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Solidarity Economy Markets as “mobilizational commons”: re-signifying the market through the lens of cooperation

Ana Margarida Esteves 

Abstract This article explores an understudied dimension of Solidarity Economy, which is how spaces of community development-oriented commercialization balance the embedment of their activities in cooperative norms and practices, while at the same time mobilizing support from mainstream society and its institutions. The analysis is based on the case study of the Solidarity Economy markets organized by Esperança/Cooesperança, a community development project based in the town of Santa Maria, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. It engages the concept of “edge work”, from Social Permaculture Design, in framing Solidarity Economy markets as spaces that manifest Karl Polanyi’s vision of an “active society” in counter-movement to market commodification. This materializes as a reconciliation of cooperative practices with market mechanisms, based on trust-building and political mobilization, among different social sectors and agents, around direct producer-to-consumer exchanges. The analysis frames these markets as “mobilizational commons”: Sites of re-signification of market activity through the engagement of otherwise competing producers in experimenting, enacting and coordinating cooperative practices, as well as of consumers, social movements and the state in the re-framing economic activity over time. It concludes with an analysis of the political limitations to the “edge work” promoted by Esperança/Cooesperança, posed by electoral rotation and political socialization, as well as the suggestion to frame further research on this topic in the context of structural power relations.

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Introduction

The concept of Solidarity Economy frames community-based organizational forms and practices in Polanyi's vision of an "active society" in "contradictory", but creative, "tension with the market" (Burawoy, 2003: 198). So far, research in the field has focused on organizational development and counter-hegemonic identity formation, as well as policy making (i.e. Tremblay and Gutberlet, 2012; Orbán, 2015; Sahakian and Dunand, 2015; Ould Ahmed, 2015; Laville, 2016). It lacks accounts of how Solidarity Economy initiatives balance the realization of alternative livelihoods while engaging with pre-existing economic, cultural and institutional structures. This article applies the concept of "edge work", taken from Social Permaculture Design (Lynch, 2016), to analyse how the organization of Solidarity Economy Markets by *Esperança/Cooesperança*, a community-based anti-poverty project located in southern Brazil, engage producers, consumers, social movements and the state in this balancing act.

Esperança/Cooesperança is a community-based project, aimed at promoting "urban, rural and regional sustainable development"¹ in the municipality of Santa Maria, the central region of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. It was founded in 1987 with the purpose of fighting unemployment, social exclusion and rural exodus, resulting from the marginalization of small and medium producers in the region by globalized supply chains (Sarria Icaza and Freitas, 2009: 33–40). It is rooted in a concept of development as a bottom-up process of emancipation from needs that are artificially created or enhanced by neo-colonialism and capitalist globalization (Tévoédjèrè, 2002: 1978). Its operational strategy is based on the *See/Judge/Act* methodology of social intervention, used by *Ação Católica*, the Catholic Action branch in Brazil, to develop, within the network of Ecclesial Base Communities, organizations of social intervention known as *Pastorais Sociais* (Souza, 2006: 56). *Esperança/Cooesperança* is governed by an elected assembly of representatives of participating producers, supported by a technical and management team issued from the *Pastorais Sociais* and coordinated by *Cáritas Brasileira*. Since its foundation, it has been coordinated by Sister Lourdes Dill, member of the religious congregation *Daughters of Divine Love*², who at the time of fieldwork was also the vice-president of *Cáritas Brasileira*.

The article begins with a literature review on Solidarity Economy. It continues with a methodology section, followed by an analysis of the evolution of *Esperança/Cooesperança* from an initial phase, focused on the scaling up of practices of subsistence into a large commercialization cooperative, to its

1 <https://www.esperancacooesperanca.org/misso>.

2 <https://www.ofdivinelove.com> (accessed on 23 June 2019).

restructuration as a collectively managed “mobilizational commons”, where stakeholders are engaged in a re-signification of the market through the experimentation, enactment and coordination of cooperative practices. It concludes with an analysis of the political limitations to the “edge work” promoted by *Esperança/Coesperança*, posed by electoral rotation and political socialization, as well as the suggestion to frame further research on this topic in the context of structural power relations.

