew very skeptical of such notions of development and deliberately started directing their collective action towards a different vision of social transformation, which eventually materialized into multiple practices of commoning. In this work, we identify some shared strategies through which an alternative development model proposed by integral cooperatives unfolds in the present. Our objective, throughout this paper, is to analyze such strategies in dialogue with the existing literature on development, prefiguration, and the commons, but especially in dialogue with our interlocutors, who give meaning and content to this research, while reflecting on the potentials of a commons-based development model.

This paper builds on previous critical literature on development (Escobar 1992; Gudynas 2013; Lang, 2013; Kalpana, 2017; McMichael, 2017; Gabay and Ilcan, 2017), which tends to frame it as a neocolonialist project aimed at facilitating the integration of all social groups into the globalized capitalist economy and the international division of labor. It also acknowledges the fact that critical and potentially subversive concepts, such as "sustainability", tend to be co-opted by the hegemonic development narrative (Gudynas, 2013). Drawing on this critical perspective, throughout our integrative literature review (Torraco, 2015; 2016; Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003) we analyze to which extent commons-based prefigurative organizations can point towards a distinct model of development. Our endeavor, therefore, consists in combining theoretical inspirations on prefigurative politics (Boggs, 1977; Monticelli, 2018; 2022b; Feola, 2019; Escobar, 2022; Laamanen 2022; Schiller-Merkens 2022; Yates and de Moor, 2022) with literature on the commons (Ostrom, 1990; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2016; De Angelis, 2017; Varvarousis and Kallis, 2017) to create an adequate framework to understand not only the change of values these alternatives propose but also the way those values are converted into concrete practices and social relations.

Based on an analysis of the data gathered throughout long periods of ethnographic fieldwork, several series of interviews, and archival research, we sought to identify strategies of commons creation and management deployed by integral cooperatives. By placing such commons-based organizations in a context of globalized capitalism and admitting their vulnerability to the effects of neoliberal development policies, we understood that the strategies implemented to pursue a transition to a commons-based development model, are based on the expansion of collective autonomy in relation to main structures of capitalist power: the market and the state. Our provisional findings can instigate further endeavors along two main lines of research. On the one hand, the difficulties and possibilities of maintaining the collective autonomy of such prefigurative organizations and of scaling up the commons-based development model without neglecting the specificities of each territory and socio-environmental context; on the other, the risks of co-optation and degeneration, as well as the strategies developed to protect against external pressures. More broadly, we hope this paper constitutes a fruitful contribution to reflect on the potentials of applying knowledge about the commons and prefigurative politics to organizational, (self-)management and development studies.

The paper starts with a critique of the neoliberal development model, demonstrating how it leads to deep social and ecological problems. Then, we introduce the notion of "commons-based development model", explaining its specificities and contrasting it with the former. Subsequently, we define prefigurative organizations and justify why such a category is important to understand our case studies. We will, thus, explore the origins of integral cooperatives, their defining features, and how they materialize in Portuguese territories. In the third section, we describe our methodology and general approach to the field. Then, in the fourth section, we present the case studies, while seeking to identify the defining aspects of the commons-based development model they enact. Two of such case studies are integral cooperatives, one in an urban context—Rizoma—and one in a rural context—Minga. The third case study is the Portuguese Network of Integral Cooperatives, a mutual support structure of which Minga and Rizoma are part. In the fifth section, we reflect on how the strategies deployed by such prefigurative organizations contribute to the direct improvement of living conditions of their communities and foster a more sustainable relationship with local ecosystems, prefiguring a transition from a neoliberal model of development to a commons-based one. Finally, in the sixth section, we wrap up all our research process and findings, while admitting the limitations of our analysis and pointing towards paths for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The neoliberal project

Development has become the main goal of diverse political entities, ranging from national states to international NGOs. This is well illustrated by the United Nations' sustainable

development goals, which are presented as "a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet"[1]. However, there is a vast literature defending that these new globalized goals are in fact "a banal set of technocratic fixes for poverty" (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017: 338) backing the globalization of a "universal market" while becoming "a power device which reorgani[zes] the world" (Lang, 2013: 9).

Development is more deeply addressed by Gudynas' (2013), who traces the evolution of this concept from the Second World War to the present. In this analysis, we see how this concept became almost indistinguishable from economic growth and, more recently, the term "sustainability" was distorted and combined with the concept of "development" to promote the idea that economic growth can be compatible with environmental preservation, backing new types of nature and human exploitation, from neo-extractivism to neocolonialism processes (Gudynas, 2013). Ecofeminist authors, such as Maria Mies, also alert to the fact that economic growth, propelled, as it is now, by capitalist hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), is incompatible with environmental sustainability (Mies, 1998). Moreover, it results in a deeper unbalance in wealth distribution and further exploitation among human beings from distinct social classes (Lang, 2013).

Capitalism, as a social system propelled by a *tautologic* drive for wealth accumulation (Jappe, 2019), is continuously expanding its capacity to transform common goods into commodities. On the one hand, it naturalizes the instrumentalization of humans for economic gain (Jappe, 2013); on the other, it normalizes the instrumentalization of nature for the dictates of profit-making (Watts, 2005; Lang, 2013), at the cost of entire ecosystems. At the core, the instrumentalization of humans and the instrumentalization of nature have the same origin: they reflect an economic thinking according to which the multiplication of money is an end in itself. Such world-view follows the transformation of money from a mere means of exchange to a valuable commodity in its own right, giving rise to a distinct form of circulation, described by Karl Marx in terms of a transition from the formula C-M-C (commodity-money-commodity) to M-C-M' (money-commodity-more money), which corresponds the emergence of capital (Marx, 1976; Jappe, 2006). This invariably leads to systematically prioritizing what is profitable to the detriment of what contributes to the improvement of living conditions, resulting in the destruction of the very conditions on which profit (and human life itself) depends, generating what Anselm Jappe (2019) appropriately calls an "autophagic society".

