

THEMATIC ARTICLE

Rural social innovation in practices of solidarity economy in the Cooptar collective in Southern Brazil

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Abstract

Disputes over land and the struggle for the right to work and dignified life for rural workers have been going on for a long time in Brazil. They are currently reconfigured based on new forms of exclusion that characterize the “new rural.” Rural social innovation (RSI) comprises a broad process of social change, capable of contributing to dealing with challenges and, providing opportunities for social inclusion and overcoming inequalities. This article aimed to understand the transforming potential of the RSI developed at the Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Cascata Ltda. (Cooptar), a Collective resulting from one of the agrarian settlements formed from the occupation of the Annoni Farm in Rio Grande do Sul by the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). Methodologically, the case study was based on documental research, observation, 24 semi-structured interviews with cooperative families and external technicians, and content analysis. The findings showed that, through processes of ongoing training and protagonism of the members of the collective, Cooptar exists and has been self-renewing for 33 years in its interpersonal and family relationships (confronting individualism and gender inequality), practices of solidarity economy (collective ownership and self-management) and diversification in production processes, constituting a true culture of transformative and solidary social innovation.

**Keywords:** Rural social innovation. Innovation culture. Agricultural cooperation. Organizational practices. Agrarian settlement.

*Inovação social rural em práticas de economia solidária no coletivo Cooptar no Sul do Brasil*

Resumo

As disputas pela terra e a luta pelo direito ao trabalho e à vida digna de trabalhadores rurais vêm de longa data no Brasil, reconfiguradas na atualidade pelas formas renovadas de exclusão que caracterizam o “novo rural”. A inovação social rural (ISR) compõe um processo amplo de mudanças sociais, capaz de contribuir para o enfrentamento de desafios e simultaneamente promover inclusão social e superação de desigualdades. Este artigo visa compreender o potencial transformador das ISRs desenvolvidas na Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Cascata Ltda. (Cooptar), um coletivo decorrente de um dos assentamentos agrários formados na ocupação da Fazenda Annoni, no Rio Grande do Sul, pelo Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). O estudo de caso se valeu de pesquisa documental, observação, 24 entrevistas semiestruturadas com as famílias cooperativadas e com técnicos externos, bem como de análise de conteúdo. Os achados evidenciaram que, mediante processos de formação permanente e de protagonismo dos membros do coletivo, a Cooptar existe e segue se renovando há 33 anos em suas relações interpessoais e familiares (enfrentamento do individualismo e da desigualdade de gênero), práticas de economia solidária (propriedade coletiva e autogestão) e diversificações nos processos produtivos, constituindo uma verdadeira cultura de inovação social transformadora e solidária.

**Palavras-chave:** Inovação social rural. Cultura de inovação. Cooperação agrícola. Práticas organizativas. Assentamento agrário.

*Innovación social rural en prácticas de economía solidaria en el colectivo Cooptar en el sur de Brasil*

Resumen

Las disputas por la tierra y la lucha por el derecho al trabajo y a la vida digna de los trabajadores rurales tienen lugar desde hace mucho tiempo en Brasil, reconfigurándose actualmente en nuevas formas de exclusión que caracterizan la “nueva ruralidad”. La innovación social rural (ISR) comprende un amplio proceso de cambio social, capaz de contribuir a enfrentar los desafíos, posibilitar la inclusión social y la superación de las desigualdades. Este artículo tuvo como objetivo comprender el potencial transformador de las ISR desarrolladas en la Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Cascata Ltda. (Cooptar), colectivo resultante de uno de los asentamientos agrarios formados a partir de la ocupación de la Hacienda Annoni en Rio Grande do Sul por el Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sin Tierra (MST). Metodológicamente, el estudio de caso utilizó investigación documental, observación, 24 entrevistas semiestruturadas con familias asociadas a la cooperativa y técnicos externos, y análisis de contenido. Los hallazgos mostraron que, a través de procesos de formación permanente y protagonismo de los integrantes del colectivo, Cooptar existe y sigue renovándose hace 33 años en sus relaciones interpersonales y familiares (enfrentando el individualismo y la desigualdad de género), prácticas de economía solidaria (propiedad colectiva y autogestión) y diversificación en los procesos productivos, constituyendo una verdadera cultura de innovación social transformadora y solidaria.

**Palabras clave:** Innovación social rural. Cultura de innovación. Cooperación agrícola. Prácticas organizacionales. Asentamiento agrario.

Article submitted for the Call for Papers "Social and solidarity economy in the organization of decent work: sociological interpretations" on January 30, 2023 and accepted for publication on July 19, 2023.

[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by this article’s translator.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120230019x>

## INTRODUCTION

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The debate on social innovation (SI) is prominent on global, academic, and public policy agendas (Pazetto et al., 2022) as a means to address social problems and enhance community well-being while bolstering territorial capital (Ravazzoli et al., 2021). The interest in this topic is particularly driven by its applicability to today's complex and urgent issues, including exclusion, alienation, economic oppression, and environmental degradation, among others, as well as its potential to bring about societal transformation.

