

Embedded Alternatives: How a consumer cooperative in Barcelona reimagines community and sustainability

Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

In light of the United Nations' 2025 "International Year of Cooperatives", this thesis explores the structures and processes through which a consumer cooperative contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Whilst the United Nations (UN) highlights the role of cooperatives in advancing the SDGs, research has largely overlooked the underlying mechanisms that make cooperatives effective. This thesis addresses that gap, by moving beyond the predominantly descriptive case studies found in existing literature. Focusing specifically on SDG 11: *Sustainable Cities and Communities* and SDG 12: *Responsible Consumption and Production*, this thesis explores how a consumer supermarket cooperative in Barcelona fosters community inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability, while advancing local sustainable consumption and production patterns. Integrating the frameworks of performativity and embeddedness, alongside the degeneration and regeneration theses, this thesis investigates how the cooperative aligns local needs with global sustainability objectives, balances social and market logics, and navigates the risks of mission drift under capitalist pressures.

Through a qualitative plausibility probe case study, including participant observation, interviews and institutional document analysis, the research shows that the cooperative operates as a deeply embedded space. This embeddedness is cognitive in its embrace of local knowledge and participatory governance, social in its cultivation of solidarity, care and mutual aid, organisational in its networks with fellow cooperatives and institutional & geographic in its local commitment to the education of local production and agroecology. The cooperative challenges mainstream sustainable development discourse by resisting growth imperatives through care, compromise and community.

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To Giulia who ignited a fire in me.

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1. Introduction

According to the United Nations' current “International Year of Cooperatives”, cooperatives play a vital role in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, in doing so, ensure amongst other things, food access and climate adaptability, enhance community resilience and well-being, improve sustainable consumption and production patterns and promote inclusive growth and development (Wanyama, 2014; COPAC, 2023). However, most of the studies written on the connection between cooperatives and the SDGs are descriptive, in most cases a case study is discussed with limited attention given to the specific mechanisms through which cooperatives address the SDGs (Joannidès et al., 2016; UN, 2018; Moxom et al., 2022). To address this gap, I am conducting research on one consumer supermarket cooperative in Barcelona to examine the practices and structures through which cooperatives address the SDGs. Within the broad framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, this thesis narrows its focus to SDG 11: *Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable* and SDG 12: *Responsible Consumption and Production: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns* in order to ensure a clear and relevant scope of analysis, as consumer cooperatives are linked most strongly to contributing to SDG 11 and SDG 12 (COPAC, 2018a; COPAC, 2018b; Moxom et al., 2022). Subsequently, this thesis investigates the extent to which the consumer cooperative aligns with the principles and objectives articulated in SDG 11 and SDG 12. Hereby, I identified two main research questions: *How does the consumer cooperative improve community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability in Barcelona?* and *how does the consumer cooperative strengthen sustainable production and consumption patterns within Barcelona's food system?*

My research examines one consumer supermarket cooperative in Barcelona to assess how the cooperative aligns with and potentially challenges SDG 11 and SDG 12. Through active participation in a supermarket cooperative in Barcelona, interviews, participant observation and the analysis of institutional documents, I analyse how the UN's claims interact with lived experiences on the ground to gain a deeper understanding of the specific mechanisms and practices that underpin the cooperative. Hereby, I am merging the theory of performativity and embeddedness, as well as the degeneration and regeneration thesis, to furthermore discuss how

the cooperative creates alternative economic futures, aligns social and market objectives and navigates the potential erosion of their ethos due to the broader capitalist context they are set in. By drawing on the theory of performativity (Butler, 1990; Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Gibson-Graham, 2008), I investigate how the daily practices and governance structures of the cooperative enact and sustain new social norm-making, community resilience and sustainable production and consumption patterns. The concept of embeddedness enriches this analysis by emphasising the cooperatives' deep rootedness in their local community through cognitive, social, organisational and institutional & geographical proximity (Boschma, 2005; Su et al., 2020; Lomuscio et al., 2024). I utilise the degeneration thesis to critically assess the risks cooperatives face as they operate within a capitalist market context and use the regeneration thesis to illustrate how cooperatives can actively renew their participatory structures and foster a culture of care and social responsibility, even after periods of drift or compromise (Cheney et al., 2014).