This logic is frequently imposed and reproduced by policies that reflect the neoliberal drive of this global development project. In the European Union context, the vision that guides most local development plans points towards a process of complete urbanization (Lefebvre, 1970; Brenner, 2019). This constantly results in a "technocratic, quantitativist, economist toolkit" (Lang, 2013) of political and financial incentives for attracting population to cities and depopulating rural areas, investing in industrialization and digitalization, being held hostage of

[1] https://sdgs.un.org/goals [Accessed: 27 December 2023].

indebtedness mechanisms, and facilitating the liberalization of all existing markets. In the case of Portugal—as in many other countries within and beyond the EU—such processes, although continuous and overarching, become stronger in moments of crisis. An example of this stems from the Troika's[2] bailout requirements imposed throughout the period of 2011-2014, which resulted in the liberalization of the labor market and the precarization of work conditions (Silva and Cardoso, 2017), followed by the liberalization of the rental housing market, with the New Regime for Urban Rental (*Novo Regime do Arrendamento Urbano*) (Drago, 2021). These measures represented a threat to a whole generation that was entering the "job market". The *Geração à Rasca* ("Struggling Generation") was a highly educated young generation (born from 1980-1995) that faced job precarization, lack of job opportunities and high taxation (Barbosa, 2020). From this social stratum emerged a wave of social movements against austerity measures. Their demands, however, weren't met, and austerity ended up fueling a boom in youth migration. The estimation is that, between 2011 and 2014, around 485,000 Portuguese migrated, and roughly 332,000 people lost their jobs (Barbosa, 2020). Ironically, this socioeconomic context can be seen as the cradle of the first Portuguese Integral Cooperative: Minga. While, on the one hand, most of its future founding members were forced to migrate, on the other, the creation of Minga was motivated by the need to create less precarious job conditions when planning to return to Portugal. The decision to come back followed a South European wave of counter-urbanization as an answer to this crisis (Döner et al., 2020), which motivated the creation of this cooperative in a rural area.

With the alleged end of the *Great Recession*, a housing crisis started to become apparent. Paired with the liberalization of the housing market, several neoliberal measures were implemented, such as the "Golden Visa" program (officially named "Residence Permit for Investment Activities"), aimed at attracting foreign investment in exchange for a Schengen visa (Drago, 2021). Besides, the exponential increase in tourism, actively promoted by the government, had dramatic consequences in the Portuguese biggest cities (Estevens et al., 2023). All these factors contributed to soaring housing prices, accelerated processes of gentrification, mass evictions, the dissolution of neighborly ties, and rampant rates of homelessness.

In a city increasingly driven by tourism, real estate investment and the attraction of high-tech businesses, and marked by an ever-increasing difficulty to maintain community bonds, a group of young people decided to create a space that would promote encounters between neighbors, the consumption of socially and environmentally sustainable projects, agroecological production, democratic decision-making, and a multitude of debates on social transformation. That is how, in the Autumn of 2020, Rizoma was born.

[2] The consortium, constituted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, that provided a financial bailout to Portugal, Spain, Greece, Ireland, and Cyprus in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis.

2.2. Common-based development

The aim of this article, however, more than denouncing the unsustainable character of the hegemonic development project, is to analyze the alternative development model outlined by our case studies. Several intellectual traditions have been dealing with alternative ways of development. From the South American conceptualization of *Buen Vivir* (Acosta and Martínez, 2009), to the Human Development Index based on Sen's work on "capabilities" (Sen, 1993), or an ecofeminist vision of "preservation of life-centred development" (Mies, 1998). Even though we recognize the validity of all these perspectives, in this work we will focus on a commons-based development model, which better reflects the particularities of our case studies. Drawing on De Angelis' thesis (2017) that the commons constitute a more democratic and ecological social system, we argue that integral cooperatives, as commons-based organizations, prefigure a development model that fosters more democratic and ecological communities. For this purpose, however, we must clarify what we mean by "commons" and understand how this model is prefigured by integral cooperatives.

While celebrating the achievements of Elinor Ostrom's groundbreaking work (1990) in demonstrating that, when meeting certain requirements, commons can represent a feasible alternative to public and private property regimes, we also recognize its limitations. Its focus, mostly limited to the efficiency of models of governance in the management of *already* existing resources, is insufficient to account for the dynamism that permeates social life and human-nature relations (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2017), that's to say, the ever-changing environment in which commons exist and persist. For this reason, we opt for an understanding of the commons as embedded in a social reality in constant transformation (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2016; De Angelis, 2017). Harvey (2012: 73), for example, does not perceive commons as a resource, but rather as a "social relation between… a social group and those aspects of its… environment deemed to its life and livelihood" sustained by the very practice of doing-in-common, or *commoning*. As such, commons are understood as more-than-human relations that are always under construction.

De Angelis (2017) takes it a step further, arguing that the commons comprise a whole distinct *social system* in relation to capital. According to the author, while both social systems aim at reproducing, they do it through different and often clashing codes, measures, and values. While capital reproduces itself through profit accumulation—which implies exploitation of labor and nature—, commons reproduce through practices that define a sharing culture (De Angelis, 2017). And while it is true that in a capitalist enterprise some resources can be shared (spaces, tools, data, etc.), they are not commonly owned; besides, the surplus value, which results from collective work, is not shared, neither are the decisions of how such surplus should be distributed. These characteristics are inherent to the international cooperative principles[3], followed by the Portuguese integral cooperatives. Among other things, these advocate for the distribution of surplus value,

[3] https://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles [Accessed: 22 November 2024].

the enhancing labor conditions, and the democratization of decision-making processes. This is clear in the second principle—"democratic member control"—and the third—"member economic participation"—, which limits profit-making and guarantees that surpluses are reinvested for common benefits.

According to De Angelis, commons value systems, contrary to capital, have a propensity to operate against the commodification of social life and nature. Values within commons tend to be *qualitative*, not quantitative; as such, people tend to be valued according to *how* they contribute to the community, not by how much profit is generated by their activity. Similarly, nature is rarely treated as a mere property to be bought and sold at a higher price; nature is usually recognized as an integral part of the community, if not the very element around which the community is constituted (De Angelis, 2017). That is the case in *baldios*, the communal land that Portuguese peasants use for grazing animals and collecting various kinds of goods (wood, fibers, fruits, mushrooms, etc.), which is an essential part of Portuguese peasant way of life and is reflected in its own social organization (Dias, 1953; Seixas, 2019). The decommodification of life represents a strong line of action in integral cooperatives too. The term "integral"[4] refers to the potential to cover the needs and aspirations of its members in every aspect of life. This means to incorporate under the cooperative model not only productive activities (goods and services) but also reproductive ones (food, supply, health, education, leisure, etc.).