The contemporary rural context is characterized by profound structural and socioeconomic changes, which have given rise to the concept of the "new rural." This term refers to the expansion of non-agricultural activities resulting from the increasing urbanization of rural areas and a growing emphasis on environmental preservation. These activities encompass housing, tourism, leisure, and service provision. Additionally, they extend to personal hobbies and the establishment of small, intensive agricultural ventures like fish farming, horticulture, floriculture, fruit cultivation for fresh consumption, and small animal husbandry. While these activities are not entirely new, they have been effectively reimagined to cater to emerging niches or to differentiate themselves from traditional markets. This transformation is related to agricultural families' social and economic diversification. It is important to note that this "new rural" also includes individuals affected by the modernization and mechanization of agriculture who have been excluded from this process and relegated to rudimentary subsistence farming (Silva et al., 2002). These changes significantly affect the rural population's well-being and reflect de-agrarianization processes in rural territories (Neumeier, 2016). In response to the challenges posed by the "new rural," agrarian settlements are actively engaging in rural social innovation (RSI) (Schermer & Kroismayr, 2020), a phenomenon that requires further theoretical exploration (Santo & Andion, 2022).

This article aims to understand the transformative potential of RSI as developed by Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Cascata Ltda. (Cooptar), a collective of agrarian settlements that emerged during the occupation of Fazenda Annoni in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, led by the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in the mid-1980s. The specific objectives of this research are a) identifying the key elements that contributed to the promotion of Social Innovation (SI) within the collective, b) characterizing the role of SI within the historical context of the collective's formation, and c) reflecting on the counter-hegemonic aspects of the solidarity economy, considering the individual's role within the collective, the actions of leaders, and the collective's autonomy.

RSI is a prominent research topic within the field of social sciences, particularly in rural social studies, rural administration, and rural history. This emerging and intricate subject (Bonavigo & Bavaresco, 2008) encompasses many social, economic, and political practices. Our research experience led us to include two references to comprehensively understand RSI. Firstly, the concept of transformative SI reshapes power relations, promotes autonomy, and addresses social needs. Secondly, the practices of the solidarity economy, which are already associated with transformative SI in the existing literature, played a crucial role in elucidating the meanings and dynamics that foster agency, autonomy, and RSI within Cooptar. This social phenomenon is intricately woven into the collective's historical formation process, shared leadership, and the autonomy granted to the individuals involved.

The relevance of this study lies in its introduction of the RSI theme into discussions about SI, offering a valuable resource for understanding the particularities associated with seeking solutions to social problems in the "new rural." Additionally, this article contributes to the development of the field of RSI studies within the solidarity economy and practices of social transformation in the Brazilian context. Furthermore, from a transformative perspective, it is worth noting that the existing literature on SI has largely been based on experiences in Northern countries (Avelino et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2016), while studies from the global South such as this one are scarce (Ferrarini, 2019, 2022) and consider innovation in the analytical dimension, focusing on the creation of social value and solutions to contemporary social problems.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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### Social innovation: concepts and perspectives

Despite the appearance of novelty, socially innovative practices have a historical presence in creative endeavors aimed at meeting people's needs, improving living conditions (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), enhancing social practices (Taylor, 1970), promoting sustainable development, inclusion, equity, and safeguarding rights (Kusumastuti et al., 2022). The new elements in social innovation (SI) seem to be the meanings and the roles assigned to modern scientific and economic principles (Ferrarini, 2019), making SI a contemporary phenomenon that reflects society's capacity to transform its local reality. Therefore, SI represents a means of addressing social issues, or as stated by Pazetto et al. (2022, p. 88), "a path of resistance and opposition to inequalities and social apathy related to the suffering of others." Furthermore, SI yields societal benefits (Cloutier, 2003; Murray et al., 2010) and contributes to local development, closely intertwined with how people inhabit their territory (Sarate & Piccinini, 2019).

Research on SI has benefited from theoretical contributions from various fields of knowledge, evolving within an inter – and transdisciplinary context. This has led to the development of a research field equipped with diverse research methods and tools (Taylor, 1970; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). The methodological complexity of the empirical field becomes apparent when we consider the delineation of research levels (Cloutier, 2003) and recognize that SI ecosystems can either foster or hinder the intended SI development.

Exploring this topic involves considering various definitions of SI, which encompass new ideas or combinations of ideas presented through products, services, and methods (Murray et al., 2010), interventions (Taylor, 1970), professional training programs, business models, and strategies for sustainable development (Monteiro, 2019). These definitions also extend to collaborative work and technology transfer projects (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Klein et al., 2016; Santo & Andion, 2022), each with the potential to address complex situations in contemporary societies.

However, these definitions alone do not fully address a crucial problem inherent to the concept of SI. For a considerable period, SI was primarily recognized for the benefits it yielded in terms of products, often with less attention given to the underlying production processes. In such cases, SI could be characterized by top-down and paternalistic approaches that overlook stakeholder participation. To rectify this issue, scholars like Mulgan (2007) and Murray et al. (2010) addressed the matter by proposing definitions that take an integrated perspective, encompassing both the product and process aspects. They emphasized the participatory nature of open innovation and the collaborative nature of learning. Consequently, it became clear that the product of social innovation cannot be isolated from the innovation's process or organization (Hulgård & Ferrarini, 2010).

