

Digitization is key element in the growth potential of agroecological cooperatives

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The coronavirus crisis has led to some of the general public developing a critical view of the current food consumption model, as shown by a recent survey by the Catalan Consumer Agency, which reveals that 60.5% of all Catalans tend to think that the pandemic will promote more responsible, sustainable and fair consumption. Moreover, the various lockdowns have caused a significant increase in online shopping

throughout Spain, with a 92% rise in volume and a 114.5% rise in value, according to aggregated consumption data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. This change in shopping habits and the awareness of the food model may also have an impact on the development of alternative, local models such as agroecological consumption cooperatives, where producers and consumers interact in order to promote the consumption of food products based on agroecology.

According to Ricard Espelt, member of the Digital Commons (Dimmons) research group at the UOC's Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3), who has recently published a study analyzing the role of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and the organizational model in these cooperatives' growth potential, "These are initiatives based on a fair relationship between producers and consumers, in which the consumption of local products is encouraged, as is the optimal use of natural resources without synthetic chemicals or genetically modified organisms. Moreover, the social and political impact of food production is taken into account". The results show that in organizations that have professionalized some of the tasks, digital adoption is better and they have greater potential for scalability.

He said: "The home lockdown highlighted the real nature of our consumer model. The long queues of people wearing masks to buy food and essential items in supermarkets and, in parallel, the organization of small producers on the internet, are two phenomena that offer a very good illustration of the real nature of the current food model." The researcher also explained that, "At this time of awareness-raising, we need to work to promote a change of scale in terms of local consumption. Within this framework, our research aims to discover whether cooperatives are able to have another level of impact, and it also intends to study the role of information technologies in this scalability."

A sector representative of the social and solidarity economy in Barcelona

The new study has focused on the role played by digital platforms and [social media](#) in Barcelona's agroecological network, which, with 56 cooperatives and 177 suppliers, has the highest number of this type of cooperative in Spain and is one of the 10 most outstanding areas in the world. These organizations represent over half of the activities in the city's so-called social and solidarity economy (SSE), which represents 7% of its GDP. Espelt said: "The expansion of digitization in this sector since the 2000s, when digital technologies became more accessible, affordable and easier to use, has played a significant role as a facilitator of the network among the agents that participate in it, and has become a key element characteristic of new-age agroecological consumption cooperativism."

Based on qualitative interviews and website content analysis, the research has studied the levels of digital adoption, as well as assessing compliance with the principles of the social and solidarity economy of fair trade and cooperation, and the organizations' level of professionalization. The researcher said: "The city's tradition of cooperativism has shown a certain resistance to establishing professionalized structures and has favored a particular consumer model—totally self-managed organizations—with a strong track record. However, at the same time, it has probably limited the scale of growth. This research also tries to respond to this debate on the impact of professionalization."

Technological sovereignty, a pending matter

The results show that ICT have become a very useful tool for interaction between cooperatives and consumers, and most use them. However,

there are significant differences between professionalized cooperatives—100% of which have adopted a digital platform—and those that have totally voluntary management, in which they are adopted in 82% of cases. Only 34% of all the cooperative platforms use free or open-source programming. Espelt said: "Despite the fact that these organizations are committed to the promotion of food sovereignty, which is linked to the desire to control food and decide on the rules of the game that create a space for social justice between consumers and producers, the same attention is not paid to technological sovereignty, in other words, the control over technology and data."

Social media constitute another key element in the dissemination of agroecological consumption cooperatives' activity and in the entire ecosystem. The researcher said: "Through these channels, a lot of work has been carried out in terms of awareness-raising, knowledge and interest, reaching a broader population base." Once again, the study reveals differences in accordance with the various management models: all the professionalized cooperatives are present in these digital areas, while only 53% of those managed voluntarily have a social media profile. Moreover, the use varies significantly: the professionalized organizations' profiles are updated regularly, while the rest are only updated occasionally, depending on the manager's availability.

Professionalization compatible with the principles of proximity, fair trade and cooperation

In addition to the digital switchover, the study also paints a picture in which professionalized cooperatives have greater scalability potential. Only 8.8% include the professionalization of tasks, but have a larger number of members, 72 on average, in comparison with 29 in the case of organizations managed by volunteers. These data show that they have more growth potential, since they exert their influence on a larger

consumer group, in comparison with the self-managed groups. "This is particularly important, since professionalized organizations do not set themselves an upper limit for growth, unlike groups based on volunteers," the researcher noted.

The data gathered during the study also prove that professionalization is not incompatible with the principles of SSE that have been assessed (proximity, fair trade and cooperation), since they comply with these indicators just like the other cooperatives. In fact, the professionalized organizations have better levels of cooperation (double those of their voluntary counterparts) with other SSE organizations.

The challenge of the sector's sustainability

All these factors indicate that professionalization is an important element for sustainability and the extension of a consumption model that promotes the SSE values. Espelt said: "The greatest challenge for the agroecological cooperatives is sustainability, which is linked to a large extent to the capacity for scalability. Not because all the initiatives should be large, but rather because they must have viable sustainability models, which they have not done up to now. In the search for a balance between growth and maintaining these organizations' missions, in both production and consumption organizations, our results show that the facilitation of groups with professionalized activities is what can promote growth on a larger scale."

These data are particularly relevant at a time like the present, in which the COVID-19 crisis has revealed an alternative environment of local channels, which facilitate more direct interaction between the producer and the consumer. Nevertheless, the researcher recognized the need to make deeper changes in order to underpin this sustainability:

"Strategically, it is an opportunity to push the most consolidated and the most renowned shopping channels (supermarkets and the internet,

respectively) towards more democratic and fairer models. Despite this potential, structural measures must be supported in order to promote effective change and reconsider the food model. In this challenge, public policies will play an essential role in the consolidation (or not) of this (new) opportunity."

More information: Ricard Espelt, Agroecology presumption: The role of CSA networks, *Journal of Rural Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.032)

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