Although contradictory, these two systems are deeply interwoven and mutually dependent, resorting to resources that are produced in each other's contexts. However, as De Angelis (2017) also demonstrates, the way wealth is appropriated in commons is fundamentally different: while in capital wealth is privately accumulated, in commons, wealth is collectively held and used to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the community itself. The same is observed in our case studies: despite their unavoidable integration in the capitalist market, in integral cooperatives wealth and resources are collectively managed for common benefit.

Understanding the concept of "commons" as a distinct social system that allows for the reproduction of socioeconomic experiments paves the ground to the analysis of our case studies in the light of prefigurative politics and to start unfolding the alternative development model outlined through their practices.

2.3. Prefigurative organizations

Our case studies, although not directly self-defined as political organizations, actively contribute for changing social standards in terms of economic relations and power structures—mainly at a local level. They do this by enacting the very socioeconomic changes they advocate for; in other words, by practicing "prefigurative politics". The term was coined by Carl Boggs (1977: 4), referring

[4] Although we opted for a more literal translation, the most accurate translation of "integral" cooperative would be "holistic" or "wholesome".

to "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal". This political *ethos* is famously epitomized in the Industrial Workers of the World's motto "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old"[5].

As Yates and de Moor (2022) note, the term "prefigurative politics" have been deployed to refer to three but interrelated dimensions of activism: to *imagine* alternatives, to *implement* alternatives, or to *decide* how such alternatives are implemented. Underlying such alignment between means and ends (cf. Hardt and Negri, 2017; Laamanen, 2022) is the idea that a community does not need a revolution to change their structure and practices. As Monticelli notes, prefiguration can aim to "defend subjects and spaces from capitalist expropriation and exploitation, to restore spaces of former capitalist (re)production or to create, from scratch, new collective subjects and spaces through experimentation" (Monticelli, 2022b: 19; cf. Monticelli, 2018). Examples of prefigurative organizations are food-networks, time banks, worker-owned firms, transition towns, intentional communities, etc.

Schiller-Merkens (2022: 3) identifies three defining features of *prefigurative organizations*: "(1) the rejection of dominant forms of organizing that are perceived as harming alternative moral principles, (2) the creation of forms of organizing with which envisioned alternative principles are instantiated in the present, and (3) the strive to instigate and/or contribute to a social transformation of the economy". Consonant with those features, integral cooperatives reject organizational models based on profit and hierarchical structuring; instead, they focus on directly bettering the living conditions of all members—which includes facilitating the access to goods and services, the development of their professional projects and the creation of spaces of conviviality—and on developing strategies to continuously decentralize power; finally, they promote this model helping emergent cooperatives.

Prefigurative politics often imply a struggle against the centralization of power, in relation to governing bodies, but also in interpersonal relationships. In practice, this implies minimizing dependency on the state and the market (Escobar, 2022), breaking down hierarchical structures and promoting horizontal relations. Prefigurative politics act, foremost, in people's imagination (cf. Feola, 2019), helping to overcome the frequent inability to envision alternatives to the present, while showing, through practice, that it is possible (and desirable) to establish distinct socio-environmental relations, means of production, distribution, and consumption, but also means of making sense, giving meaning and valuing. In this sense, it promotes the development of new subjectivities, other forms of being (Hardt and Negri, 2017).

Despite seeking to outline the basis for post-capitalist futures, many prefigurative initiatives maintain a very close relationship with capitalist markets, which, as Monticelli (2022a) affirms, may result in repression or co-optation by the state and the market. This is especially true for cooperatives, which have an explicit commercial activity. Cooperatives were important prefigurative organizations throughout the history of workers' struggles in the face of industrialization and capitalist

[5] https://archive.iww.org/history/library/iww/isandisnt/5/ [Accessed: 3 August 2023].

exploitation, leading them to envision a world in which democracy could be extended, not only to the workplace but also to the places in which they satisfy their material and social needs. However, many cooperatives hardly became distinguishable from capitalist enterprises when faced with the pressures of a competitive market, following a productivist logic, maintaining the same hierarchical structures for decades and disregarding the harmful ecological impacts of its activity (Carvalho Ferreira 2002; cf. Kasmir, 2015). The study of prefiguration is inevitably also the study of the relation between prefigurative initiatives and capitalism. This implies responding to a very complex question, proposed by Monticelli (2022a: 5): "How should one assess the transformative potential of prefigurative initiatives when these are following the frameworks, metrics and organizational forms of capitalism?". On the other hand, however, it also implies recognizing, as the feminist economists Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson did, that alternative organizations constitute diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013), while emphasizing that the economy is made of a plurality of economic practices beyond the market.

2.4. Integral cooperatives

In 2010, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, emerged in Catalunya the concept of "*cooperativa integral*". It is proposed by an anti-capitalist collective called Crisis as a "tool" that would contribute to "the process of progressive independence from the market and the state"[6]. It would function as a legal structure meant to unite "all the basic elements of an economy[,] such as production, consumption, financing and its own currency and, at the same time… integrate all the sectors of activity that are necessary to live: food, housing, health, education, energy, transportation…", while following the principles of "economic and political self-management" and "equal participation of its members"[7]. Cooperativa Integral Catalana stemmed from the core of social movements that demanded the accountability of financial institutions for what became known as "The Great Recession" and advocated for a transition to another socioeconomic system (Ortiz, 2017).

In 2015, Cooperativa Integral Minga was born in Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal, to a great extent, as a response to the effects of the austerity measures that followed Troika's intervention in the country. Like its Catalan counterpart, its goal is to "intervene in all the areas that are necessary to live, such as production, services, housing, health, education". However, in an informal conversation, Jorge Gonçalves, one of Minga's founders, deems it more decentralized than the Catalan model, allowing for the autonomy of each person or group on managing their project.

In 2021, Rizoma Cooperativa Integral emerged in Lisbon, much inspired by Minga, albeit with its own specificities and in a much more urbanized environment. In the meanwhile, six other

[6] https://cooperativa.cat/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/02podemos_cast.pdf [Accessed: 23 April 2024].