Cloutier (2003) contributes to advancing research in this field by categorizing SI into four analytical dimensions: the object itself, the process of its creation and implementation, the intended target of the changes, and the outcomes achieved. Within its dynamic or its process, SI promotes an emancipatory perspective by fostering collective protagonism, democratic participation, and the sharing of diverse knowledge, both individual and collective (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Klein et al., 2016). Collective protagonism offers new meanings to human relations and power structures, fuels aspirations, and mobilizes citizens to conceive novel modes of action and innovative knowledge arrangements (Avelino et al., 2017; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

Initially regarded as an agnostic lens through which to analyze the pursuit of positive social change (Phills et al., 2008), Social Innovation (SI) has evolved into a catalyst for engaging individuals, groups, and communities, challenging the boundaries between disciplines, regulatory frameworks, and traditional dichotomies. However,

social innovation cannot be separated from the broader political context in which it unfolds and from the polysemy of meanings that emerge amid the complexity of a society that reproduces large-scale inequalities and indiscriminate environmental degradation (Ferrarini, 2022, p 17).

Amid diverse contexts and intentions, SI faces two primary sources of inaccuracies. Firstly, its origin shares similarities with technological innovation, originating within a commercial logic aimed at profit maximization. Consequently, while SI's meanings in strategic and political documents may vary significantly, its interpretation in economic and, at times, marketing terms is prevalent. The second source of inaccuracies pertains to the attribution of meaning to the "social" aspect of innovation.

As Brandsen et al. (2016, p. 5) aptly state, “What is needed is a concept of social innovation as a complex societal process, rather than a mere classificatory definition of an action or product.” The intricacy of the “social” dimension is tied to the diversity of the desired directions of social change, which ultimately revolves around common life projects in dispute in society. Such complexity did not invalidate or discredit the SIS; on the contrary, it encouraged scholars to discriminate between practices and deepen the debate. One of the resulting elaborations was the distinction between two currents or schools of SI: the instrumental, also called technocratic or neoliberal, and the transformative or democratic (Montgomery, 2016).

Primarily explored within the field of organizational studies, the **instrumental perspective** of SI is restricted to addressing societal demands. It emphasizes the creative endeavors of social actors, often associated with philanthropy and individual responses to social challenges. Researchers adopting this perspective frequently concentrate on generating income, providing access to consumer goods and services for vulnerable populations, or enhancing their overall well-being (Monteiro, 2019; Murray et al., 2010). In this context, the SI agenda is managed in terms of forging new markets and fostering competition, which includes a political undertaking to reshape the state and engage in what is often referred to as “soft privatization” of services previously under the purview of the welfare state (Kerstenetzky, as cited in Monteiro, 2019)

From a **transformative perspective**, SI has a more expansive meaning. It extends beyond merely addressing social needs; it seeks to transform reality, mental paradigms, and interpretative frameworks within a given society. This transformation ultimately leads to the emergence of new models of development (Avelino et al., 2017; Ferrarini, 2022; Klein et al., 2016). Transformative SI is inherently disruptive and counter-hegemonic. It is conceived as a tool to politicize spaces that neoliberal strategies often aim to depoliticize. It challenges the vertical power distribution within society, advocating for horizontal alternatives that facilitate genuine community participation (Montgomery, 2016). These social practices empower individuals and contribute to the development of communities and territories (Neumeier, 2016).

This alternative perspective of SI has evolved within a longstanding tradition that views local development and initiatives in social and solidarity economy as pathways to co-construct public policies, foster the development of a diverse economy, and experiment with renewed forms of democracy (Klein et al., 2016; Monteiro, 2019). This more recent and clearer distinction between instrumental and transformative perspectives has forged a connection between the solidarity economy and SI. Hence, the significance and challenge of this study lie in its contribution to fostering a dialogue between these two fields, enriching each other through theoretical and empirical insights.

While they are conceptually and ethically-politically distinct, instrumental and transformative SI can intertwine and complement each other under specific conditions (Monteiro, 2019). One form of this integration is observed in social practices driven by urgent basic needs. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, food donation campaigns evolved into creating sustainable production and consumption networks (Ferrarini, 2022), representing a shift from dependency to autonomy.

## Solidarity economy and social innovation

The solidarity economy presents a counter-hegemonic proposal grounded in solidarity, self-management, and cooperation, strongly emphasizing collective values over individual interests (Gaiger, 2009). Its origins can be traced back to the mid-1980s in Latin America when unemployed workers began the creation of alternatives. However, it also embodies a broader desire for collective modes of organizing production and life. The solidarity economy finds its roots in ancestral forms of collective production prevalent in the global South and in the organization of small farmers in rural areas, where it holds particular prominence, especially in Brazil. Initiatives within the solidarity economy encompass cooperative ventures, associations, informal groups, or more complex arrangements within production chains, fair trade networks, solidarity credit systems, and local currencies. These enterprises are characterized by collective ownership of the means of production, the socialization of resources, and a commitment to principles of equity and solidarity, all of which foster broader systems of reciprocity and the notion of justice with new value. Under the self-management regime, decisions within these enterprises are made collectively, with each member possessing equal voting power (Gaiger et al., 2018).