Solidarity Economy: towards a re-framing of market dynamics?

The still-evolving concept and praxis of Solidarity Economy includes practices of grassroots economic self-governance that prioritize the creation of social value over capital accumulation (Mance, 2007; Auinger, 2009; Ould Ahmed, 2015; Laville, 2016). Such a process reconciles cooperative or social ownership of the means of production with market mechanisms for the allocation of factor inputs and the distribution of economic output (O’Hara, 2000: 71). At its core is the normative orientation of economic activity towards democratic deepening within community-based economic activities (Laville, 2016: 244–5), as well as the promotion of economic resilience of territories, supported by participatory politics (Bauwens and Niaros, 2017: 24; Estivill, 2018: 15).

The praxis of Solidarity Economy is based on the setting up of alternative spaces where “socio-ethical and counter-cultural practices” are experimented with, enacted and coordinated (Fois, 2019: 108). Literature in the field shows a variety of forms in which such alternative spaces exist and function (i.e. Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008; Mendell, 2009). Among them are alternative commercialization networks, such as Solidarity Purchasing Groups and Solidarity Economy Markets, aimed at promoting the economic resilience of territories by supporting production re-localization and food system re-territorialization (Graziano and Forno, 2012; Migliore *et al.*, 2014; Forno *et al.*, 2015, 2018; Forno, 2018; Giambartolomei *et al.*, 2018; Lekakis *et al.*, 2018). This happens through the promotion of direct producer-to-consumer exchanges, which maximize income for producers by cutting middlemen out of transactions (Grasseni, 2014; Rakopoulos, 2015). These exchanges are embedded in processes of co-production of networks of trust, based on relationships of proximity and direct collaboration, between consumers whose purchasing choices are motivated by environmental and social justice goals over instrumental concerns and producers whose characteristics match those motivations (Grasseni, 2014: 184–5). Besides being spaces of commercialization, these alternative spaces are sites of construction of what Escoffier (2018) calls “mobilizational citizenship”,

through processes of “production of belonging” inherent to the local identities of struggles “updated and reformed through processes of micro-mobilization” (p. 775).

The sustainability of these alternative spaces requires public support, in the form of regulation and policy programs (Ostrom, 2009). Such framework may translate into financial support (Mendell, 2009), as well as the training and technological development of producers (Sarria Icaza and Freitas, 2009). It may also focus on their integration into “local cooperative ecosystems”, based on “system-like stock-and-flow” circuits of value which reproduce the material resources, norms and rules that are necessary for their self-sustenance (de Angelis, 2017: 270–1). Such self-sustaining circuits of value requires instruments, such as community currencies, which support the re-localization of supply chains by coordinating lateral interactions among a diverse set of actors and socializing them into norms and practices of effective communication, internal trust and reciprocity (Bar-Yam, 2002; Poteete and Ostrom, 2010; Lietaer *et al.*, 2012; Rigo and França Filho, 2017).

This article engages in the ongoing debate on how alternative spaces, such as Solidarity Economy Markets, manage to build economic and political alliances, while embedding economic activity in counterhegemonic norms and practices. It applies the concept of “edge work”, taken from Social Permaculture Design (Lynch, 2016), as well as what is hereby referred to as “mobilizational commons”, to analyse how the leadership of *Esperança/Cooesperança* engages producers, consumers, social movements and the state in this balancing act.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the article, as well as its focus on context and process, it uses a hermeneutic methodology based on the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006; Czarniawska, 2014). The data were collected during fieldwork that took place in Santa Maria from September to November 2016. Fieldwork consisted in archival research and participant observation in events that took place at *Centro de Referência Dom Ivo Lorscheider*, the permanent market space of *Esperança/Cooesperança*, as well as in public spaces around Santa Maria. These included the weekly markets, the yearly *Feira da Primavera* (Springtime Fair) and a gathering of the *Sem Terrinha*, the children and youth section of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*/Landless Workers’ Movement (MST). It also included participant observation in regular markets organized in public squares by *Esperança/Cooesperança*, of meeting with public officials and of the public festivities of the Brazilian Independence Day (7 September), as well as *Dia do Gaúcho* (state holiday of Rio Grande do Sul,