[7] https://cooperativa.cat/que-es-la-cic-3/ [Accessed: 3 August 2023].

integral cooperatives were formalized in different Portuguese territories, while others are in the process of doing so. Following the spread of this organizational model throughout the country, in 2022 took place the first Portuguese event dedicated to the subject—*Fórum das Cooperativas Integrais*—, which gave place to a mutual aid network: *Rede das Cooperativas Integrais* (Network of Integral Cooperatives).

It is interesting to notice that "integral cooperativism" is not a new concept in Portugal. In 1951, António Sérgio, the personality after which the inspection entity of Portuguese Cooperatives—CASES—is named, would already call for a "march towards integral cooperativism". In his words: "The goal, as I understand it, is to give the maximum development to the consumers' cooperatives, turning them into producers as well as into banks. The best instrument for social progress are the consumers' cooperatives that become producers for its own associates, both in agriculture and manufacture, acquiring lands and building workshops, and being financed by its own bank"[8]. Nonetheless, only 46 years after Antonio Sergio's death and 41 years after the democratic revolution was the concept of "integral cooperativism" recovered.

While every integral cooperative has its own specificities, there are shared features that characterize this organizational model and contribute to its general coherence. First, the *decentralization* principle is essential for allowing for, on the one hand, democratic management and, on the other, that decision-making processes don't result in constant hindering. Second, even though their influence is meant to be far-reaching, *their activity is localized*, stemming from and aiming to specific territories. This allows integral cooperatives to adjust and respond to the affordances and needs of their neighboring communities and respective environment. Third, environmental sustainability and regeneration is a shared concern which substantiates common ethical ground between different integral cooperatives. The following analysis of specific case studies aims to understand how these shared organizational principles unfold, constituting the basis for an alternative development model.

3. Methodology

This paper builds on critical perspectives on the neoliberal development model, moving on to an analysis of commons-based prefigurative organizations in order to understand how these can point towards a distinct model of development. Following an integrative literature review on the topics of development, commons and prefigurative politics, we examine the discourse and practices of three case studies: the integral cooperatives Minga and Rizoma, and the Portugueses Network of Integral Cooperatives. An analysis based on a "relational comparison" (Hart, 2002), in which we compare the strategies adopted by these commons-based organizations and their relation with capitalist power structures, enables us to go beyond the specificities of each initiative

[8] https://cases.pt/boletim-ooperativista-comentado/ [Accessed: 2 December 2024].

and to create a wider perspective on the overall layout of such alternative development model. This analysis draws on long periods of ethnographic fieldwork and the complementary qualitative methodology described below.

The first author's ongoing research in Rizoma Cooperativa Integral dates back to October 2021. Its methodology combines ethnographic fieldwork with the conduction of semi-structured interviews, a continuous monitoring of digital channels of communication, and a thorough review of archival records. The ethnographic fieldwork unfolded in practices of participant observation that included attending assemblies and other deliberative meetings, performing organizational tasks, and participating in sessions of mutual aid (*ajudadas*). Since the day of its accession to Rizoma, the researcher has been transparent about the intention to study the cooperative, disclosing the research project and seeking to develop a mutually beneficial relation with the organization. Between November 2021 and February 2022, the researcher focused on analyzing the minutes of previous assemblies, which provided information for preparing the first round of interviews. The first round of interviews started in March 2022 and finished in July 2022. The 12 interviewees included in this first round were selected due to their engagement in Rizoma's creation process, with the objective of outlining a general picture of the actors that constitute the organization, the roles they assume and the motivations to participate in such a project. A second round of 26 interviews, following an equivalent format, was held between October 2022 and July 2023. This time, the questions were focused on more specific subjects, especially stemming from observations held during ethnographic fieldwork, such as the relation between certain values and practices, particular decision-making processes, and informal power relations. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for further analysis. The processes of archival research and interviewing were combined with a continuous exercise of participant observation. Mutual aid events, such as the restoration of its headquarters or the creation of its cultural space, were particularly important moments for observing how an economic organization that claims to favor cooperation to the detriment of competition is enacted in practice. The data gathered during moments of participant observation were carefully registered in a field notebook and then transcribed to the computer, where it was compared with data gathered from the interviews, the minutes of every meeting, and the messages exchanged online.

The second author performed ethnographic fieldwork in Cooperativa Integral Minga from January 2023 to July 2023 as part of a doctoral research project on social economy practices in rural areas. Proceeding the fieldwork period, an interview was held with one of the cooperative's founding members, in June 2022, to assess the relevance of such a case to fulfil the objectives of the doctoral research. Then, in October 2022, a virtual meeting was organized with the researcher and the board members to present the research project. This meeting was crucial to define the direct contributions of the research process to the cooperative, and vice versa, as well as to define procedures to guarantee privacy regarding members' data. During the fieldwork period, the researcher moved to Montemor-o-Novo, where a series of tasks were performed: conducting a survey previously designed by members of the cooperative; interviewing all members and synthesizing the data to update the information about the services and products available in the cooperative's website; digitizing and

organizing internal documents; co-organizing the event Member's Day; helping with back-office tasks and distributing vegetables to the school canteen. The survey was answered by 47 people (corresponding to 44% of Minga's members at the time) and it was readapted to the current needs of the cooperative, but also to fulfil the need of collecting data for the research. The semi-structured interviews were made to 65 members (101 were contacted), some by phone, some in-person, but all of them recorded and then transcribed. The questions were mainly about the projects developed inside the cooperative. However, all interviews would end with an open question about their story: how they came to develop these projects in Minga. Besides these activities, the researcher participated in five *ajudadas*: four held in the house of four members of the cooperative, and another in Minga's shop. In addition, informal conversations and day-to-day activities were registered in a field journal with daily entries.

Moreover, both researchers were engaged in the Portuguese Network of Integral Cooperatives since its inception, on October 2nd, 2022. The research at this scale was based on continuous participation in monthly meetings and in the annual Forum of Integral Cooperatives, during which the researchers would gather substantial data. Additionally, relevant communications by email were continuously saved and subject to further analysis.

