

# The (In)Visibility of Cooperatives on the North Coast of Gaúcho: A Cloudy Field of Analysis

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## Abstract

This essay discusses the (in)visibility of cooperatives on the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul in relation to institutions representing cooperativism at the state and national levels. Using a bibliographic method, the study collects data and evidence to gradually uncover the incomplete puzzle of these cooperatives and their limited presence in institutional records. The analysis is structured into three sections: a theoretical framework, results and discussion, and final considerations. The findings suggest that invisibility may offer cooperatives a form of autonomy—freedom from systemic constraints, standardization, and regulatory obligations—whereas visibility implies costs, contracts, and direct involvement in hierarchical structures. This paradox highlights the complexity of the relationship between cooperatives and institutional recognition.

*Keywords:* Invisibility; Cooperativism; Networks; Symbolic power

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## La (In)visibilidad de las Cooperativas en la Costa Norte Gaúcha: Un Campo de Análisis Nublado

### Resumen

Este ensayo aborda la (in)visibilidad de las cooperativas en la Costa Norte de Río Grande del Sur en relación con las instituciones que representan el cooperativismo a nivel estatal y nacional. A partir de un método bibliográfico, el estudio recolecta datos y evidencias que permiten desvelar gradualmente el rompecabezas incompleto de estas cooperativas y su limitada presencia en los registros institucionales. El análisis se estructura en tres secciones: marco teórico, resultados y discusión, y consideraciones finales. Los hallazgos sugieren que la invisibilidad puede brindar a las cooperativas una forma de autonomía, al liberarlas de las restricciones sistémicas, la estandarización y las obligaciones normativas; en cambio, la visibilidad implica costos, contratos y una participación directa en estructuras jerárquicas. Esta paradoja resalta la complejidad de la relación entre las cooperativas y el reconocimiento institucional.

*Palabras clave:* Invisibilidad; Cooperativismo; Redes; Poder simbólico

### Introduction

Cooperativism represents an organizational model based on collaboration, collective decision-making, and mutual benefit, aiming to improve both the quality of life and the economic development of its members and communities. However, despite their potential, many cooperatives remain unnoticed by the wider public and by institutions that represent the cooperative movement at state, national, and global levels. This invisibility is often the result of a lack of formal links with representative organizations, which compromises not only their performance but also the broader perception of their relevance and contribution to local development.

Increasing the visibility of these cooperatives is essential. It enables them to attract new members, access institutional support, and play a more significant role in the economic and social advancement of their regions. Yet, a noteworthy phenomenon persists: cooperatives that operate independently from formal federations or umbrella organizations. These entities follow cooperative principles but are excluded from official databases, thus remaining absent from comprehensive analyses and public policies focused on cooperativism.

This essay emerges from a central, seemingly simple question: How many cooperatives exist on the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul? At first glance, this appears to be an easily answerable inquiry. However, when delving deeper, evidence reveals a significant level of invisibility surrounding these organizations within this specific territory. What explains this persistent field of invisibility? These are complex yet necessary questions, especially when considering the region in question, which, according to Amlinorte (Association of Municipalities of the North Coast), includes 23 cities such as Areia, Torres, Tramandaí, Três Cachoeiras, Três Forquilhas, and Xangri-lá. In this area, cooperatives are expected to play an important role in economic and social development, yet their presence remains obscure in many respects.

As Köche (1997) argues, the production of scientific knowledge arises from the human need to understand both oneself and the surrounding world. In line with this idea, this study seeks to comprehend how and why this configuration of “invisible cooperatives” exists on the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul and to reflect on the implications of such invisibility.

Methodologically, the essay employs a bibliographic approach, serving as a foundation for data analysis and the gradual assembly of an incomplete puzzle regarding the presence and distribution of cooperatives in this region. The study relies on secondary data drawn from prior research, reports, cooperative registries, and other relevant publications. Sources include the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the Organization of Cooperatives of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Ocergs), and the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB).