on 20 September) in Santa Maria, in which the project participated. Fieldwork also included 33 semi-structured interviews with *Esperança/Cooesperança* project managers, participating producers, regular consumers, activists of MST and *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores*/Small and Subsistence Farmer's Movement (MPA), as well as civil servants from the municipality of Santa Maria. The purpose of these interviews was to collect information about the evolution of the project, as well as the "edge work" carried out with different stakeholders. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling.

The sampling process began with introductions from the project management team, which was the gatekeeper to the field. Each interviewee was asked to indicate another person in the same actor category (producer, consumer, project manager and activist). The interviewing process was finished when the data collected did not add any new information to that of previous interviews. The interview guides were structured around the respondent's role or relationship to the project and, in the case of producers, their area of activity. All the quotes were transcribed in Portuguese, the original language of communication, and translated to English in a way that attempted to retain as much as possible of the original meaning. For privacy purposes, this article only uses the real name of interviewees in the quotes related to the overall functioning of *Esperança/Cooesperança*. In those that refer to particular producers, their identity is protected by pseudonyms. Due to time constraints, resource limitations and issues of consent, it was not possible to obtain financial data from *Esperança/Cooesperança* or individual producers that were backed by official documents. As a result, the data used in the analysis of these topics are based on estimations made by participating producers or project managers, or participant observation, unless otherwise specified.

***Esperança/Cooesperança*: from microcredit system to Solidarity Economy Markets**

Scaling up practices of subsistence

The process leading to the creation of *Esperança/Cooesperança* dates back to the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*/Ecclesial Base Communities created in the region in the early 1980s. In 1984, the regional office of *Cáritas Brasileira* launched *Banco da Esperança*/The Bank of Hope, a microcredit system aimed at promoting economic self-determination, as well as healthier livelihoods for the rural and urban poor, by organizing them into small producers' cooperatives, designated as the *Projetos Alternativos Comunitários* (PACs)/Alternative Community Projects (Bertucci and Silva, 2003). The goal was to promote income generation among the urban poor, by scaling up

subsistence agriculture, as well as manufacture developed within the realm of reproductive labour (Sarria Icaza and Freitas, 2009: 8–11). It was funded mainly by revenue raised from the sale of products from PACs, as well as from other producers in the region, in *Feira da Esperança*, a regular fair held in the compound of *Catedral da Medianeira*/Cathedral of the Interceding Virgin, in Santa Maria. This revenue was complemented by funds from the Diocese. This system was inspired by *Banco da Providência* and *Feira da Providência*, created by Brazilian Bishop and Liberation Theology promoter Dom Helder Câmara in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s. It quickly expanded to four other Brazilian states, as it was regarded by progressives as a source of best practices for poverty alleviation, breaking with a long Catholic tradition of assistentialism (Souza, 2007).

The launching of *Esperança/Cooesperança* in 1987 aimed to upgrade the PACs system by “aggregating all small community-based economic projects into a big project that would support them with technical assistance, as well as promote their organizational development as socially transformative experiences” (Sarria Icaza and Freitas, 2009: 43). For that purpose, the Diocese signed a contract with *Misereor*, an international Catholic development NGO based in Germany, which brought extra resources for the PACs, as well as funding for the building of *Centro de Referência Dom Ivo Lorscheiter* (CRDIL), a marketplace named after the former Bishop of Santa Maria and founder of the project, which was inaugurated in 1989. The strategy was designed by a team composed by *Cáritas* technicians and professors of Economics and Management from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). It aimed to bring all PACs together into a cooperative (*Cooesperança*), based on a producer-to-consumer system of commercialization mediated by technicians from *Cáritas*. These middlemen would collect the goods at their place of production, pay 70 percent to the producers, bring them to CRDIL and then pay the remaining 30 percent to the producers after commercialization. The producers would also receive technical assistance on organizational management and product development from a team composed by *Cáritas* social workers, professors and students from UFSM and trainers from *Instituto Marista de Solidariedade*³.