In the aftermath of fieldwork research, field diary entries were combined with data resulting from interviews[9] and surveys to be analyzed and divided in useful categories. These categories guided the process of comparison between the two case studies, enabling us to understand the relations established between governance models, autonomy seeking strategies and external limitations resulting from coercive relations with capitalist power structures.

4. Results

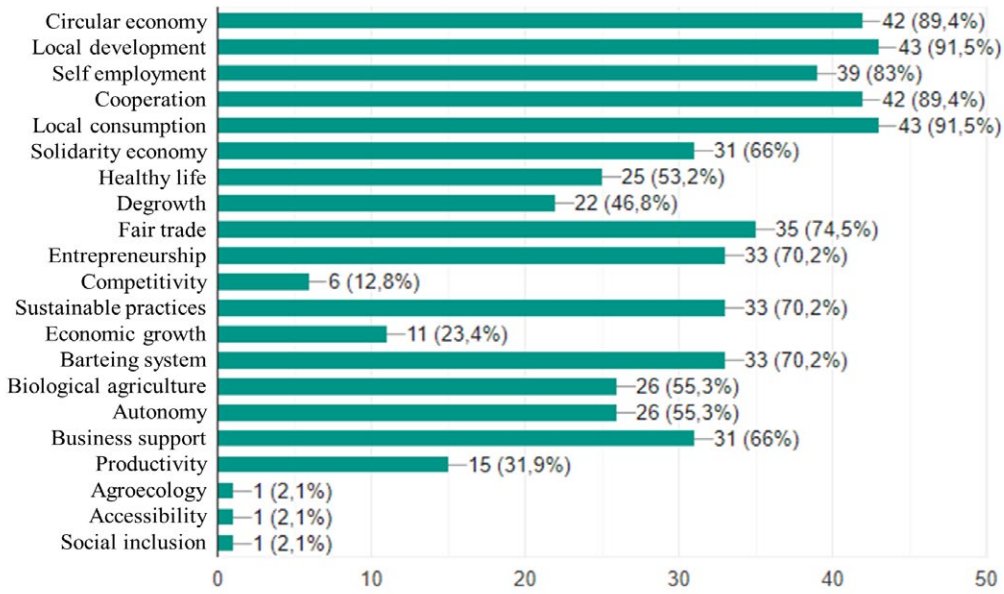
4.1. Cooperativa Integral Minga

Cooperativa Integral Minga emerges as a critique to the globalized capitalist model of production and reproduction, in a context in which IMF neoliberal directives were being imposed in Portugal. An initial group of eight people coming from big cities in and out of Portugal got together to create a plan meant to allow for the development of plural life projects with some level of autonomy. The goal was to create a cooperative enterprise increasingly independent of market competition and state support, with space for heterogeneity. Roughly a year later, Cooperativa Minga was formalized in Montemor-o-Novo, in the Portuguese region of Alentejo, as a multisectoral cooperative, combining commerce, services, housing and construction, and agriculture. Montemor-o-Novo is a small-scale

[9] All interlocutors cited throughout this paper consented with having their full names published. They were consulted individually and granted us permission to being associated with those very words.

city located in a "predominantly rural remote" area of Portugal (Brezzi, Dijkstra and Ruiz, 2011). However, it offers an advantageous proximity to Lisbon and to Évora, one of the biggest cities in Alentejo (roughly one hour driving or by bus). In terms of social perception, Montemor-o-Novo was described as "rural" in several interviews both by residents and representatives of government institutions. This region has been suffering a decrease of resident population: just from 2021 to 2023 the population decreased almost 1% (while national population rose approximately 2%). Even though it has a quite high index of aging population compared with the national scenario (almost 26% higher), it didn't rise significantly the last couple of years (INE, 2024). In its website, Minga explicitly states that it seeks to contribute for the development of Montemor-o-Novo and for "changing the reality of the local community[10]. When asked about the values associated with the cooperative, members mostly evoked "local development" (91,5%), "local consumption" (91,5%), "circular economy" (89,4%), "cooperation" (89,4%) and "self-employment" (83%) (see Figure 1). This idea of local development is strongly interwoven with the idea of moving from state-market dependency to local autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Figure 1. Answers to the question "Which of the following values do you associate with Minga?"



Note: survey conducted from February 2023 to April 2023.

This autonomy status is achieved by the de-commodification of life, resorting to diverse strategies, such as the sharing of resources. What we observed among Minga's members—and other residents

[10] https://mingamontemor.pt/ [Accessed: 6 September 2024].

of Montemor-o-Novo—is either the commonalization of available resources or the sharing of private resources without profiting. One example of this is the bimonthly newspaper promoted by an architecture collective from Minga, called "Dica d'Obra", which aims to share its knowledge about traditional construction techniques, promoting self-construction. Minga, as an integral cooperative, also enables common access to services that support self-employment, such as the sale of their products in the shop, common accountancy, or the use of *Espaço Integral*, a multifunctional shared space. Furthermore, the management of such spaces and services is commonly discussed among members, and it can be subject of restructuring during monthly meetings[11], upon democratic deliberation.

Another strategy for expanding autonomy is the creation and maintenance of local social welfare networks based on mutual aid and care. This is not something new; practices that strengthen collective autonomy have been present in the Portuguese peasant culture since immemorial times. *Ajudadas*, for example, are traditionally peasant practices in which people would get together to harvest crops or to build someone's house (Sanchis, 1983). Such practices are adopted within the cooperative, but also informally between its members and other Montemor-o-Novo's residents. While at a personal level, people organize *ajudadas* in order to obtain help to cultivate their lands or to (re)build their houses, Minga, as an organization, also resorts to such practices to maintain common spaces, such as painting the façade of its shop. This particular event was a three days' session in which seven members of the cooperative gathered to repaint the façade of the cooperative's shop.

In addition to such informal strategies, Minga provides a set of professional tools that promote local autonomy. As an integral cooperative, it allows its members to develop a plurality of economic projects within its legal structure without the bureaucratic constraints of starting a new company. As such, this type of structure promotes more heterogeneous organizations and plural life projects. A perfect example of this is a member who works as a locksmith, a masseuse and an event organizer (Sofie, personal communication, 31 March 2023). Furthermore, the incentive to the members to use the structure of Minga not only to sell their products and services but also to buy products from other members drives from the idea of prosumerism widely spread among Portuguese integral cooperatives. This concept describes members not either as consumers or producers, but as both at the same time.

