

Cooperativa Integral Minga in the Alentejo Region

New Production Practices of Solidarity

In solidarity economics the best outcome is found when we consider cooperation as the basis of the social and economic processes. Cooperatives can be key stakeholders in a new collaborative economy.

By Jorge Gonçalves

Cooperatives, or in a broader perspective, cooperation is a way of addressing the difficulties of producers, facilitating the access to products and services to consumers, and a way of capitalizing society in monetary and non-monetary terms, enhancing resilience, so that people have the real control over the course of their lives, even when crises emerge. *Cooperativa Integral Minga* is a recent example that tries to put these ideas in place in Alentejo, in the south of Portugal, being integrated in a broader movement taking place in the country.

It is a widespread notion that economic growth is not to be expected to happen indefinitely as there are boundaries both to people's needs and availability of natural resources. Once the capacity to grow in terms of profits meets its limits, the capacity to invest is also reduced, reducing the capital available for further investments. The current financial crises, which become chronicle throughout the world, also in the western or so-called developed economies, are demonstrative of this, with significant social consequences, such as growth on unemployment, mass migration, closure of borders, wars, food insecurity.

Additionally, state-based social security systems that appeared to address the problem of the individualistic man have now less capacity to respond to problems due to lower tax revenues, and higher unemployment.

While the competitive-based productive and social security systems are facing significant crises, solidarity economics proposes a different approach, being integral cooperatives a possible practical way in order to enhance resilience of territories (i. e. their capacity to provide livelihoods).

The idea of a *Cooperativa Integral*

„Integral Cooperative“ is a concept that emerged in Cataluña in 2010, with the *Cooperativa Integral Catalana*, naming the idea that the same cooperative should include all sectors

needed for living like production and consumption of goods and services, housing, health or education. Persons are considered both as producers and consumers, the so-called producers, and exchange processes as more than cold actions of acquiring a good or service, but rather as acts between people that interact through their lives, where not only monetary transactions take place, but where trust and other symbolic elements are also relevant. Similar experiences took place before, like *Conjunto Palmeiras* in Brazil, a neighborhood that in order to face a situation of high unemployment and emigration, defined a strategy to promote local production and consumption, developed its own currency, a bank, a microfinance system, and schools where the basic concept to promote local development is cooperation.

Inspired by these two experiences, *Cooperativa Integral Minga* was founded in July 2015. This is a multisector cooperative that has four sectors: agriculture, commercialization (production of non-agricultural products), services and housing. It is located in Montemor-o-Novo, a town of ten thousand inhabitants, in Alentejo, a region in the south of Portugal. Alike most of the countryside of Portugal, since the 1960s there has been a significant decrease of around 50% of the population, and the current crisis is deepening this process. Agriculture has been abandoned, local shops were substituted by supermarkets and the youth leaves to bigger cities in the coastal areas or abroad either to study or to find job opportunities.

New tools for the population

Minga tries to revert this process by creating tools that can be used by the population. It facilitates people to formalize their economic activities by sharing administrative and management costs among the members. There are high entrance costs for small producers, namely regarding minimum payments to social security and having an accountant. It has a shop with local products, and with other products that are needed but that come from outside, acting as a consumers cooperative. It helps organizing production and distribution channels for farmers by supplying canteens or other cooperatives, having its basket system, participating in the local market or buying machinery. It helps non-farmers by collective buying of inputs, finding shops and participating in fairs. It has a shared rented place that serves as a venue for socio-cultural activities and it has a website for promotion of the products and services. It furthermore has an internal currency that facilitates the exchange of products and services between its members.

Challenges for the cooperative

Housing insecurity is another problem that *Minga* is trying to address. Many times rents make up more than 50% of the income of families, and with higher unemployment rates, many people have no means to pay their rents or raise credits. In Montemor there was a cooperative of housing in the 1980s that built houses for 2,000 people. But since then no projects worked in that direction, as since the 1990s it was believed that bank loans would suffice. There are many houses which are abandoned, neither for sale nor for renting, and yet many people without a house. This is a big burden and a constraint to oppose the demographic trend of the last decades, to fix and attract population to the town. In this regard, *Minga* is proposing two simultaneous projects, on building and rebuilding, using low impact techniques that try to fight speculation, by substituting the private property regime, to one based on the right of use.

In the future, there are other tools that are to be developed according to the needs of its members, departing from the idea that, more than an ideological perspective, cooperation is a practical way to address the problems that affect our lives. By doing this, one develops a sense that when there is a problem, we can communicate with our peers and try to find our common issues, and to see if there is ground for us to work together in order to overcome them.

Minga means “ajudada”, an expression used in Ecuador referring to the collective actions which are done voluntarily between neighbors, friends and family, that are easier done together. Examples are gathering olives or building a house. In Portuguese, *Minga* is a form of the verb “Minguar”, which means, to degrow, as a reference to the degrowth movement, which entail ideas like consuming less, locally, seasonally or re-using resources.

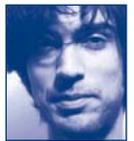
The cooperative is only one year old and it is not funded, as it tries to find its own economic autonomy. It is too early to talk about it as a sustainable project, but in a short period it made several steps in that direction, a lot of people got involved in many different ways, and it has already more than 40 members, from different generations (from 18 until 80 years old) and fields of work. Some members are originally from Montemor, others join from the outside, and through this process a sense of solidarity and appropriation gradually emerges in which heterogeneity is a key element to enrich the social bonds.

Minga is not alone in this movement in Portugal. Recently the Portuguese *Network of Solidarity Economy* was created, cooperatives throughout the country are appearing in various sectors of activity and meetings are taking place, in order to share needs, knowledge, ideas and resources. Many of the partners of *Minga* are other cooperatives, consumer groups and informal collectives. The emergence of these relationships has been a key to help the development of each of them and to provoke a more structural change. This has allowed a broader spectrum of the population to live in an alternative social and economic system, as it increasingly capable to provide livelihoods while providing different forms of interaction, where cooperation and ecological sustainability are the main driving force.

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