The project also included the development of production units of a larger scale, aimed at creating employment for the urban poor in the region, designed by a team of professors and students from engineering, management and product design departments of the university. These include *Grupo ASPA*, a cooperative that produced *cuias*, a traditional recipient for *chimarrão* (Brazilian word for mate tea) made of pumpkin shells, as well as *Malhas*

3 This educational institution, founded by a religious order (*Irmãos Maristas*), engages lay people in the education of children and youth, as well as professional training and skills development among the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Medianeira, a textile cooperative created by factory workers left unemployed by the bankruptcy of industries in the region. Dom Ivo Lorscheiter and Sister Lourdes Dill intermediated between the projects and the market in the search and negotiation of prices for raw material, as well as spaces for the commercialization of the final products. At the time of fieldwork, these production units produced mainly for commercialization at CRDIL, as well as events organized by social movements, UFSM, *Cáritas*, municipal schools and the *Pastorais Sociais*.

The initial strategy of *Esperança/Coesperança* turned out to be unsustainable, due to politically motivated cuts in *Misereor*'s budget for Latin America, which drastically reduced the project's funds (Sarria Icaza and Freitas, 2009: 47). Another factor that compromised its sustainability was the lack of a sense of ownership of the project from the part of its beneficiaries, which offset economic and social incentives for their participation in its assemblies (Op. cit.). This included a lack of trust towards the project managers and technical assistants that coordinated the project, which interfered with commercialization (Sarria Icaza and Freitas, 2009: 47). These circumstances led to a restructuring of *Esperança/Coesperança*, with the purpose of promoting a sense of accountability from the part of project managers and technicians, as well as ownership of the project from the part of producers. In 1992, the system of commercial mediation was abolished. Producers began to sell directly to consumers at CRDIL, as well as to manage the space collectively, with the support of the project management team, and contribute 10 percent of their revenue to its upkeep⁴.

At the time of fieldwork, CRDIL was the site of a weekly Solidarity Economy Market, known as *Feirão Colonial*, as well as of 3-day thematic markets on the first week of Spring (*Feira da Primavera*) and during Advent (*Feira de Natal*). Sources from the project management team claim *Feirão Colonial* receives several hundreds of visitors every Saturday, most of them resident in the municipality of Santa Maria. The thematic markets attract several thousands of visitors from across Rio Grande do Sul. CRDIL is also the host of FEICOOP—*Feira Internacional do Cooperativismo* (International Fair of Cooperative Economics), a 4-day event that takes place every year during the first fortnight of July. According to internal documents of *Esperança/Coesperança*, the first edition of FEICOOP counted with 27 vendors, while its 25th edition, which took place in 2018, counted with at least 200. The thematic fairs receive a much higher number of visitors. The archives of FEICOOP indicate that this event receives an average of 200,000 visitors every year, originating from different parts of Brazil and Mercosur, as well as other parts of the world. All these commercialization events include a par-

4 Information confirmed by different project managers and producers interviewed during fieldwork.

allel schedule of workshops, debates and performative activities organized by *Esperança/Cooesperança* and like-minded social movements.

Re-signifying the market

With the restructuring of *Esperança/Cooesperança*, CRDIL became more than a mere space of commercialization, having been reframed as what is hereby called “mobilizational commons”. This concept, based on fieldwork, refers to the management of an alternative space as a common resource for the construction and performance of political identities and projects by the managing collective, as well as the engagement of external actors in the pursuit of its goals. To refer to that engagement, this article adopted the concept of “edge work” from Social Permaculture Design. This concept recognizes that the principles active in nature apply as well to human societies (Lynch, 2016: 53). One of the principles is that of the “edge effect”, according to which areas of contact between distinctive geographical, socioeconomic, cultural and institutional realities can become highly productive sites of social innovation, as a result of an “edge work” of mediation and promotion of exchanges (Op. cit.). The concept of “edge work” refers hereby to the contact and mediation between participating producers, as well as between these and consumers, social movements and state, formally and informally promoted by project managers with the purpose of building CRDIL as a politically protected space, where alternative economic identities and practices to those of capitalism can emerge, develop and be supported through resource mobilization.