These formal and informal instruments—the sharing of resources, the creation of a welfare network, the promotion of self-employment, and the encouragement of diversification of economic activities—give Minga the character of a transition platform in the process of moving from state-market dependency to local autonomy. However, this process of transition faces both internal and external limitations. Such limitations generate conflicts, for example, around the regulation for the usufruct of common goods and services, and the participation in their maintenance. One example

[11] Monthly meetings are moments in which all members of the cooperative are invited to participate in common decisions, tasks or needs. These meetings are managed according to the international cooperative principle of "one member one vote". As such, decisions are achieved through a voting process in which all members have equal power.

of this is the management of the common multifunctional space (*Espaço Integral*). Since this is a room in which different activities coexist (as permanent tapestry looms and a coworking space with occasional meetings and workshops) it is hard to define what is owned by a specific member, what is common to the cooperative, and what is open to external people.

> *"The looms are a project of Alexandra; they are not a common good. Even the shop is not totally clear. There are people who think that that should be a project of a specific group of people who'd take it to make it a business [instead of a cooperative's service]."* (João, personal communication, 21 March 2023)

The prefigurative character of this project is grounded in the fact that, when confronted with these limitations, the members of Minga try to find solutions autonomously from capitalist structures. An interesting example of this is the case of school canteen provisioning. Minga obtained from the municipality the contract to supply municipal school canteens with locally produced vegetables. However, some specific vegetables have such a high demand that local producers are unable to cover it. The easy answer would be to buy it from bigger non-local distributors. However, a visit to one Minga producer's non-cultivated land originated a plan to cultivate this field with such high demanded vegetables, relying on *ajudadas* with other parents for the harvesting and planting seasons.

The proliferation of integral cooperatives throughout the Portuguese territory owes a great deal to Minga's effort to disseminate this organizational model through workshops, classes in schools, YouTube videos, TV programs, and public, associative, and academic events. An outcome of this effort is the emergency of new integral cooperatives, such as Rizoma.

4.2. Rizoma Cooperativa Integral

In November 2020, Rizoma Cooperativa Integral was officially created in Lisbon, with an initial focus on consumption. However, foreseeing its future expansion, its members decided to register it as a multisectoral cooperative, which included the branches of services, housing and construction, culture, agriculture, and commerce.

Its first project, called "mini-Rizoma", allocated to the consumers' section, was constituted by a communitarian grocery shop and a bar. As requirements to be a member of the consumers' section and, therefore, to consume at the shop and bar, every member has to take part in a welcoming session and buy 15 EUR of social capital (the minimum required by the Portuguese cooperative law), as well as committing to perform a shift of three hours every four weeks, as a grocer, cashier, bartender or cook. In return, all consumers have the right to actively participate in the management of the project, being endowed with equal voting power.

Contrary to most cooperatives, including Minga, whose decision-making processes are based on the method of majority voting, in Rizoma—except for the biannual general assemblies—all decisions are reached through consensus; therefore, every member has the right to block a proposal if they fundamentally disagree with it. Such logic of democratic decision-making is extended to the whole cooperative, whose internal organization is distributed between several working groups that

focus on different aspects of the organization, such as governance, communication, finance, or IT. Each group has the autonomy to decide upon its specific dimension of action. This prevents the concentration of power in one person or a restricted group. In addition, all members have the right to present proposals, which are subjected to discussion sessions ("deep dive") open to all members and developed until all the participants consider it ready for deliberation. Decisions take place in sectorial meetings (reserved for members of that specific sector of economic activity) or general meetings (which congregate all sectors), depending if it has a direct impact on the cooperative as a whole or just on a specific section. In this sense, Rizoma works as a laboratory for direct democracy, developing strategies for decentralizing power and waging the limits of horizontality and consensus-based decision-making.

In 2022, Rizoma moved to a three-floor building, in which the shop and bar occupy the ground floor; the upper floor is allocated to the co-working space, a project of the services section; the lower floor, in addition to shop storage, is reserved for the project *Cave Cultural* (Cultural Basement). Cave Cultural is under the aegis of the culture section and includes a stage for performances and classes, as well as a bouldering wall for climbing. Several spaces can be rented (or requested for free, in case of non-paid events) when they are not being used. While Rizoma's agriculture and commerce sections are inactive, its housing section has been experiencing a strong effervescence, motivated by the soaring rental prices that have been affecting Lisbon and an apparent political will to grant buildings and lands to housing cooperatives[12]. Contrary to the traditional housing cooperatives in Portugal, that would allow for the alienation[13] of property, Rizoma's housing section sets limits in this matter. In order to fight speculation, the housing project that members of Rizoma intend to develop is based on collective property, in which associates would be granted the right of inhabiting, but not the right to sub-rent or sell their part. This is meant to prevent the transmission of cooperative property to private ownership, therefore protecting it against speculation.

Like Minga, Rizoma congregates a diversity of informal economic practices that broaden the autonomy of its members, while reinforcing their sense of solidarity and belonging. In the digital communication platforms adopted by the cooperative, there are regular calls for help, not only concerning common spaces but also member's individual needs. In addition to that, members frequently donate things to the cooperative or other members and get together to take care of each other's children or to cultivate Rizoma's terrace, just to give a few examples. In consonance with Gibson-Graham's research (2006a; 2006b), this plurality of socioeconomic practices expands our notions of what economy is, beyond the market and commercial transactions, but also opens up the way for a distinct development model, one that is not based on economic growth, but on improving living conditions.

[12] https://www.publico.pt/2023/04/10/economia/noticia/cooperativas-governo-quer-ressuscitar-sector-faz-16-casas-ano-2045505 [Accessed: 4 August 2023].

[13] Government's new housing legislative package: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/56-2023-222477692 [Accessed: 18 December 2023].

