



The Social and Solidarity Economy: From the Margins to the Mainstream

## **Case study**

# The role of solidarity cooperativism to build the country-city network in COVID-19 pandemic

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## THE ROLE OF SOLIDARITY COOPERATIVISM IN BUILDING THE COUNTRY-CITY NETWORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The National Union of the Solidarity Cooperativists Organizations (Unicopas)<sup>3</sup>, created in 2014, is a non-governmental organization, whose objective is acting for the conception and strengthening of cooperativism and solidarity economy in Brazil. It is the largest representative of the solidarity cooperatives in this country as it is the union of the four major institutions of solidarity economy and cooperativism of Brazil: the National Union of Cooperatives of Family Agriculture and Solidarity Economy (Unicafes); The Central of Cooperatives and Solidarity Enterprises of Brazil (Unisol); the Nation Confederation of Cooperatives of Agrarian Reform of Brazil of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (Concrab/MST) and the National Union of Collector of Recyclable Material in Brazil (Unicatadores)<sup>4</sup>.

Unicopas represent over **2 500** cooperatives, which is more than **800 000** associates, including family farmers, artisans, collectors of recyclable materials, rural population of agrarian settlements, traditional communities, indigenous, quilombolas, among others. The grassroots of the solidarity cooperativism in Brazil is composed mostly by women and is present all over the country.

Currently, Unicopas implements a project in partnership with the European Union (CSO-LA/2018/400-905), which aims to strengthen the role and protagonism of women within their cooperatives and cooperative central. For that, Unicopas created a Women's Coordination Group, composed of representatives from the four centrals affiliated with Unicopas. The coordination group is responsible for organizing regional and national events, at this moment there are great exchanges of experiences and integration among the participating women. Also, the coordination group develops courses and training for women in cooperatives to help them reinforce their leadership and gain autonomy.

The cooperativism and solidarity economy provides way of valuing the work and knowledge of these women: it generates decent work and income and values a model of sustainable development with a participatory management of the cooperatives. Thus, cooperativist women are not only encouraged to

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train themselves and to be present as leaders and managers of their cooperatives, but to achieve emancipation and financial autonomy through work that values them and of which they are active participants.

Talking about autonomy does not involve only financial independence and income generation, but also involves the liberty to make choices. It is through this that many women are able to get out of violent situations. Women's work is, most of the time, a double journey and sometimes even a triple journey: working outside their house, domestic work and taking care of children and family. These are functions historically given to women. In this matter, the role of solidarity cooperativism is a way of working that promotes not only economic sustenance, but also emancipation and dignity, with practices based on self-management, democracy and cooperation.

Economic autonomy is essential for self-sustenance and permits these women to decide their own lives. It is also important considering the Brazilian context of increasing unemployment and informal employment. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in the third quarter of 2020 the unemployment rate in the country was 14,6%, reaching 14,1 million people. At the same time, research shows an increase in people in informal employment at 36.9% of workers at the beginning of the second half of 2020.

In this context, the cooperativism and solidarity economy is a way to generate decent work and income and to empower these women. It has also played an important role in helping the people who live in urban peripheries during the Covid-19 pandemic, by enabling the creation of a network between people who work in the country, most of them women, and those who live in urban peripheries, who have been dealing with increasing unemployment and hunger. In Brazil, those responsible for the majority of these peripheral houses are also women, who have been facing hunger, unemployment and the fear of catching the disease and leaving behind their loved ones.

The network country-city, of which Unicopas is a part and in which it plays an important role, carried out solidarity actions during the pandemic, such as the distribution of more than 80 tons of food<sup>5</sup>. The joint action between Unisol and Concrab/MST, both affiliated with Unicopas, involved 590 producers and helped hundreds of families from five municipalities of the Vale da Ribeira region, one of the most vulnerable in the state of São Paulo. It also distributed 90 tons of food to vulnerable families from the ABC region, in the state of São Paulo<sup>6</sup>. These actions show that the cooperativism and solidarity economy can provide a way out of the crisis we are facing. Through actions of solidarity, it is possible to guarantee what is essential for living to many people who have no job nor income in this pandemic.

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<sup>5</sup> Access: <http://unicopas.org.br/noticias/cooperativismo-ecosol/intercooperacao-cooperativas-unicopas-se-unem-e-doam-mais-80-toneladas-de-alimentos/>

<sup>6</sup> Access: <https://unicopas.org.br/noticias/cooperativismo-ecosol/solidariedade-intercooperacao-unicopas-resulta-na-distribuicao-de-90-toneladas-de-alimentos-em-sao-paulo/>

Cooperation and solidarity among rural workers and city workers is essential for Brazil to minimize the impacts of this crisis. At a time when Brazil sees the substantial growth of cases and daily deaths, ensuring the lives of the most vulnerable people is fundamental. This way, we will promote the real meaning of cooperativism that goes beyond a commercial relation between producer and consumer, we put in practice the real true spirit of solidarity. (Francisco dal Chiavon, Unicopas' president)

Women manage some of the cooperatives that worked to provide food for families in urban peripheries. Débora Nunes, who is the president of a cooperative in the state of Alagoas from an agrarian settlement, says that nothing could have been done alone, that solidarity cooperativism, in addition to guaranteeing economic autonomy, humanizes the work. Because of the cooperative process, women also have more chances to be effective in leadership positions, this way they learn how to conduct other aspects of their lives, besides productive activities.

At the same time, many people who receive these donations are also involved in solidarity economy and cooperativism. This is the case of many families collecting recyclable materials who had their work cut off because of the pandemic. The cooperativism and solidarity economy has also transformed the lives of many of these people, such as Lúcia Fernandes, who is a collector of recyclable materials in the Federal District of Brazil and president of the Association Overcoming Obstacles. She states that it was through solidarity cooperativism that she gained knowledge, commitment, dignity and respect. Lúcia has a trajectory of struggle and superation, a woman that transforms "garbage" into decent work, income generation and personal achievement.

Because of the inter-cooperation between Concrab/MST and Unicatadores, both affiliated with Unicopas, it was possible to donate more than 30 food baskets to collectors of recyclable materials and their families in the peripheries of the Federal District<sup>7</sup>. The network between rural workers and city workers helps people that are in a vulnerable situation, cannot work, and fight against hunger, especially during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the prospects for the next years in Brazil are no different, we are already seeing an increase in hunger and food and nutrition insecurity. So strengthening these networks is critical.

These are only a few cases that demonstrate the importance of solidarity cooperativism, especially during the pandemic, as a way of emancipation through income generation and by providing food for those who need it. There are still many challenges ahead, especially in face of Brazil's current political situation. Unicopas performs political advocacy to strengthen the regulatory frameworks of cooperativism and solidarity economy, because this is a productive model that contributes to the fulfilment of the SGDs, especially 2, 5, 8, 10 and 11.

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<sup>7</sup> Access: <http://unicopas.org.br/noticias/cooperativismo-ecosol/campo-e-cidade-aco-es-de-intercooperacao-potencializam-cooperativismo-solidario/>



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