The essay is organized into five sections: following this introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical framework addressing network relationships, nodes, ties, and organizational flows in society. Sections 3 and 4 discuss the main findings and their implications, while Section 5 offers final considerations on the power inherent in invisibility—or the power derived from remaining unseen within systemic structures.

### **Networks, Nodes, Ties and Flows**

The term “network” has gained “growing popularity” (Mercklé, 2004). According to Portugal (2007, p. 1), this success can be attributed to two fundamental reasons: “the extraordinary development of communications, which enables the existence of connections where there was previously isolation; the valorization of relationships between people over relationships between people and things.” The relevance and explanatory power of the network concept now extend well beyond the boundaries of the social sciences, increasingly permeating other scientific domains (Portugal, 2007, p. 2).

Within the social sciences and development studies, the notion of networks has been applied in diverse ways, which at times makes its precise meaning and analytical utility difficult to define (Schmitt, 2011). Authors such as Castells (1999) describe the emergence of a globalized, capitalist, and networked society governed by decentralized power centers and structures grounded in information technologies (Schmitt, 2011).

From the World Wide Web to financial markets, epidemics, scientific research, and terrorism, these authors portray contemporary society as a complex social network, revealing “the smallness of the great world in which we live” (Barabási, 2003, p. 7, our emphasis).

The concept of social networks first appeared in the fields of Sociology and Social Anthropology. Initially, during the 1930s and 1940s, the term was used primarily as a metaphor; scholars did not yet define morphological characteristics to describe concrete situations, nor did they establish direct links between networks and individual behavior (Portugal, 2007).

As Mercklé (2004, p. 4) explains, each social network can be defined as “a set of social units and direct or indirect relationships between these social units, through chains of varying size.” These social units may be individuals, informal groups, formal organizations, companies, or even countries. The relationships among these network elements may involve monetary transactions, the exchange of goods and services, information flows, face-to-face or virtual interaction, and may be either permanent or episodic (Portugal, 2007). Regarding nodes, ties, and flows, Portugal highlights the following:

“Nodes are the elements of the network, identified by the relationship they have with the ego. Ties – the relationships between network nodes – can have very different characteristics” (Portugal, 2007, p. 24, our emphasis).

The meaning and strength of ties are determined by several properties, such as:

“the content of the flows, their diversity, the frequency of contacts, the outcome of the interaction, the influence and interference of one node on the behavior of another” (Portugal, 2007, p. 25, our emphasis).

As Schmitt (2011, p. 89, our emphasis) points out, the image of a system composed of nodes and flows is frequently invoked as a metaphor to help construct representations capable of addressing social complexity. However, beyond its metaphorical use or technical application, a growing body of literature employs the concept of networks as an analytical tool or, as seen in Actor-Network Theory, as the foundation for constructing a new ontology of the social world (Schmitt, 2011).

Castells (1999) similarly argues that networks—their architecture and their dynamics of inclusion and exclusion—constitute the basis of the main processes and functions shaping our society, thereby giving rise to a new social morphology. In this sense, networks should be seen not merely as a metaphor but as an effective analytical instrument for understanding the complexity of contemporary society (Schmitt, 2011).

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Finally, Schmitt (2011, p. 90) observes that references to networks as structures or mechanisms of governance are increasingly common, reflecting their potential to integrate multiple “interest holders” (stakeholders). These interconnected “network-like” groups are often ascribed various attributes or emergent properties, such as flexibility, horizontality, and a democratic culture. This normative and optimistic perspective on networks currently underpins numerous “pro-development” intervention projects, demonstrating the central place that the notion of networks has assumed in the imagination of contemporary capitalist society (Schmitt, 2011, p. 90).

### **Networked Power: Hierarchical and Symbolic**

Augusto Franco (2009, p. 2) analyzes social networks from the perspective of hierarchical power, rather than symbolic power. He even critiques the approach to “social networks on the internet”—such as Facebook, Orkut, and Twitter—which, according to him, apply concepts from traditional sociology to analyze a new phenomenology that manifests in organizational patterns that are more distributed than centralized. Power is, therefore, one of the key concepts explored in this field.