Rizoma, however, is far from achieving its "integral" status, since it is still mainly a consumers' cooperative. None of its goods are produced within the organization, except some delicacies that are made by individual members and sold at the bar. This might be due to the fact that, contrary to Minga, the great majority of Rizoma's members' source of income is external to the cooperative. Self-employment is still an underdeveloped feature of Rizoma, with only four members presently invoicing their clients through the cooperative. As such, we observe little diversification of economic activities or transition from one previous economic activity to another. One attempt to do otherwise concerned a group of members who aimed to organize a common translation project, not only to distribute surplus work, but also to guarantee more economic stability to all of them. Nonetheless, since the processes of self-employment in Rizoma were still in its embryonic state, most members were reluctant to give up their relatively safe labor without a promise of stability in the cooperative and the project experience. This also generates vulnerable financial health, contributing to its dependency on external funding.

On the other hand, Rizoma lacks the structure to train its members, not only on how to make the transition to cooperative employment (i.e., self-employment through the cooperative), but also on cooperative culture and democratic management more broadly, making it difficult for new members to develop their projects within the organization. In addition to a procedure for training its members, developing integral cooperativism in Rizoma would imply to start producing an incremental portion of the products it sells, integrating the professional activities of its members and (co-)developing cooperative financial tools, which, as we have seen, are virtually non-existent in Portugal. And, for that purpose, an inter-cooperative trajectory is essential.

4.3. Network of Integral Cooperatives as a commons ecology

Following the first national forum of integral cooperatives (*Fórum das Cooperativas Integrais*), in October 2022, a network of inter-cooperation was created—*Rede das Cooperativas Integrais*—with the aim of developing a mutual aid platform. From then on, members of different cooperatives would meet online every third Tuesday of each month to weave the network together. This has included organizing online meetings with convergent initiatives and developing didactic resources for groups who intend to create their own integral cooperative. This platform was also responsible for organizing the second forum of integral cooperatives. The principle of "cooperation among cooperatives" was translated into practice when members of distinct cooperatives joined to assume responsibilities to make that event possible. Regenerativa (from São Luís) granted the space, a member of the newborn Coop 99 (from Porto) took care of the communication, a member of Rizoma (from Lisbon) created the posters, a member of Minga (from Montemor-o-Novo) sent the invitations, and so on. The surplus money raised with the registrations to the forum was turned into the Network's common fund, which is collectively and democratically managed.

In the aftermath of the Forum, new members joined the Network's monthly meetings, and new working groups were formed: one dedicated to communication, the other to cooperative training,

and another to the network's identity, as well as a study group focused on reflecting about the labor relations within cooperatives. As it grows and strengthens, the Network is improving its capacity to exert political pressure towards favorable policies and legal changes, including the creation of a legal framework for cooperative financing. An example of this is the regular participation of members of FESCOOP in the Network monthly meetings, an organization for the promotion of ethical finances that has been struggling with the Portuguese legislation to develop cooperative financial instruments. Furthermore, one of the founders of the Network became a current board member of CONFECOOP, the Portuguese confederation of non-agricultural cooperatives, an organization with substantial political recognition from which integral cooperatives could achieve stronger representation and develop collaborations with other cooperatives.

The confluence of the Portuguese integral cooperatives into a network is consonant with De Angelis (2017: 287) concept of "commons ecologies", which he defines as "webs of interrelated commons, cooperating at different scales and intensity". According to the author, to be able to thrive against the coercive forces of capital, commons such as integral cooperatives would need to develop into wider ecosystems of inter-cooperation, in order to produce commons at larger scales and intensifying their presence throughout the social fabric (De Angelis, 2017). Similarly, the Network of Integral Cooperatives aims at facilitating the proliferation of this cooperative model, but not without some level of coordination between such organizations. This is achieved, not through some hierarchical structure, but rather emerges quasi-spontaneously, in a decentralized and horizontal way, through communication in regular meetings and the sense of solidarity that is developed during moments of commoning.

For De Angelis, there are two different types of *structural coupling*[14] among commons: "symbiosis" and "meta-commonality". Symbiosis would happen "with the inclusion of the boundaries of two (or more) commons into one unit" (De Angelis, 2017: 292). This happens, for example, when external initiatives are integrated into a cooperative, such as when the housing collective Aldrava or the audiovisual collective Sintrópica joined Rizoma. In this process, "[e]ach group retains its own identity, autonomy, and autopoietic processes while operating within the boundaries" (De Angelis, 2017: 293) of the cooperative. However, the case of the Network of Integral Cooperatives would belong to the second type. As the author explains, in meta-communality each commons maintains "its identity and internal commoning, while at the same time establishing a new systemic coherence with other commons" (De Angelis, 2017: 293). Likewise, within the Network all organizations retain their structure and components while being integrated into a higher level of coordination between organizations, which allows them, for example, to share knowledge and other resources, develop common strategies and projects, or join forces to exercise political pressure.

Such a systemic framework allows us to switch from a perspective that sees integral cooperatives as bounded organizations to one that reveals a coordinated effort to outline an alternative development model, based on inter-cooperation, decentralization of power, democratic decision-making, and

[14] Symbiotic relations among systems (De Angelis, 2017: 330).

ecological accountability. Furthermore, it makes clear that, quoting one of the participants in the second Integral Cooperatives Forum, *"integral cooperativism is not just about integral cooperatives"* (Jorge Gonçalves, 8 October 2023, public communication at the Forum of Integral Cooperatives), but also about a different vision for the future shared by a diversity of people and organizations. Although the focus of this research is on integral cooperatives, a commons-based development model is constructed through the common—and more or less coordinated—effort of many distinct entities, including associations of community-supported agriculture, cultural and artistic associations, alternative media, ecologically oriented publishers and hacker collectives. To a lesser or greater extent, all the prefigurative organizations that constitute this broader commons ecology contribute to substantiating the development model that will be explored throughout the next section.

5. Discussion

The analysis of these case studies reinforces the thesis that commons-based prefigurative organizations and, more concretely, integral cooperatives, can point towards a more democratic and ecologic development model. They do so by shifting both the *aims and means* of development. Criticizing the fact that business profitability alone does not ensure a better life for all stakeholders—producers, managers, consumers, distributors, and so on—, these organizations turn the focus of their activity from capital accumulation to the direct improvement of living conditions. This means to allow for a dignified and satisfying life (Sen, 1993). In other words, focusing not only on material wealth but also on the enhancement of affective and professional environments, the satisfaction of social needs, and the promotion of psychological health (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014).