The activities taking place at CRDIL re-signify the market through “edge work” that promotes cooperation amongst producers, contact between different social groups and engages *Esperança/Cooesperança* with political actors. CRDIL became a space of experimentation, enactment and coordination of cooperative economic practices, as well as engagement with social movements in a wider vision of economic transformation. Such activities promote the encounter between the wider public and otherwise socially and spatially segregated socio-economic realities. These include the urban poor, such as *catadores* (recyclable waste collectors), as well as manufacturing workers, living in the industrial periphery of the city, who were left unemployed by the bankruptcy of local industries during the 1980s. They also include the *colonos* living in the rural belt of Santa Maria or neighbouring municipalities, and the indigenous and *quilombola* afro-descendent communities, as well as MST settlements. From these activities, one can identify three processes contributing to the production of “mobilizational citizenship” within *Esperança/Cooesperança*, which can be classified as forms of what Escoffier (2018) calls “micro-mobilization” and “production of belonging”.

One of the processes is the promotion of lateral interactions among producers based on reciprocity and cooperation. The publicity materials of the fairs organized by *Esperança/Cooesperança* include the motto *Uma Feira Ensinante e Aprendente*, which can be roughly translated as “A Market of Self-Teaching and Self-Learning”. The way different project managers and producers interpreted this motto indicates that such events are regarded as sites of socialization into economic practices based on trust, reciprocity and cooperation. Such processes begin with the condition that, in order to commercialize at CRDIL, individual producers need to be aggregated into *grupos de produção*. These are producers’ associations, containing at least three family units, which have a common accounting and fiscal identity. Their purpose is to facilitate the access of subsistence producers to the market, as well as to promote economies of scale in production, through incentives for cooperative practices such as the sharing of production spaces and machinery and collective purchases. It also promotes the diversification of supply within the *grupos de produção* through incentives for individual producers to specialize and add value to their output, instead of maximizing quantity in terms of production. This includes training on cooperative economics, business accounting and management, manufacture development and commercialization, promoted by the regional branch of *Instituto Marista de Solidariedade*. This combination of incentives for cooperation and specialization promotes non-competitive commercialization arrangements, in which one producer within the group is responsible for selling and keeping the account balance of another production unit. That is the case of “Larissa”, part of a family of livestock-producing *colonos*, subsistence farmers descending from European immigrants who came to Rio Grande do Sul in the late 19th and early 20th century. Her production unit specializes in the production and commercialization of ham and sausages, while other units in her *grupo de produção* specialize in other livestock produce:

“This week I am here, taking care of our vending place. [Name withdrawn] could not come, so I am selling the milk, cheese, cream and curd they produce from their animals. It is not necessary for all of us to be here together at the same time. There is a lot of trust among us. They know that I will not cheat when writing down the transactions and that I will give them all the money from sales, as agreed. They also know that I will return the produce they were not able to sell. We also transport their produce here to the market in our truck. There is no need for each of us to have our own truck. We share it among us. Next week, if necessary, someone will be here in my place at the vending table”.

(Interview nr. 23, 22 October 2016)

Another process is the engagement of the wider public through the re-signification of the products on offer and the framing of their consumption as a political act that contributes to the emergence of a solidarity-based economy. This contributes to securing a client base for these products, constituted mainly by middle-class consumers with a left-of-centre political orientation that are predisposed to favour environmental and social concerns over instrumental motivations when making purchasing choices. That is the case of “Bette”:

“During my student years, I was against the dictatorship. I was a member of Juventude Universitária Católica [Catholic Youth Student movement]. We observed the state of the world and based our analysis in solidarity towards the oppressed. (...) I’ve known Esperança/Coesperança since its inception. Their militancy is my militancy. (...) I’d rather pay a bit more but eat healthy, flavorful products that are made with care in an economy of fairness, than pay less, not be satisfied and contribute to the oppression of others”.