According to Franco (2009), from the perspective of networks, power is inherently tied to more centralized rather than distributed organizational patterns. As he states, “social networks (distributed) are movements of deconstruction of hierarchy” in direct proportion to their degrees of distribution (Franco, 2009, p. 3).

Thus, Franco (2009) explains that instead of discussing the possibility of exercising power within networks, we should consider the extent to which it becomes impossible to exert power at all. He clarifies this by stating:

“Although from a topological point of view, all flow complexes (or collections of nodes and connections) are networks (more distributed or more centralized), the term network is correctly applied to configurations where there is a multiplicity of paths (abundance). We do not usually use the word network to designate hierarchies (characterized by the scarcity of paths), despite the fact that we sacrifice mathematical rigor (for which all systems of nodes and connections must be noted as networks regardless of the degree of distribution)” (Franco, 2009, p. 4, our emphasis).

When addressing power and networks, it is essential to recognize that power tends to dissipate as networks become more distributed. There is, of course, a distinction between hierarchical power and symbolic power. While Franco’s analysis focuses exclusively on hierarchical power, it is important to acknowledge that various types of networks—or more precisely, network architectures—exist, each with distinct patterns of flow, including how power is distributed, exercised, and transformed within these structures. As Franco (2009, p. 4) asserts, social structures are fundamentally networks. He identifies four essential propositions:

“They are: 1) Social networks are not ways of representing groups of social actors; 2) no representation. And the network is ontologically ‘prior’ to the group; 3) and the interaction and clustering that ‘produce’ the agent (actor); social actors are constituted as such to the extent that they interact in clusters in social networks” (Franco, 2009, p. 4).

Franco (2009) further argues that the importance of who holds greater influence or followers within the network is secondary. Social networks, by their nature, work to deconstruct hierarchy. For him, the network is “prior” to the group in ontological terms; the group (grouping  $\leq$  agglomeration  $\leq$  clustering) is itself a phenomenon emerging from the network:

“Thus, instead of saying that networks are forms of representation of groupings, it would be more reasonable to say that groupings are network configurations” (Franco, 2009, p. 5).

From the network perspective, Franco (2009, p. 7) equates power with centralization. Distributed and centralized net-

works represent opposite extremes, and most social networks lie somewhere between these limits, displaying varying degrees of centralization or distribution.

According to Franco (2009), a centralized network configures a “one-with-all” pattern, while a distributed network reflects an “all-with-all” structure. In the case of cooperative network configurations, both centralized (A) and distributed (C) forms are integral components. However, Franco (2009) critiques Baran’s second diagram (the decentralized network), arguing that nodes connected to multiple centers are not typically entirely disconnected from each other, as Baran’s illustration suggests. This holds true whether referring to the branches of a multinational corporation or a cellular political party structure (Franco, 2009, p. 8).

Marques (1999) suggests that networks can be studied via graphical representations (such as sociograms or scaling diagrams) to visualize positions and structures, or through mathematical reconstructions of link patterns (relationship matrices) to allow for quantitative analysis of positions and overall structures.

When considering the pattern of bonds, the concept of *habitus* emerges. According to Haas (2012), *habitus* represents an acquired and deeply embedded state of moral character that shapes feelings, desires, and behavior within specific situations. This formative influence constitutes what Bourdieu (1989) terms *symbolic power*.

Bourdieu (1989) defines symbolic power as invisible, exercised only with the complicity of those who either do not wish to recognize they are subjected to it or are unaware they exert it themselves. A practical example to clarify this concept is online privacy: on one side are individuals unaware of the implications of their data exposure; on the other are the entities that implicitly accept the contractual terms of occupying digital space, thus becoming subject to its potential excesses (Foucault, 1990). Symbolic power manifests and operates through the simultaneous mobilization of three dimensions: field, *habitus*, and capital, which Bourdieu (1989) defines as follows:

*Field* is “the territory of relations between groups, collectives or survival units of the human subject, with different social practices, context and discourses; it is a space for the mobilization of power for consensus and ruptures, depending on the historical circumstances of the power game in play [...]”