Guided by such principles, the solidarity economy embodies substantive economic rationality aimed at expanding the reproduction of life rather than capital. From a substantivist perspective, the economy is not a sphere primarily governed by market principles, where accounts must be settled at any cost, but rather by the principle of reciprocity (Polanyi, 2012). Moreover, reciprocity extends beyond the confines of the enterprise; it also encompasses concern for the broader community

and the environment. Therefore, productive dynamics are an integral part of life. In solidarity economy enterprises, actions bridge economic and social practices, fostering participation and engagement in community issues (Gaiger, 2009).

This perspective is counter-hegemonic, as the solidarity economy has consistently pursued SI throughout its trajectory. Its aim is to enable non-capitalist production and management methods within a market-driven economy, often with limited resources, while internalizing its social and environmental costs. An examination of solidarity economy practices underscores elements of SI, with a particular emphasis on robust solidarity (Laville, 2016), collaboration, reciprocity, and trust as catalysts for the development of social bonds and opportunities for social change.

## Rural social innovation

Research on rural social innovation (RSI) is a relatively recent and rapidly growing field (Kusumastuti et al., 2022), highlighting the significance of this phenomenon for sustainable development and community life in rural areas (Ravazzoli et al., 2021). The contribution of RSI mirrors that of SI in general, emphasizing collective learning and protagonism processes (Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2016), among other factors previously mentioned. The development of the field of RSI studies hinges on the examination of socially innovative practices in their relation to the specificities of rural contexts, the dynamics characterizing the “new rural,” and the individuals spearheading such innovations. Santo and Andion (2022), in conducting a systematic review of RSI literature, discovered that most researchers consider the community as the primary actor in driving RSI development.

In the contemporary context, RSI encompasses various elements, including social relations, community governance arrangements, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. These elements collectively stimulate collaborative actions to address collective needs (Neumeier, 2016). Importantly, RSI is an integral part of a broader process of social change, addressing issues such as rural depopulation, social inclusion, and the mitigation of social inequality (Bock, 2016; Bonavigo & Bavaresco, 2008). As Neumeier (2016) and Santo and Andion (2022) have emphasized, the absence of RSI can limit the development of rural communities.

## METHODOLOGY

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This descriptive research was based on a single case study (Yin, 2015). The interpretivist paradigm was adopted to help understand the social reality, recognizing that rural social innovation (RSI) is a social phenomenon collectively constructed. Its formation, collective leadership, and members’ autonomy are rooted in a historical process.

Your text is clear and informative. However, you can make it slightly more concise while retaining all the essential information: The Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Cascata Ltda. (Cooptar), serves as the focal point of our case study. It is one of the production cooperatives established by the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in the rural settlements formed at Fazenda Annoni, a large estate in Rio Grande do Sul, Southern Brazil. These settlements hold historical significance in the context of rural struggles in the state (Silva, 2018). Cooptar was founded in 1990 as a response to the conflicts and resistance led by the MST. Remarkably, it is the sole surviving cooperative from that era still operating within these settlements. This fact underscores the importance of studying RSI in this case. Cooptar’s distinctive operational methods and capacity to adapt and address challenges throughout its journey set it apart from other cooperative experiences initiated and supported by the MST in various regions of the country.

The case study used documentary research, observations, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis. Yin’s (2015) recommendations were followed for the selection of sources and data collection (documentary research and interviews) that allowed us to understand the historical context of the collective and the role of the MST in its structuring and formalization, enabling the triangulation of sources. The interviews were carried out from January to March 2020, with 24 key informants, including 20 internal participants (IP) – founders of Cooptar and their children – and 4 external participants (EP) – professionals who followed the trajectory of Cooptar. The founders’ children were considered key informants due to the family nature of the initiative. The content of the interviews was transcribed into Word files and subjected to analysis combined with field records and collected documents, using content and categorical analysis (Bardin, 2011). To generate reports for each category, the Atlas.ti software (version 8.0) was used. Analytical categories were initially defined based on the existing literature, but empirical evidence led to the incorporation of additional categories into the analytical process, as detailed in Box 1.



**Box 1**  
**Analytical categories**

Source	Categories	Description
Literature about the transformative perspective of SI	Social innovation	It refers to new social practices that lead to innovative forms of collaborative actions, collective protagonism, knowledge sharing, and democratic participation.
	Structural change	The category refers to changes in social structures, such as how people live, forms of production, policy formulation processes, and standards and references adopted.
	Critical situations	It concerns the desire to change based on a perceived threat or failure. The desire is related to internal capability for change, including leadership and culture.
	Counter-hegemonic discourses	Such discourses are formed from debates, reflections, and narratives about changes in material and immaterial processes that seek to overcome the mainstream economic, political, and social models.
Literature on RSI and solidarity economy	Continuous learning	The category concerns capabilities, skills, and conceptions that lead to learning.
	Democratic participation	It refers to participation in horizontal decision-making processes through debates, reflections, and choices made in an assembly.
	Solidarity and trust	It refers to social relations based on developing trust and on actions for equality, solidarity, reciprocity, and mutual respect and support.
	Individual protagonism	The category gathers individual actions in the quest for solutions to overcome challenges.
	Collective protagonism	Collective actions to strengthen activities, shifting people’s mindset from individuality to collectivity, training them to act and make decisions autonomously.
Empirical evidence	Sustainable actions	Practices that reflect new forms of thinking and acting to care for life and the environment.
	Autonomy	Considering the available information, it refers to the capability and freedom to make decisions and manage their own lives.
	Empowerment	It refers to actors who are aware of their actions.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Oliveira (2021)

