

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY-LED SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: SOM ENERGIA AND NEW COOPERATIVES IN SPAIN

Spain has been experiencing the growth of a new generation of social innovation initiatives. These include cooperatives in sectors such as energy, food, mobility, and finance. They experiment with alternative, decentralised, more equitable, and radically democratic ways of producing, distributing, and consuming. Som Energia is an outstanding example.

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COMMUNITY-LED INNOVATIONS IN SPAIN IN A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

In Spain, as in other parts of the world, a number of alternative economic practices have emerged since 2008. The global crisis, the growth of unemployment, precariousness, and deprivation, connected with a cycle of intense politicisation and social mobilisation are some of the reasons behind this boost in alternative practices. Remarkably, this mobilisation not only called for public action, but also actively worked on the construction of alternatives to a system considered exclusionary, unfair, and unsustainable [1].

Driven not only by social and economic needs, but also by political perspectives and purposes, many people joined a variety of processes to build alternative and innovative models of producing, exchanging, and consuming goods and services, to address human needs and to organise life and work.

Of course, these were not new practices, as many alternative economic initiatives existed before the crisis. However, the crisis and the sudden wave of politicisation of society has contributed to the replication, expansion, visibility, and impact of this kind of project.

These practices have expanded throughout a wide range of domains: energy, food, finance, housing, etc. They have also adopted very different models and schemes: associations, self-help groups, neighbourhood associations, social enterprises, and cooperatives, among others. From social

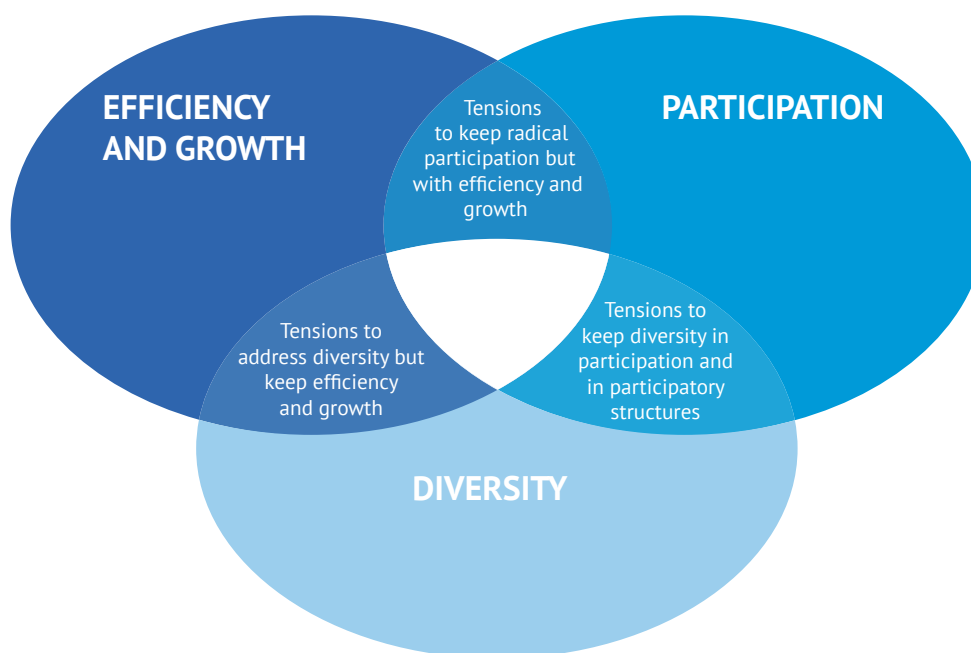
currencies and time banks, to food groups, eco-housing and energy cooperatives, social centres, library networks, and so on, this landscape displays a myriad of different initiatives of community-led social innovations [2].

NEW COOPERATIVES THAT ARE TRANSFORMING ALL SECTORS

A number of these new and innovative experiences have developed in the form of cooperatives. In fact, Spain has a long tradition of self-help, self-managed, and cooperative forms of social and economic organisation. This practice experienced a fresh push following the crisis, and new cooperatives joined existing ones. As Wigger [3] points out: *“cooperatives and other horizontally organised and democratically run self-management economic practices have expanded considerably in Spain since the outbreak of the crisis”*.

Although each cooperative has its own particularities, they do share some common features:

- They are based on values such as cooperation, solidarity, and participation.
- From these values, they try to experiment with new, fairer and more participatory, decentralised, community-led infrastructures of production, distribution, and consumption.
- They usually emphasise the democratisation, de-marketisation, and de-commodification of various basic goods and services.
- These initiatives are connected to local networks, visions, and knowledge.



Some issues and tensions in social innovation initiatives. Insights from Som Energia.

- They see themselves as a part of a niche of alternatives to mainstream systems of production and consumption.
- They are, in fact, spaces for the experimentation and prefiguration of alternative models. No matter their size or quantitative impact, they are involved in exploring new social, political, and economic arrangements to address human needs.

We can briefly mention some examples in different domains. Some of the most recent initiatives have adopted the initial word *som* ('we are' in Catalan) in their names. This demonstrates that, even though they are separate cooperatives, they share a common language and imaginary, and a sense of belonging to the same movement.