*Habitus* comprises “mental structures through which one learns, appreciates, and evaluates the social world, and are a product of the social world. *Habitus* produces practices (behaviors) and symbolic representations. It is a system that expresses the social position that was constructed through experience. (...) Tastes and prejudices, for example, are *habitus* [...]”

*Capital* consists of “economic, cultural or social assets that reproduce and promote social mobility in a stratified society” (Bourdieu, 1989, pp. 61–63, our emphasis).

For Bourdieu (1989), power is the capacity to mobilize wills, interests, desires, signs, and both physical and symbolic bodies. Power does not exist in isolation; it presupposes relationships of domination, control, and manipulation, functioning through the ability to influence and direct entities. In this sense, symbolic power is embedded within the relationships established between these entities.

When considering this form of power—extending beyond hierarchical to symbolic dimensions—it becomes evident that power operates on multiple, ever-shifting scales, from the macro to the micro. It permeates organizations such as cooperatives and individual actors alike, all of whom are simultaneously connected to multiple fields that mobilize and transform continuously. This underscores the vastness of the debate concerning the forms of power inherent in network structures, especially those related to collaboration.

Fischer (2002) emphasizes that there is no singular vector of power within networks; instead, multiple fields and scales of power intersect, forming a broader and more abstract universe of analysis. These multiple scales—considered separately or together—shape power relations in complex ways.

As Fischer (2002, p. 13) notes, when analyzing local power and power scales, “we are supporting the power relations through which alliances and conflicts between social actors are processed, as well as the formation of specific



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identities and management practices.” These relations establish and reinforce collaborative networks, reflecting what can be described as *habitus in action* or *habitus in the field*—that is, symbolic power manifesting synchronously in the production of social capital.

Ultimately, these movements of power—whether shaped by old or new *habitus*—continually generate and transform the capitals that underpin new actions and social configurations. According to Fischer (2002, p. 13), these power dynamics “are revealed concretely in the daily life of cities and regions, where traditional forms of planning, such as master plans, demonstrate their form and manner of being installed and established.” The concepts of networks, ties, nodes, flows, and power presented here are therefore essential to understanding the potential and actual strength of cooperative structures, not only in economic but also in social development.

### Cooperativism and Collaboration Networks

According to Schallenger (2003), cooperativism emerges as an autonomous form of social organization, conceived as an association of individuals who organize themselves to meet both their personal needs and the collective objectives of the group. It is presented as an “alternative, efficient and democratic way of a social construction, thanks to which the individual and the community merge in the horizon of equity and social justice” (Schallenger, 2003, p. 10). In this sense, the cooperative process is intrinsically linked to development, which, for the author, is understood as a collective process of social transformation, grounded in the sociocultural, political, and economic realities of a specific territory.

Cooperation itself is a meaningful human practice that individuals adopt to address challenges, seek solutions, and share understandings or expectations. Although cooperation is often driven by economic, financial, or material incentives, it also encompasses broader social aims, such as achieving collective well-being, preserving cultural traditions, or maintaining shared habits and values (Schneider & Haas, 2022, p. 471).

Amid the structural inequalities perpetuated by globalization, cooperativism arises as a response to these profound disparities—disparities that often limit workers’ freedoms and restrict their access to economic and social opportunities. Cooperativism seeks to overcome such barriers by fostering inclusion, solidarity, and collective empowerment.

The principles and values that shape modern cooperativism were forged in this context of inequality, where profit-driven systems fail to meet the needs of the majority. Historically, this vision emphasized the importance of collective consciousness—a recognition of the existence of “Us,” transcending individual differences (Forgiarini, Alves & Medina, 2018, p. 29). As illustrated by the famous graphic from the *Industrial Worker Journal* (1911)—“Pyramid of the Capitalist System”—society is depicted as a structure where the many sustain the privileges of the few: “*We rule you, we fool you, we shoot at you, we eat for you,*” while the masses labor and feed all (Industrial Worker Journal, Pyramid of the Capitalist System, 1911, our translation).