Data triangulation observing the categories shown in Box 1 allowed us to understand the RSIs and the factors that propelled the social changes within Cooptar.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### The context of the occupation of Fazenda Annoni and the period of the encampment

The 1970s were characterized by the intensification of the dictatorial regime and the conservative modernization of Brazilian agriculture. This modernization deepened land concentration and led to increased unemployment in rural areas. The high demand for capital invested in agricultural modernization favored specific regions and products, exacerbating inequalities in land distribution across the Brazilian countryside. This process suppressed numerous economic activities of small landowners and reshaped social relations (Schneider & Escher, 2011).

In stark contrast to the capitalist and exclusionary use of rural areas, conflicts emerged as a response to the struggle for land and the preservation of traditional and sustainable ways of life and production for small farmers and their families. In the case of the occupation of Fazenda Annoni by the MST, the planning and organization of the 1,500 participating families unfolded over the two years leading up to October 1985. These families relied on working the land for their livelihoods but did not possess land of their own.

It was cruel for us at that time. [...] The land that our parents had was not enough to continue [...] for us to continue our lives with a minimum of dignity. In that historical period, it seems that two major alternatives were presented to us: either we started fighting to get a piece of land, or we joined the fad at the time: urban migration (IP 1).

The occupation strategy was part of the MST formation process in Rio Grande do Sul. The strategy stood out for its social mobilization and resistance capacity. It was the first demonstration of strength, followed by recognition and consolidation of the movement (Bonavigo & Bavaresco, 2008).

In this process, which was a lot about [forming] a movement and about fighting for land, we did not define one thing or another. [We] were joining the fight for land but also forming a movement. [...] We were already discussing the organization of the MST, debating the national congress [of the MST], and so on (IP 3).

This social action was supported by movements linked to the Catholic Church – Pastoral Land Commission, ecclesial base communities, and Rural Youth Pastoral – and by left-wing political parties. The initial stage of the occupation was the encampment. The families set up tarpaulin shacks and lived without housing infrastructure, such as basic sanitation and electricity. Some of the families lived in these conditions for more than eight years.

There was nothing here. There was only capimannoni [South African lovegrass]. You would look to that [and think [...] What are we going to do? (IP 13).

It was like that, without electricity, using portable gas lamps or candles. Also, to get water [it was a challenge], we had to go far away to wash clothes, taking buckets. There was no water (IP 14).

The settlers included families of small farmers from the same region, rural workers, small land tenants, sharecroppers, families affected by the Passo Real dam, and families displaced from the Nonoai Indigenous Reserve. The initial milestone for the collective was a judicial decision recognizing their temporary right to stay at Fazenda Annoni. Following this, the challenge was to organize the occupation amidst food scarcity and precarious health conditions. Achieving collective goals demanded daily solidarity and perseverance (Caume, 2006; Dickel, 2019). To address these challenges, the settlers formed teams responsible for meeting the community's basic needs, organizing themselves into groups of ten families based on cultural similarities.

The encampment experience changed the dynamics of social practices. The family ceased to be the main space for the decisions of [the movement's] members, and spaces for collective constructions based on family groups, work groups, and general assemblies emerged, offering opportunities for social and political education through practice (Oliveira, 2021, p. 76).

The transition from individual perceptions to a collective mindset marked a shift from "I" to "ours," emphasizing sharing, mutual assistance, and solidarity. In this transformation, feelings of anxiety and absence gave way to collective learning, resilience, and collective protagonism. This drive for protagonism stemmed from the necessity to exert pressure for land reform while simultaneously generating resources for family subsistence (Oliveira, 2021). To cope with the complexity of everyday life in the camp, the settlers initiated collective practices and debates that encouraged actions based on agricultural cooperation (Caume, 2006; Dickel, 2019), reciprocity, and collective leadership – all characteristic elements of rural social innovation (RSI). One of these practices involved the collective design of a new organizational structure, including forming committees and appointing leaders responsible for camp management, which implied decentralized actions. While this governance structure facilitated certain operational tasks, it also led to challenges in making intergroup decisions and increased divergences in conceptions. For example, there were disagreements in defining criteria for selecting families to be settled on Fazenda Annoni versus other expropriated lands (Oliveira, 2021).

Amidst a backdrop of painful, heterogeneous, and often antagonistic experiences during their socialization in the camp, leaders emerged with diverse perceptions and stances in the realm of social struggle. These ranged from more mystical and religious arguments to positions advocating direct confrontation with existing power structures (Oliveira, 2021). The transformative impact of these social changes within the camp materialized through the legal concession of land plots to the families who had camped there. This concession period spanned from 1987 to 1993, as detailed in Box 2.