(Interview nr. 15, 08 October 2016)

The third process is the framing of the activities taking place at CRDIL as part of a wider process of social transformation, through the engagement with social movements. *Esperança/Coesperança* partners with *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT) in the movement for agrarian reform. The partnership includes supporting the MST and MPA by hosting a native seed bank at CRDIL, as well as facilitating the exchange agroecology know-how between activists of these movements and other subsistence farmers in the region. The MST and MPA have a visible presence at the weekly and thematic markets organized at CRDIL, where they have vending areas, decorated with flags and other symbols of these movements. The same happens with the movement of *catadores* (collectors) of recyclable waste. *Esperança/Coesperança* complements the organizational and technical support given by *Cáritas* and *Instituto Marista de Solidariedade* to its regional network of associations by providing training and support in business and product development, as well as vending spaces at the weekly and thematic fairs for the commercialization of products made of recyclable waste.

The marketplace also hosts organizational gatherings and performative events of the movement for agrarian reform, such as *Grito dos Excluídos* (Cry of the Excluded), a yearly march, included in the schedule of parallel FEICOOP, which departs from CRDIL and walks along the main streets of Santa Maria. On 22–24 January 2010, CRDIL hosted the first World Fair and World Forum of Solidarity Economy⁵. This event was a response of social movements, at the national and international level, to the cancellation, by

5 http://rededegestoresecosol.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/historicizando_o_forum_mundial_e_a_feira_mundial_al_de_econ_solidaria.pdf.

judicial order, of the 2009 edition of FEICOOP, the fifth MERCOSUR Fair of Solidarity Economy and parallel events organized by social movements, on 9 July, one day before the due starting date for these events. The project managers of *Esperança/Coesperança*, together with a cohort of Solidarity Economy producers from 15 Brazilian states, as well as other MERCOSUR countries that were already in Santa Maria when the prohibition was issued, organized an impromptu protest march for 10 July, known as *Marcha da Esperança*. This was the beginning of the international articulation that led to the organization of the I World Fair and World Forum of Solidarity Economy in the following year. This event counted with the support of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS)⁶. The second edition of the event took place at CRDIL during the 24th edition of FEICOOP on 11–14 July 2013⁷ and the third edition during the 25th edition of FEICOOP on 13–16 July 2018⁸.

The limits of “edge work” with the state

The network of grassroots leaders, socialized by *Ação Católica* and the *Pastorais Sociais*, which entered electoral politics and high levels of public administration through PT after the democratic transition in Brazil, granted institutional recognition to the Solidarity Economy Sector at the municipal and state level across the country⁹, as well as at the national level of government in the form of four major policy programs. One of them is *Sistema Nacional de Informações em Economia Solidária*/National System of Information on Solidarity Economy, an online database containing national-level statistical information about the sector¹⁰. The other three programs are *Programa Nacional de Fomento às Feiras de Economia Solidária*/National Program of Promotion of Solidarity Economy Markets, which reproduces the model of *Esperança/Coesperança* across the country; *Rede Brasileira de Comercialização Solidária*/Brazilian Network of Commercialization in Solidarity Economy, which provides technical and financial assistance to thematic shops, kiosks and public markets; and the network *Centros de Formação em Economia Solidária*/Training Centers for Solidarity Economy, which provides technical assistance and skills development programs for the sector. These three policy programs are funded and managed jointly by *Secretaria Nacional*

6 <http://www.ripest.org/?lang=en> (accessed on 23 June 2019).

7 <http://www.mncr.org.br/artigos/carta-final-do-ii-forum-social-mundial-de-economia-solidaria>.

8 <http://caritas.org.br/a-feira-da-economia-solidaria-reune-a-partir-de-amanha-13-produtores-de-va-rios-paises/39329> (accessed on 23 June 2019).

9 The webpage of *Forum Brasileiro de Economia Solidária*/Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy, contains an archive of all regulations and policy programs for Solidarity Economy approved in Brazil at the municipal, state and national levels: <http://fbes.org.br/acervo/> (accessed on 23 June 2019).