My findings suggest that the consumer supermarket cooperative enacts a deeply embedded space in the community. Through territorial and relational embeddedness across cognitive, social, organisational, institutional & geographic dimensions, the cooperative fosters community inclusivity, resilience and sustainability while addressing SDG 11 and SDG 12 from the ground up. Drawing on Gibson-Grahams' framework of diverse economies, the cooperative performs a "politics of possibility", challenging growth-centric development models through participatory governance, a culture of care and solidarity networks. While facing tensions such as unequal participation and time constraints, these challenges reflect the lived reality of building "diverse economies" within capitalist systems. Rather than serving as a delivery mechanism for global policy goals, the cooperative redefines sustainable development through everyday acts of care, community solidarity and education, transforming sustainability from institutional discourse into grounded, relational practice.

Situating the research: UN Year of Cooperatives

The United Nations (UN) has declared 2025 as the "International Year of Cooperatives" (IYC2025) to emphasise the crucial contribution cooperatives make in promoting sustainable progress, social cohesion, and economic stability (UN, 2023). The Committee for the Promotion

and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC), a coalition of UN bodies and the International Cooperative Alliance, oversees international efforts throughout the year. Operating under the theme “Cooperatives Build a Better World”, the initiative seeks to enhance public understanding of how cooperatives support the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030 (COPAC, 2023). This is the second year the UN has announced an “International Year of Cooperatives”, the first being in 2012. That year saw a surge in conferences, publications, and scholarly work focused on cooperatives, reflecting a strong wave of interest, political dialogue and engagement (Joannidès et al., 2016).

According to Ariel Guarco, president of the International Cooperative Alliance, dedicating a second year to cooperatives “... *is not a coincidence. Driven by concern for all communities, cooperatives have successfully adapted to overcome the evolving challenges of our time, and have shown repeatedly throughout history that together we are indeed building a better world*” (IYC2025, 2025). Major stakeholders, including the UN, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), have emphasised that the cooperative model is especially well-suited to tackle the obstacles associated with transitions toward sustainability, such as gender disparity, and both economic and social marginalisation, stating that cooperatives are essential solutions in global challenges, with a unique ability to address the 17 SDGs (Wanyama, 2014).

The ability of cooperatives to address the SDGs has largely been argued to be due to the cooperatives' foundational values and principles closely aligned with intentions and targets outlined in the 17 SDGs (Joannidès et al., 2016; Moxom et al., 2022; Lafont et al., 2023). Therefore, the “International Year of Cooperatives 2025” encourages cooperatives' greater involvement in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To understand the significance of cooperatives and why the United Nations has chosen to highlight them for a second time, it is important to firstly examine cooperatives historical development. In what follows, I will outline the history of cooperatives, the different types of cooperatives, and then examine the existing body of academic research on the topic. I will subsequently focus on the link between consumer cooperatives and SDG 11 and SDG 12, followed by presenting my case study set in one consumer supermarket cooperative in Barcelona.

2. Literature review

2.1 History of Cooperatives

The origins of the cooperative movement are broadly traced to the 19th century, particularly to the “Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers” in England (Birchall, 1997), which established a model for cooperative principles still referenced today (Cornforth, 2004; Battilani & Schröter, 2012; Cheney et al., 2014). In response to the inequalities and exploitative conditions within the industrial revolution, cooperatives emerged particularly among the working class. Subsequently, early cooperatives were forms of worker-led resistance to industrial exploitation. They were closely associated with socialist, mutualist, and anarchist traditions, especially in Southern Europe and Latin America (Birchall, 1997). Restakis (2010) extends this historical view by arguing that cooperatives represent a “humanised” form of economic organisation that prioritises people over profit, positioning cooperatives as expressions of grassroots democracy and economic justice.

In their early development, cooperatives gained intellectual interest from influential economists like John Stuart Mill and Léon Walras. Mill characterised cooperatives as associations of workers with shared ownership of capital and equal rights. Walras, on the other hand, emphasised the function of cooperatives in generating member-owned capital through consistent contributions (Battilani & Schröter, 2012). Following the Second World War, academic focus shifted towards analysing cooperatives’ capacity to endure and operate within varying economic contexts. Yet, inherent structural limitations, such as weak incentives for expansion, partly attributed to democratic governance structures, were at the centre of this scholarly work. Nevertheless, particularly during the 2008 financial crisis, cooperatives have shown how resilient they can be, which resparked renewed scholarly interest in the cooperative model (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009; Schwettmann, 2014).