**Box 2**  
**Phases of the process of land concession to settlers at Fazenda Annoni**

Phases	Description		Location of land plots granted.
I	Two groups were settled	57	Fazenda Annoni
		177	Other regions in the state of Rio Grande do Sul
II	One group was settled	35	Fazenda Annoni
III	Settlement of those living in Fazenda Annoni (ex-employees of the farm, children of small land tenants, land plot holders)	50	Fazenda Annoni
IV	Settlement of families remaining from the occupation, separated into three groups.	200	Fazenda Annoni
		313	Lands in the same region but outside Fazenda Annoni
		37	Fazenda Annoni, but in smaller and degraded land plots

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The fourth and longest phase of legal land concession lasted five years, as no land was available for all the camped families. Faced with the impasse in settling the remaining 37 families, it was agreed to settle them inside Fazenda Annoni, but they received smaller plots with degraded soil. The families of this last group formed most of the families that created the Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Cascata Ltda. (Cooptar).

### Constitution of Cooptar

Revisiting the context of the Fazenda Annoni occupation is essential for comprehending the path that led to the establishment of Cooptar in 1990, initiated by 46 settler families. Among its founders were leaders from earlier endeavors focused on advocating for the country’s democratization and social rights. They brought their knowledge and resilience to the collective, contributing significantly to its formation. Cooptar is situated within the “Assentamento 16 de Março” and is the outcome of collaborative strengthening processes.

We had already started discussing this cooperative thing of creating collective groups when we were in the encampment. Several groups were created. There were 10 of us, all quite young (single). We created a group. Two left, we were left with 8. Of those, we moved in together. From there, we created the cooperative and discussed with other groups to form a collective (IP 8).

As a cooperative, Cooptar adhered to the principles inherent to this type of business enterprise, particularly aligning with the MST’s conception and guidelines concerning production methods and a political proposal that extended beyond income generation. Instead, it emphasized collective participation, political discourse, and ongoing training. Nevertheless, within the realm of economic production coupled with political democracy and environmental sustainability, the theoretical and methodological contributions of the solidarity economy played a significant role in research on enterprises. This encompassed areas such as typologies, dynamics, and multidimensional indicators. The solidarity economy addressed a critical gap in the logic applied in cooperatives, particularly concerning the studies on small enterprises with characteristics similar to Cooptar’s. This was especially pertinent, given that many cooperatives reproduce elements of traditional market-oriented companies.

While the MST promotes supportive and sustainable economic initiatives, it is primarily recognized as a social movement emphasizing the political dimension. Consequently, even when operating under the principles of the solidarity economy, members of Cooptar did not seek affiliation with the broader solidarity economy movement and, therefore, do not identify themselves as such. For analytical purposes, the infusion of the solidarity economy concept, particularly its recent association with Social Innovation (SI), has proven to be a valuable framework for elucidating RSI within the context of this study.

Since its establishment, Cooptar has exemplified a range of typical elements and identities associated with the solidarity economy. These include the collective protagonism of settlers, practices underpinned by bonds of solidarity and reciprocity, and the development of both emancipatory political ideologies and economic indicators combined with social metrics. Within this collective, a fully cooperative system is in place where land and means of production are collectively owned and utilized. Cooptar’s land area spans 203 hectares, where various productive and self-sustaining activities are currently undertaken. These encompass dairy farming, grain cultivation, agroindustry, self-consumption, shared spaces for dining, daycare facilities,



residential areas, sports and leisure amenities. Despite being termed a cooperative, Cooptar operates as an agrovillage, engaging in shared processes such as communal cooking, childcare, and task rotations. In essence, self-management and sharing gains extend beyond the enterprise, fostering reciprocal relationships across multiple dimensions of life.

Throughout its existence, Cooptar has witnessed changes in its membership. Currently, it consists of 16 farming families, comprising 42 members. Except for the children of cooperative members, others have been part of Cooptar since its inception and reside within the agrovillage. Self-management involves intricate processes wherein individuals or families must relinquish or redefine their practices and values in consideration of the collective. In the case of Cooptar, numerous changes were implemented, with two garnering significant attention and leading to the separation of several families. The first change revolved around income-sharing among women and equal participation in decision-making processes, aspects that clashed with traditional rural culture.

This idea of everyone participating in the economic activity, everyone receiving equal pay: men, women [...] In the end, some people left the cooperative because a man didn't accept that his wife received equal pay as he did because he came from a patriarchal family. The father is in charge. The mother didn't even have an income. So, the moment she starts to earn an income, she starts to confront, to have an opinion. Some people were very clear: they left because they couldn't live with it. So, this is a revolution, and you don't do this revolution like this (IP 3).