In this struggle for greater social equality—despite the inherent contradictions of capitalist logic—the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB) asserts that cooperativist practices aim to promote “a fairer, happier, more balanced world with better opportunities for all” (OCB, 2019).

Through its principles and operational values, cooperativism aspires to construct a more democratic and accessible economic model. Indeed, “cooperatives, as companies based on a set of values and principles, allow all voices to be heard, and argue that the feminist vision can inspire cooperatives to fully apply their values and principles” (National Learning Service..., 2019).

As business organizations jointly owned and democratically controlled by their members, cooperatives are designed to fulfill the common economic, social, and cultural aspirations of their members. However, while they must operate within competitive capitalist markets—subject to the same external economic pressures as other firms—they cannot treat their own members, “the true owners and users responsible for their constitution and maintenance, with the same economic rationality that is required of them in the external environment” (Boesche & Mafioletti, 2005, p. 2). This dual role underscores the unique position of cooperatives as entities striving to balance market efficiency with social purpose.

## Structuring Cooperativism Representative Organizations

Global cooperativism is represented by numerous organizations, the most prominent being the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)—one of the world’s largest non-governmental entities—with over one billion cooperative members globally. Founded in 1895 and headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the ICA represents cooperatives across five continents and 156 countries (Büttenbender, Areia, & Sparemberger, 2023).

In Brazil, the entity responsible for representing the cooperative system is the OCB (Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives), which is affiliated with the ICA. The mission of the OCB is to foster an environment conducive to the growth and development of Brazilian cooperatives through political and institutional representation.

At the state level in Rio Grande do Sul, the Ocergs (Union and Organization of Cooperatives of the State of Rio Grande do Sul) assumes this role. Ocergs oversees the registration, certification, and regulation of cooperatives in the state. As a private, non-profit civil entity, it operates exclusively within the territory of Rio Grande do Sul and is integrated into the broader OCB system. As of December 31, 2023, a total of 370 cooperatives were officially registered under the Ocergs system.

Brazilian cooperative societies are primarily regulated by Law No. 5,764 (Brazil, 1971), which defines the National Policy on Cooperativism and establishes the legal framework for cooperative operations. According to the 2024 Brazilian Cooperativism Yearbook, there are currently 4,509 cooperatives affiliated with the OCB system nationwide, based on active registrations as of December 31, 2023.

Rio Grande do Sul stands out as the Brazilian state with the highest number of cooperative members, totaling 3,876,269 individuals and 356 registered cooperatives (Yearbook of Brazilian Cooperativism, 2024). Data from the 2016/2017 Agricultural Census (IBGE) already highlighted the cooperative movement as a major economic force within the state, generating around 69,000 direct jobs and an annual revenue of approximately R\$83 billion.

The systematic availability of such data is made possible by Article 107 of Law No. 5,764 (1971), which mandates the registration of all cooperatives with either the OCB or an equivalent state entity. This law also establishes financial obligations for cooperatives, as outlined in its sole paragraph:

“At the time of registration, the cooperative shall pay 10% (ten percent) of the highest minimum wage in force, if the sum of the respective paid-in capital and funds does not exceed 250 (two hundred and fifty) minimum wages, and 50% (fifty percent) if that amount is higher” (Brazil, 1971).

Further, Article 108 stipulates an annual Cooperative Contribution to be collected post-fiscal year, calculated as follows:

“§ 1º The Cooperative Contribution shall be constituted of an amount corresponding to 0.2% of the value of the paid-in capital and funds of the cooperative society, distributed equally to its affiliates, when applicable.

§ 2º In the case of central cooperatives or federations, the contribution will be calculated on their existing funds and reserves.

§ 3º The Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives may establish a ceiling for the Cooperative Contribution, based on technical studies” (Brazil, 1971).

It is important to note, however, that while registration with the OCB is mandatory, formal membership remains optional for cooperatives.