10 <http://sies.ecosol.org.br/sies> (accessed on 23 June 2019).

de Economia Solidária/National Secretariat for Solidarity Economy (SENAES) and *Fundação Banco do Brasil* and implemented by *Instituto Marista de Solidariedade*. At the time of fieldwork, these programs were due to be made into law by the legislative proposal nr. 4685/12, drafted by the PT group in the Brazilian Congress, instituting a national policy for solidarity economy that makes support for the sector independent of governmental agenda. Having been approved by the House of Representatives, this program was then being analysed by the Senate (PLC 137/17).

The leadership network incubated by *Ação Católica* and the *Pastorais Sociais*, also granted the leadership of *Esperança/Cooesperança* political capital that contributed to the political recognition of the Solidarity Economy sector in Rio Grande do Sul. However, its practical influence is limited by the balance of power between political parties resulting from electoral scrutiny, as well as the rotativity of positions, within government and public administration, that are attributed via election or political nomination. Most of public funding for the Solidarity Economy fairs of *Esperança/Cooesperança* came from *Programa Nacional de Fomento às Feiras de Economia Solidária*/National Program of Support to Solidarity Economy Fairs. During the mandates of PT governors Olívio Dutra (1999–2003) and Tarso Genro (2011–2015), the markets organized by *Esperança/Cooesperança* received funds from the state-level government. As a result of freezes in the budget of SENAES, resulting from the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, *Esperança/Cooesperança* guaranteed the funding of the 2016 edition of FEICOOP by negotiating, through PT members of the Congress and Legislative Assembly of Rio Grande do Sul, a legal amendment that increased the budget of UFSM for extension activities involving technical assistance.

The institutional recognition of Solidarity Economy in Santa Maria happened during the second mandate of mayor Valdeci Oliveira¹¹ (PT), the former president of the CUT-affiliated *Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos*/Metal Workers' Union, who started his militancy in the Ecclesial Base Communities. It took the form of *Programa Municipal de Apoio e Fomento à Economia Solidária*/Municipal Program of Support and Promotion of Solidarity Economy, approved by law nr. 5150 of 21 August 2008¹². This program predicts public support to microcredit, training, technical assistance and commercialization, as well as a regular Solidarity Economy Council, in which representatives of the sector and public officials discuss its implementation. In 2011, mayor Cezar Schirmer (PMDB) approved law nr. 5403

11 Valdeci Oliveira was mayor on Santa Maria during 2001–2004 and 2004–2008.

12 <https://leismunicipais.com.br/a/rs/s/santa-maria/lei-ordinaria/2008/515/5150/lei-ordinaria-n-5150-2008-institui-o-programa-municipal-de-apoio-e-fomento-a-economia-solidaria-cria-o-conselho-municipal-e-da-outras-providencias> (accessed on 23 June 2019).

of 20 July, which includes FEICOOP and the MERCOSUR Fair of Solidarity Economy in the calendar of public events of the city. This law is a symbolic measure that does not include any disposition for the public funding of these events. At the time of fieldwork, law nr. 5150 of 21 August 2008 was still awaiting regulation, in order to be implemented. Still, the participation of *Esperança/Cooesperança* and partner organizations in the Working Group of Solidarity Economy of the Municipal Development Agency of Santa Maria (ADESM) included its implementation among the agency's key strategic goals for the period of 2014–2030 (ADESM (coord.), 2014).

The leadership of *Esperança/Cooesperança* made deliberate attempts to expand its political reach beyond the network of agents socialized within the conceptual and methodological frameworks of *Ação Católica* and *Pastorais Sociais*. It accepted the invitation by the municipality for its producers to join the Brazilian Independence Day parade and display their products during the event. During the pre-campaign and electoral campaign period leading to the municipal elections of 2016, CRDIL hosted, during the weekly market, cross-partisan public debates with all candidates for the municipal government. During these debates, the leadership of *Esperança/Cooesperança* introduced Solidarity Economy not as an instrumental banner of PT or the Left in general, but rather as a project of social transformation that transcended partisan lines. Still, the project management team clearly sided with the PT candidate list, which included some of its members, as well as producers from *Esperança/Cooesperança* and fellow members of *Ação Católica* and *Pastorais Sociais*.