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), characterises cooperatives based on seven core principles, which are based on the cooperative principles developed by the Rochdale Group in England (ICA, 2025b): Voluntary and inclusive membership, democratic governance by members, shared financial involvement, organisational independence, dedication to educating

members on cooperative values and operations, collaboration between cooperatives, and a commitment to the long-term well-being of their communities. In essence, cooperatives are governed and run by the people who are part of them (Battilani & Schröter, 2012; Karakas, 2019). Today, the cooperative sector is undeniably substantial. Recent global statistical comparisons between cooperative and traditional forms of business ownership reveal that while 328 million individuals hold shares in conventional firms, over 1 billion people are member-owners of cooperative organisations (Mayo, 2012; ICA, 2023). According to the latest ICA figures (2025a), Europe has 70 million cooperative members, Asia-Pacific has 349 million members, the Americas 279 million and Africa has 18 million members. These statistics clearly underscore the significant economic and social relevance of cooperatives in today's global economy.

2.2 Types of Cooperatives

Cooperatives encompass a wide range of organisational forms, each distinguished by structural, legal, and functional characteristics. The most commonly recognised categories include worker cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, producer cooperatives, community-owned cooperatives, housing cooperatives, financial cooperatives and platform cooperatives (Altman, 2009; Karakas, 2019). Beyond these, there are more complex forms such as multi-stakeholder cooperatives, which integrate diverse member groups, often including worker, consumer and community members (ICA, 2010). Worker cooperatives are owned and democratically governed by employees, emphasising equitable pay and job security, whilst consumer cooperatives are established by users of goods or services prioritising quality, affordability and member benefits. Producer cooperatives, commonly found in agriculture, enable independent producers to pool resources for processing, marketing and distribution, enhancing their market power and income stability (Cheney et al., 2014). Community cooperatives integrate multiple stakeholder groups to provide essential social services like healthcare, whilst housing cooperatives are resident-owned entities that offer affordable, collectively managed living arrangements. Financial cooperatives are member-owned financial institutions and platform cooperatives seek to democratise the digital economy by giving platform users, such as freelancers, ownership and control over technological infrastructure, promoting ethical data practices (ICA, 2010; ICA, 2023; ICA, 2025b).

2.3 Existing Research on Cooperativism

From economics, sociology, political science to development studies, a range of academic disciplines conducts research on cooperatives, which reflects the hybrid nature of cooperatives as both economic entities and social movements. A large body of research focuses on the internal governance of cooperatives, particularly the tensions between democratic participation and organisational efficiency (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004; Estragó, 2023). The governance literature often intersects with debates about mission drift, the tendency for cooperatives to adopt more conventional business practices over time, sometimes at the cost of democratic control (Davis, 2001; Battilani and Schröter, 2012; Joannidès et al., 2016). Hence, despite their promise, cooperatives face significant internal and external challenges. Internally, issues of member disengagement, mission drift, and lack of professionalisation can dilute democratic processes (Cornforth, 2004). Externally, cooperatives often struggle to compete with conventional firms due to scale and access to capital, face obstacles such as the limitations of non-enforceable international frameworks and are under extreme competitive pressure (Davis, 2001; Battilani & Schröter, 2012; Karakas, 2019). Subsequently, many cooperatives are adopting more hybrid organisational models to maintain market viability. For example, to strengthen their competitiveness and expand their international presence, many cooperatives are incorporating more conventional business strategies (Karakas, 2019), highlighting the evolving governance challenges cooperatives face within the broader capitalist system.

A more recent and rapidly growing area of research situates cooperatives within the context of socio-ecological transformation (Lafont et al., 2023; Lomuscio et al., 2024). Research has shown that cooperative models are more equipped to advance sustainable practices compared to conventional businesses, which can be analysed through economic, social, and environmental dimensions. From an economic standpoint, cooperatives actively support regional economic networks, as they keep financial flows within the community and reinvest in the local area (Zeuli & Radel, 2005; Mills & Davies, 2013; Wrede, 2023). Moreover, Birchall and Ketilson (2009) found that cooperatives outperformed conventional enterprises during the 2008 financial crisis, due to their long-term orientation, member loyalty, and embeddedness in local economies.