## Visibility as a Trap

If visibility constitutes a trap, could invisibility serve as resistance? This provocative proposition draws on Foucault’s (1987) assertion that visibility itself is a mechanism of control. To be seen is to conform to norms, to engage with systemic expectations and contractual obligations. Foucault (2012) further argues that in the “society of spectacle,” visibil-

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ity equates to continuous surveillance:

“Beneath the surface of the images, bodies are invested in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, the detailed and concrete training of useful forces takes place; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the points and supports of power; the totality of the individual is not amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, but the individual is carefully manufactured, according to a tactic of forces and bodies” (Foucault, 2012, p. 205).

Visibility thus offers an illusion of presence; we are neither mere spectators nor actors, but rather cogs within the panoptic machine—subject to its power and, paradoxically, sustaining it:

“We are much less Greek than we think. We are neither in the stands nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power that we ourselves renew, because we are its gears” (Foucault, 1987, p. 179).

Foucault warns that the spectacle of visibility enslaves us; the more visible we are, the more exposed and controlled we become. Is resistance possible in this pervasive system? Can one escape this machinery when it exists even within us? These questions underscore the difficulty of disengagement when surveillance is omnipresent yet imperceptible.

In this “society of spectacle,” symbolic capital is intrinsically tied to visibility. The more followers, interactions, and exposure one accrues—whether individuals or organizations—the more power is ascribed. But what if invisibility itself possesses symbolic power? Might remaining unseen be a strategy to evade the traps of control, categorization, and standardization?

For cooperatives on the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul, such questions are critical. Is their invisibility accidental—or intentional resistance against systemic absorption? These unresolved considerations warrant deeper inquiry.

### *The Complexity of Observing the Invisible*

Attempting to map the cooperatives on the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul reveals substantial challenges. Existing studies frequently recycle identical data because information regarding these cooperatives remains fragmented, elusive, or simply undocumented. Many cooperatives operate informally, beyond the reach of official records, raising the question: is this regional phenomenon unique, or indicative of a broader national pattern?

The complexity lies in the decentralized nature of information sources. To estimate the true number of cooperatives—both registered and informal—one must consult a multitude of databases: the OCB system, Federal Revenue Service records, municipal registries, and other localized sources. As Romey (2015) notes in reference to the Nazca Lines, some mysteries remain persistently difficult to decode—and this “invisible field” of cooperativism seems similarly obscure.

This opacity provokes deeper reflections. Is the absence of data the result of systemic neglect, organizational disarray, or a deliberate choice by the cooperatives themselves? What do these “non-data” reveal about the socio-economic dynamics of the region?

While the OCB system provides data on cooperatives formally linked to the organization, it does not capture the full picture. Many legally constituted cooperatives operate independently of the OCB, leaving significant gaps in official statistics.

For this study, data were sourced from the Organization of Cooperatives of Rio Grande do Sul (OCERGS), part of the national OCB system, covering the 23 municipalities that constitute AMLINORTE (Association of Municipalities of the North Coast). According to OCERGS (2021), six cooperatives are officially affiliated:

- Mixed Cooperative of Family Farmers of Itati, Terra de Areia, and Três Forquilhas (COOMAFITT);
- Mostardense Agricultural Cooperative Ltda (COOPAM);



- Cargo Transporters Cooperative of Santo Antônio da Patrulha (COOPERSAP);
- Santo Anjo Agricultural Cooperative (COOPERGESA);
- Liquid Products Transportation Cooperative (COOPERLÍQUIDOS);
- Três Cachoeiras Road Cargo Transporters Cooperative (COOPERTRAC).

Of the 23 municipalities surveyed, only four host officially recognized cooperatives, as summarized in the table below.

**Table 1 - Cooperatives of the Northern Coast of Rio Grande do Sul**

Cooperative	Municipality
COOMAFITT - Mixed Cooperative of Family Farmers of Itati, Terra de Areia and Três Forquilhas	Itati
COOPAM - Mostardense Agricultural Cooperative	Mostardas
COOPERSAP - Cooperative of Cargo Transporters of Santo Antônio da Patrulha	Santo Antônio da Patrulha
COOPERGESA - Santo Anjo Agricultural Cooperative	Três Cachoeiras
COOPERLÍQUIDOS - Liquid Products Transport Cooperative	Três Cachoeiras
COOPERTRAC - Cooperative of Road Freight Transporters of Três Cachoeiras	Três Cachoeiras

Source: SESCOOP/RS / OCERGS, (2021).