As we have seen, this is pursued by developing strategies to expand personal and collective autonomy in relation to the state-market binomial, which promotes a neoliberal development model based on an ever-increasing commodification of life. In these case studies, we identify four main strategies deployed to achieve this transition to a development model that aims at the common good, in social and ecological terms. These *transitional strategies* are: (1) the establishment of an alternative shared value system, (2) the generation of communitarian means of production and distribution, (3) the democratic management of common resources, and (4) the creation of local and inter-cooperative support networks.

Creating an alternative vision for a common future implies agreeing on a set of distinct shared values. The prefigurative organizations we described embody an implicit criticism to an economic system based on individualism, competition, and hierarchy, given the social and ecological externalities it generates. Alternatively, they ground their practices on values such as solidarity, democracy, and environmental care. This echoes the words of Mariana Reboleira, member of Rizoma: *"I think that is one of the most important things, the way we organize, to not necessarily having a leader… If you divide the responsibility for everybody, then comes the sense of participation… It brings a different way of valuing people"* (interview, 20 May 2022).

Such values (and ways of valuing) foster the sharing of goods and resources. As a counterpoint to private property and the concentration of wealth and means of production, these organizations base their activity on collective ownership of resources. This is exemplified by the multipurpose facilities held by both cooperatives, but also by the collective agriculture project in Minga and by Rizoma's self-managed shop. These are proposals for promoting social equality through the right to shared resources.

However, this aim is only achieved when combined with decentralised, democratic management of such resources, which tends to foster the accountability of community members, as suggested in Mariana's testimony. Besides, this underpins a mutual assessment of the impacts that collective actions have on the ecosystems everybody depends on, resulting in a tendency to prioritize ecological practices. This is apparent in the emphasis put on preventing waste in both cooperative's grocery shops, either by transforming almost spoiled fruits and veggies into meals or by selling them at lower prices. Besides, there is a deep emphasis on selling local and agroecological products and promoting such principles even outside the cooperative.

Finally, these prefigurative organizations tend to give rise to local and inter-cooperative support networks—what De Angelis called "structural coupling". On the one hand, we witness the development of mutual aid practices between neighbors or at a municipal level; on the other, we see the weaving of alliances with other organizations, either in a symbiotic or meta-communal manner. The creation of the Portuguese Network of Integral Cooperatives perfectly illustrates such a strategy. This type of structure aims to counteract co-optation processes, namely the external pressures exerted by the state-market binomial to reframe their actions along a neoliberal development model. On the other hand, it functions as a communitarian welfare system in the face of state negligence in moments of generalized crisis. This is also evident at the scale of Montemor-o-Novo, where Minga is just one of a multitude of cultural, educational and social institutions, associations and groups that share some common principles, needs and aims, materializing De Angelis "commons ecology". A perfect example of this is the creation of Estação Cooperativa, a cooperative of 10 collective members from associations to other cooperatives or collectives, created to manage an abandoned train infrastructure of 13,000 m^2 in Casa Branca (a small village near to Montemor-o-Novo)[15].

These four transitional strategies constitute the foundation of a commons-based development model based on more democratic and ecological organizations, promoted by these integral cooperatives. On the one hand, we observed that all members, regardless of their socio-economic background, have equal right to participate in deciding the destiny of revenues they contribute to generate. On the other hand, their shared ecological values lead them to prioritize environmentally beneficial practices, even though it may imply some decrease in revenues.

Scaling such a development model to a national or international level would mean approving public policies in which development is not equated with economic growth for its own sake, but rather with improving living conditions in a material, social, psychological, affective, and environmental

[15] https://estacaocooperativa.cargo.site [Accessed: 9 September 2024].

sense. Ultimately, this would mean transitioning from a capitalist system to one based on economic democracy and ecological knowledge. Prefigurative organizations such as integral cooperatives have an essential role in that endeavor. While outlining the basis of a new socioeconomic system, they also stimulate our collective imagination, allowing us to envision an alternative future, beyond the continuous increase in social inequality and the prospects of environmental cataclysm.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have highlighted the environmental and social consequences of the neoliberal development project, while exploring an alternative model of development based on the commons, as outlined by the Portuguese integral cooperatives. On the edge of plural societal challenges, which include economic, financial, and environmental crises, the integral cooperatives' movement proposes a distinct way of conceiving our economic organizations.

We have argued that integral cooperatives can be considered prefigurative organizations, not only because they embody both a critique and an alternative to standard commercial organizations, but also because they strive to disseminate a commons-based development model. They adopt a legal framework in which capital accumulation is prevented, encouraging the collective management of resources, therefore, promoting the transition from profit-based practices to economic practices that favor the common good.

We founded our arguments on long-term research among two integral cooperatives in Portugal, and in the Portuguese Network of Integral Cooperatives. Throughout this process we were able to identify some strategies deployed by these prefigurative organizations to promote a transition to a commons-based development model: setting an alternative shared value system, generating communitarian means of production and distribution, deploying democratic management of common resources, and creating local and inter-cooperative support networks. The adoption of such a model resulted in integrating plural life projects within such organizations, developing more democratic decision-making processes and prioritizing beneficial environmental practices.

This work aimed at shedding some light on the alternative development model prefigured by the organizations under research, while examining how it unfolds through practice. However, we believe further research on this topic would be needed in order to better understand the limitations and potentials of such commons-base development model. On the one hand, we recognize the importance of studying the appliance at a wider scale of the four transitional strategies examined in our research. On the other hand, we acknowledge internal limitations within these organizations, which we were unable to fully explore in this essay. These include the risks of degeneration—the process of abandoning the project's foundational values when facing periods of crisis or deep challenges—and co-optation—the process of selectively introducing potentially disruptive practices into the free market or turning them into profit-oriented initiatives (Rossini,

Azozomox and Debelle, 2018). Finally, we hope this work contributes to the multidisciplinary inquiry on the transformative potential of cooperative enterprises—and the commons, more broadly—to a critical analysis of the hegemonic development model, and to the collective effort to build an alternative development proposal based on democratic and ecological principles, so urgent in these times of deepening social and environmental crisis.

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