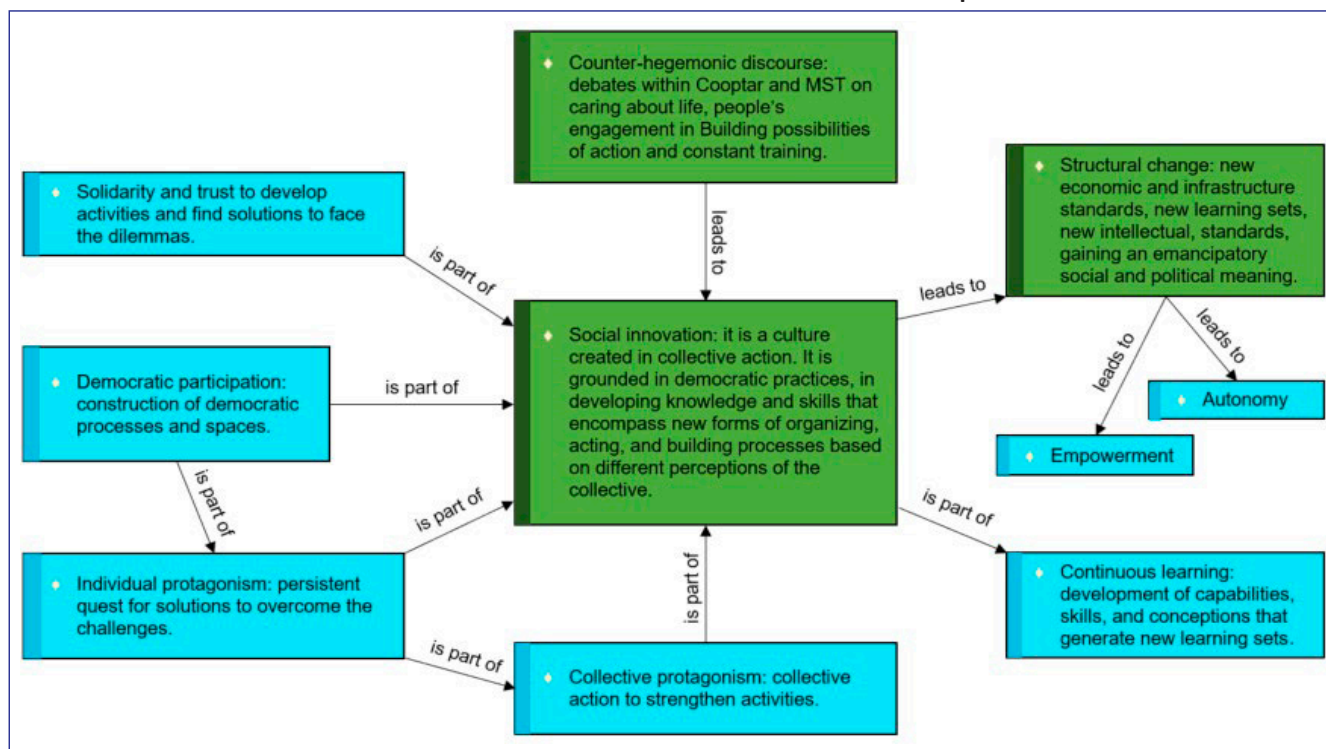
The second significant change pertains to the transition toward ecological agricultural production, aimed at subsistence and improving quality of life. Additionally, other challenges encompass shifts in production processes. Initially focused on grain production, they later diversified into milk production, slaughterhouses, knitwear, pig farming, and various other endeavors, each with its own cycles and associated uncertainties.

Despite the complexities and challenges, Cooptar is a successful example of economic sustainability and socio-environmental impact. However, one key factor underpins the success of this experience: the second generation is pursuing a university education, enabling them to return to the community and continue innovating in cooperative and sustainable processes. When young individuals, despite the allure of urban life, plan their futures around a return to the countryside and communal living, it signifies a profound cultural shift.

## Discussion of results

The analysis of Cooptar's experience revealed characteristic elements of RSI, as shown in Figure 1. The green rectangles represent the categories selected from the SI literature from a transformative perspective. The blue rectangles, in turn, represent the categories of analysis in the solidarity economy literature and the elements identified in Cooptar.

**Figure 1**  
**Characteristic elements of rural social innovation at Cooptar**



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Oliveira (2021).

The analysis uncovered that the crisis stemming from exclusionary agricultural development exacerbated inequalities and marginalized farmers and their families from income-generating processes, underscoring the **critical situation** in the struggle for land. Initially, during the collective’s early actions, they grappled with resource scarcity, emotional exhaustion, and an inability to generate surpluses for subsistence. In a subsequent phase, during the third decade of operation, the cooperative faced the closure of its slaughterhouse due to failure to meet legal requirements. This setback compromised the collective’s income and led to significant emotional distress as new risks and uncertainties emerged.

At this moment, Cooptar participants were challenged to critically reflect on the situation they were experiencing. The collective perceived and interpreted this critical moment and considered it an opportunity for collective learning. Aware of external threats, they listed their weaknesses, including managerial limitations and the previous choice of monoculture, driven by the economic logic of agribusiness, which had constrained their subsistence resources. In the search for alternatives, they chose to develop collective leadership. Avelino et al. (2017) state that the collective construction of alternatives to overcome critical situations constitutes a practice of SI. They mobilize the collective toward changes, mitigating exclusion, minimizing operational setbacks, and solidifying positive outcomes. RSI “goes beyond any transposition of new production techniques” (Santo & Andion, 2022, p. 8) in a social and collective process of continuous change.

At Cooptar, the MST’s counter-hegemonic discourses regarding agricultural cooperation and sustainable development were crucial in prompting farmers to reconceptualize their ideals, objectives, and motivations. Drawing inspiration from the principles of the solidarity economy (Laville, 2016), the collective broadened its horizons, enriching its meanings (Ferrarini, 2019) and crafting its own set of experiences, practices, and discourses (Bonavigo & Bavaresco, 2008). Moreover, it formulated a proposal for economic and social organization that, by its very nature, embodies a form of transformative social innovation (SI) (Klein et al., 2016; Laville, 2016; Ravazzoli et al., 2021).