In its attempts to reach out, the project encountered resistance from the judiciary. The court decision which cancelled the 2009 edition of FEICOOP and the fifth MERCOSUR Fair of Solidarity Economy came out on 9 July 2009, one day before the event. It was justified by the risk of cross-border spreading of the Influenza A virus (H1N1). However, the court prohibition did not include other international fairs scheduled for the same period in Santa Maria. In October 2019, *Esperança/Cooesperança* organized a meeting with officials of the municipal health standards regulation authority. The purpose was to clarify questions that producers had about existing legislation, as well as raise awareness of the necessity to adapt existing legislation to the circumstances of small and subsistence producers. During and after the meeting, there were producers who expressed a sense of being misunderstood and patronized by the health standards regulation officials. One producer interpreted their presentation about hygiene standards in livestock production as.

“... a way of trying to tell us that the only ‘right’ way to produce is the way of the large enterprises, of the capitalists. They forget what Sister

Lourdes told us, which we tell whomever cares to listen: We never put a product on the market that we would not feed our children. We put the same amount of care in those products that we put in the food we make for our children. We need legislation that recognizes our way of doing things, that recognizes that our way of doing things is as hygienic as the way of doing things of large enterprises and large supermarkets. It is just different. And healthier"¹³.

Conclusions

This article has explored the scope and limitations of the “edge work” carried out by the coordinators of *Esperança/Coesperança*, in the engagement of producers, consumers, social movements and the state in the resignification of market dynamics. The Solidarity Economy Markets organized by this project are “mobilizational commons”, sites of re-signification of economic activity through the promotion of cooperation among otherwise competing producers, of contact and trust between otherwise segregated social sectors, and the engagement of social movements in framing Solidarity Economy as part of wider political projects. Such “edge work” is promoted by project managers and coordinators whose political capital grants them privileged access to agents in influential positions within the public sector and civil society.

The “mobilizational citizenship” produced within such spaces promotes public support for Solidarity Economy as a result of an “edge work” of mediation with political parties, elected representatives and civil servants. The effect of such mediation, in terms of engaging the state in regulatory and policy innovation, is limited by two factors. One of them is the impact of electoral rotation on agenda setting and resource allocation by the public administration. The other is the fact that the “mobilizational citizenship” promoted by the “edge work” carried out by the leadership of *Esperança/Coesperança* in this field reaches out mainly to a network of producers, regular consumers and institutional partners socialized in progressive Catholic circles. Fieldwork evidence indicates that efforts by the project to reach out to public officials that did not share such background had limited effect. Further research is necessary to assess the extent to which *Esperança/Coesperança* is able to compete with agents in the wider market, namely by attracting consumers, as well as allies in the state and the third sectors, which do not share the same values and political socialization as the project participants and its project managers.

13 Transcription of an intervention that took place during the meeting. I obtained permission to quote interventions by producers, as long as I would keep their anonymity.

These findings challenge scholars and practitioners to adopt a research agenda on Solidarity Economy that analyses the actual impact of “edge work” on the institutional, economic and social dimensions of community development. Such analysis should address the capacity of the “edge work” carried out by project managers to form strategic coalitions that effectively mobilize resources and impact regulation and policy making. It should also contextualize such coalitions in the framework of structural power relations, so as to address their impact on the capacity of Solidarity Economy Markets to secure a socially, economically and politically diverse consumer base. It should also take into account how such processes impact the participation of both producers and project managers in internal decision-making processes, as well as social movements and other forms of collective action. Besides, this research agenda should address how the economic empowerment of producers in Solidarity Economy Markets enhance economic outcomes in their communities, namely through job creation and the development of local and regional level supply chains that encourage the use of endogenous resources. It should also address how Solidarity Economy contributes to forms of grassroots mobilization and political participation leading to the improvement of social conditions.

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