We identified that some cooperatives deliberately choose not to be linked to OCERGS, even though they are structured as cooperatives and operate according to cooperative principles and values. Examples include the Recycling Work Cooperative in Tramandaí, the Pitangueiras Rice Cooperative in Capivari do Sul, the Palmares Rice Cooperative in Palmares do Sul, and COOPVIVA, located in the city of Osório.

To better understand COOPVIVA's specific case of "invisibility," an inquiry was sent via email in 2021 asking about the reasons for remaining outside the Brazilian Organization of Cooperatives (OCB) system. The cooperative responded as follows:

"In fact, the cooperatives in RS that are associated with OCERGS will be part of the OCB, which is a Federal Organization. They are organizations that provide legal support, mainly in the labor area, and courses in various areas to help the cooperatives, but this support has a cost. We are a small cooperative, we have no employees, the farmers do the cooperative's work according to their work schedule. As membership is not mandatory, our staff chose not to bear this cost anymore" (COOPVIVA, 2021).

Gradually, through this process of mapping cooperatives on the North Coast of Rio Grande do Sul, we begin to discern the factors underlying their visibility or invisibility. Visibility entails financial costs, contractual obligations, and integration into a hierarchical system. As long as there are no pressing needs for such support, remaining "invisible" is perceived as a more economical and viable option.

## Conclusions

Precisely identifying all the cooperatives located on the northern coast of Rio Grande do Sul remains an unresolved challenge. This field of analysis is still nebulous, marked by the difficulty of data collection and the absence of a single, comprehensive source of information. The available data are fragmented, dispersed, and constantly changing, as new cooperatives are formed while others dissolve. In this context, some cooperatives deliberately choose to remain outside the OCB system, becoming, in a sense, "invisible" within official records.

Reflecting on the notion that visibility may act as a trap, invisibility appears as a potential strategy of resistance. To remain invisible is to escape systemic obligations, standardization, and contractual restrictions—while visibility, in contrast, implies financial burdens, formal commitments, and direct integration into hierarchical structures. For many of these cooperatives, especially those with limited resources or informal operations, invisibility represents a viable and

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less onerous alternative.

Within the framework of global capitalism, especially in rural and peripheral areas distant from major urban centers, development remains restricted. In this scenario, cooperativism emerges as an alternative socio-economic movement—a form of resistance to the dominant forces of globalization and capitalist accumulation. However, despite its emancipatory potential, cooperativism does not fully escape the pressures of inequality and the flaws in wealth distribution fostered by capitalist systems.

Nevertheless, the benefits of formal membership and visibility cannot be entirely disregarded. Visibility grants access to rights, protections, and opportunities otherwise unavailable to those outside the system. Being part of the network—and formally recognized within it—confers symbolic power, enhancing not only the development potential of the cooperative itself but also contributing to regional social and economic transformation. Cooperatives, in this sense, act as crucial nodes of local development, strengthening bonds, generating collective capital, and shaping social habits and practices.

In attempting to quantify the number of cooperatives in the region, this study encountered more questions than answers. These unresolved issues—Why is this data not systematized? Is the lack of information deliberate? What lies behind this field of invisibility? Are cooperatives voluntarily remaining invisible, or is this imposed by the system?—reveal the complex and dynamic nature of the cooperative landscape on the northern coast of Rio Grande do Sul. Such inquiries suggest a fertile field for further research.

Based on the theoretical reflections and structural analysis presented here, it is possible to conclude that cooperative networks, shaped by their nodes and ties, have the potential to strengthen local development processes. These networks empower cooperative members by reinforcing their capacity for initiative and collective decision-making, confirming the importance of cooperativism as a socio-economic strategy in regions marked by systemic marginalization.

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