According to Avelino et al. (2017), evidence of social transformation is reflected in significant practice shifts and the emergence of change narratives. At Cooptar, spaces were created to change narratives and develop new behaviors and perceptions of the context and standard of production practices. Monoculture was replaced by a sustainability-oriented approach, encompassing subsistence farming, agroecology, diversification of production, environmental management, adoption of new technologies, and the implementation of updated production and control processes. These practices went hand-in-hand with social dimensions, including disseminating new knowledge, promoting ecological values, and reconstructing practices rooted in the members' historical background.

In this context, as noted by Bock (2016) and Neumeier (2016), rural social innovations (RSIs) emerge through collective initiatives that address various aspects of life, thereby transforming the collective's reality. This transformation was evident at Cooptar, characterized by a) physical structures, including workplaces, residences, and the social center, which were collectively managed; b) the shift from economic dependence and scarcity to empowerment within the family economy; c) the promotion of equal participation and action between men and women, leading to the overcoming of gender inequality; d) support for specific technical and academic training; and e) the development of a concept of rural well-being.

Drawing from the insights of Avelino et al. (2017), it becomes evident that the solidarity economy practices played an essential role in generating RSIs at Cooptar. These practices contributed to the establishment of a new organizational culture that extended beyond economic objectives, fostering profound social transformations in line with the ideas presented by Ferrarini (2019) and Laville (2016).

At Cooptar, social relationships and practices were collectively constructed, leading to the development of perceptions related to diversity, equality, solidarity, and the cultivation of trust and respect within the community. As Gaiger (2009) asserts, these practices fundamentally alter social dynamics within a collective, prompting its members to view themselves as an active "community" rather than mere observers. The pursuit of equal rights further facilitated the emergence of robust democratic processes.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

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The challenges of securing a dignified life for rural workers have deep historical roots and extend beyond mere subsistence. The struggle for land, coupled with cooperative and sustainable production, serves as a form of resistance and defense to preserve life in rural areas. This approach encompasses the production of healthy food for the Brazilian population, the strengthening of social bonds, and the promotion of local cultures. The social value generated through these efforts is immeasurable and holds profound implications for the nation's future. Throughout this article, we have examined and comprehended these challenges within the context of their potential to generate rural social innovation (RSI). To qualify as transformative, a social innovation (SI) must instigate systemic changes in culture and power dynamics within a democratic framework. This transformation allows for the expression of diverse voices and practices capable of shaping novel, effective, and sustainable solutions.

The case of Cooptar illustrates the intricate nature of the elements encompassed within RSI and offers valuable lessons. An analysis of the planning of the occupation actions at Fazenda Annoni, the experiences within the encampment, and the formation of Cooptar unveils the collective's remarkable capacity to instigate structural changes. These transformations extend beyond work processes, which are no longer straightforward, permeating into various facets of life, family dynamics, and moral principles. The MST, along with social forces, leaders, and participating families, mobilized and reinvigorated community values and ancestral practices. They engaged in democratic experiences aimed at safeguarding rights and enhancing the quality of life for all community members.

In this process, the most notable changes observed revolved around cultivating a profound sense of collectivity that did not deny individualities; instead, it celebrated them as vital components of the community's growth. These leaders played a crucial role in democratically spearheading the subsequent transformations, which unequivocally constituted RSIs. These innovations included resource generation for family sustenance, cooperative and ecological production methods, enhancements in physical infrastructure, diminishing gender disparities, and improvements in the quality of life and overall well-being in rural areas.

Through the lens of theoretical categories, these transformations unveiled the pivotal elements in nurturing RSI within the Cooptar collective: critical situations, counter-hegemonic discourses, solidarity, trust, democratic participation, collective learning, and individual and collective protagonism. Evidently, these RSI elements interplayed and engendered structural shifts within the collective. Through collective learning, they contributed to the creation of new knowledge sets in an ongoing spiral motion. Individual protagonism fueled the collective by instigating changes founded on solidarity and trust, ultimately metamorphosing and empowering its participants. In terms of theory, this study provided a noteworthy contribution by delving into RSI as a contemporary social phenomenon within the context of the new rural paradigm, connecting it with the concept of transformative Social Innovation (SI), and linking it to the values and practices of the solidarity economy.

As elucidated in the text, Cooptar encountered numerous material and relational challenges throughout its history. Self-management proved to be a non-linear process, and this experience underscored that fact. However, member families took it upon themselves to reevaluate their values and practices. Trust and ongoing training processes played fundamental roles in achieving tangible outcomes and perpetuating RSI. Rather than merely generating SIs to address individual dilemmas, these families nurtured a culture of innovation so robust that young people today plan to devote their lives to carrying forth and enhancing these supportive and democratic practices. A promising future beckons, and the expectation is that additional chapters in this narrative of struggle and triumph will be written, offering fresh insights into innovation and transformation within production and rural living.

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#### DATA AVAILABILITY

The entire dataset supporting the results of this study was published in the article itself.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was supported by the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Sul (IFRS), Campus Erechim.

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