Some older cooperatives, such as *Coop 57*, have found new importance and have supported emerging initiatives. It has been operating since 1995, its objective is to offer responses to the financial needs of citizens and increase the social and solidarity economy. It is deeply connected with local actors in the various territories it operates in, and has supported new initiatives and benefited from the new impulse towards social and solidarity economy.

Almost every sector has seen the birth of various new cooperatives. In the case of food, we find *Som Alimentació*, a consumers' cooperative formed in 2017. It provides its members with access to local and ecological food, limiting intermediaries, and offering fair prices to producers. It arose from the previous experiences of food groups, which expanded rapidly in Valencia after 2011. *Som Mobilitat* is a similar initiative in the domain of transport. Since 2015, it has endeavoured to collectively develop and provide goods and services to accelerate the transition to a more sustainable model of mobility. They offer

car-sharing services of cars owned by the cooperative or by individuals, enterprises, or public institutions. It is organised into local groups to ensure that the people of each municipality are those who promote and adapt the mobility services, which are adapted to the characteristics of each neighbourhood, town, or city. *Som Connexió* works with a similar model. It is the first cooperative in the field of telecommunications in Spain. It has provided services since 2015 and calls for an engaged, empowered, and mobilised citizenry that controls its own telecommunications.

These last three cooperatives have been inspired by the model of *Som Energia*, one of the more relevant experiences of this new wave of cooperatives, in terms of growth, impact, and innovation.

SOM ENERGIA: AN INSPIRING EXAMPLE

Som Energia was created in 2010 with 150 members; since then, it has expanded exponentially across all of Spain, having more than 55,000 members today. From the outset, its members played a fundamental role in developments and in all decision-making processes. A sign of this is the appearance of the 'local groups', which are groups of committed activists that join forces in their own local territory in order to organise conferences, debates, and regular meetings, to both disseminate the products offered by the cooperative and to engage people and raise awareness about sustainability, energy transition, and current ecological challenges. They promote a new culture of energy, explain issues such as fuel poverty or revolving doors, or plan policy advocacy initiatives together with other actors. Beyond the local groups, other democratic spaces for decision-making

exist at the national level: the governing council and the annual assembly. Additionally, further spaces exist for discussion and formation, such as the local groups' annual meeting and September's Energy School [4].

The cooperative commercialises energy, which is acquired in the national daily energy auction (the only way to operate in Spain) and sold to members. However, *Som Energia* also supports local energy projects and carries out lobbying and awareness-raising actions to change energy governance in Spain, so the de-centralisation of energy production, distribution, and consumption can become a reality. Members of *Som Energia* can choose to just buy energy, or become more engaged and take part in local groups, assemblies, or specific activities of the cooperative. We can briefly refer to some of the key contributions of the cooperative [4]:

- *Som Energia* has injected inspiration, credibility, optimism, and self-confidence into similar initiatives. It has been able to operate and grow in a very closed, obscure, and oligopolistic sector, tightly controlled by a handful of huge companies. It has also impressively swelled the number of its members, supported a number of renewable projects, influenced policies, generated new discourses, and tested new models of participation.
- The cooperative has been able to manage diversity. It gathers people with very different profiles and needs. For some more passive members, *Som Energia* is a service provider, which operates in a more responsible way. Activists, who identify more with terms such as energy sovereignty or de-growth, consider the cooperative to be much more than that: it is a space of participation where they can engage in order to transform the energy system.
- It has been a powerful space for both individual and collective learning. Members have learnt, through active participation, alternative discourses and new ways to organise, act and transform, in a very complex context.

EMERGING TENSION AND QUESTIONS

Finally, we can mention some specific tensions and questions that emerge from the experience of *Som Energia* [4]. Firstly, the issue of efficiency and growth. Rapid growth and the need for efficiency posed a number of problems. For example, it is becoming impossible to provide the cooperative's

members with renewable energy originating solely from small local energy production facilities. This leads to a number of questions, regarding whether it is better to support larger renewable projects, as well, or if the cooperative should stop growing to be fully consistent with its aims.

Secondly, *Som Energia* faces the question of territorial diversity. The cooperative is present in territories with very different needs, paces of work, political situations, etc. This leads to a number of questions regarding the governance and organisational procedures of a big structure operating in very diverse territories.

Finally, there is the issue of participation. The cooperative has various democratic spaces and procedures; however, they have to be in permanent evolution, due to growth, maturity, and other internal dynamics. This leads to a number of questions regarding how to maintain and expand this democratic way of functioning in such a big structure.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of *Som Energia* illustrates a number of tensions of key importance for cooperatives and other social innovation initiatives proposing innovative and transformative bottom-up models in different sectors. These tensions can emerge in a range of issues. For example, between growth and efficiency and values – how to balance growth and efficiency in tandem with maintaining the values and the participatory orientation that make these innovations relevant; between growth and efficiency and diversity – how to keep some kind of unity and an overall strategy but respond to the demands of the different territories and groups; or between diversity and participation – how to balance the very different expectations and political cultures within the initiatives in participatory processes.

Nonetheless, all these innovative experiences in Spain are demonstrating that alternative models of production, distribution, and consumption are already possible. These experiences are full of tensions and complexities, but demonstrate that the political energy mobilised in recent years can be converted into specific and innovative projects to make another world possible.

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