From a social perspective, cooperatives better respond to the needs of their members (Carisse, 2019). According to Carisse (2019) cooperatives' participatory governance and collective ownership frameworks empower workers to actively influence operational decisions. These practices create civically engaged individuals, fostering a politicised workforce rather than individualised employees (Mills & Davies, 2013; Dombi, 2015). Furthermore, the cooperative model facilitates a proactive approach to addressing environmental concerns, often guided by a long-term perspective (Göler von Ravensburg, 2011; Carisse, 2019). Compared to investor-owned companies, which prioritise immediate financial gains, cooperatives embody a more long-term commitment to local ecological well-being, thus, prioritising environmentally responsible and sustainable practices (Mills & Davies, 2013; Vieta & Lionais, 2015).

A significant body of academic research has examined cooperatives as a form of resistance to neoliberalism, with much of this work led by J.K. Gibson-Graham, the collective pseudonym of feminist political economists Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham. Gibson-Graham (2006a) argue that cooperatives form part of a “diverse economy” that resists neoliberal economic logic, whereby cooperatives embody spaces where alternative futures are actively practiced. Defourny and Nyssens (2013) explore how cooperatives are integral in areas where state or market solutions fall short, such as elder care and youth unemployment. Moreover, cooperatives are increasingly studied as hybrid organisations, combining economic viability with public service provision (Borzaga & Tortia, 2007). These models challenge the dichotomy between public and private, offering participatory solutions to welfare provision and community development.

The academic literature on cooperatives reveals their complexity as hybrid organisations. While much of the early work focused on governance and efficiency, recent studies have shifted toward viewing cooperatives as tools for systemic change, capable of responding to economic, social, and ecological crises, as well as forms of resistance to neoliberal, capitalist market logic (Zeuli & Radel, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Borzaga & Tortia, 2007; Defourny & Nyssens, 2013; Lafont et al., 2023; Wrede, 2023; Lomuscio et al., 2024). This growing field continues to challenge conventional economic thinking by highlighting the viability of cooperation, democracy, and solidarity in organising production and social life. Nevertheless, the cooperative model is not without its vulnerabilities, as the collapse of Fagor within the Mondragon Network illustrates (Errasti et al., 2017). Sustaining a cooperative comes with challenges, which is why

ongoing research into cooperative governance models and adaptive strategies is crucial to ensure their long-term success (Mills & Davies, 2013; Cheney et al., 2014).

2.4 Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals

Extensive literature exists on the connection between cooperatives and the SDGs, particularly since the UN “International Year of Cooperative 2012”, which saw a surge in publications (Schwettmann, 2014; Wanyama, 2014; COPAC, 2023). The main body of literature features case studies and argues that cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance the SDGs due to their values-based, democratic and member-driven structure, directly aligning with the SDGs’ aims to promote gender equality, eradicate poverty, ensure environmental sustainability and foster inclusive economic growth (Bollas-Araya et al., 2022; Moxom et al., 2022; Lafont et al., 2023). By discussing a case study, most studies link a certain type of cooperative to an SDG (UN, 2018).

In the report *Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals: The role of cooperative organisations in facilitating SDG implementation at global, national and local levels*, Moxom et al. (2022) link each cooperative type to addressing specific SDGs, whereby agricultural producer cooperatives help smallholder farmers access markets and resources, thereby contributing to SDG 1 (No poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), while financial cooperatives enhance financial inclusion and resilience, supporting SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Consumer supermarket cooperatives are linked to contributing most strongly to SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and Communities) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Moxom et al., 2022). Therefore, as I am studying a consumer cooperative, this thesis narrows its focus to SDG 11 and SDG 12, in order to ensure a clear and relevant scope of analysis.

Within the *Transforming our world: A cooperative 2030 series* the United Nations (2018) recognises that consumer cooperatives significantly contribute to making cities and communities more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable by expanding public spaces (SDG 11). According to COPAC (2018a), a coalition of UN bodies and ICA, consumer cooperatives significantly support SDG 11 by strengthening community inclusivity, safety and resilience through

participatory governance and community engagement, fostering a sense of community solidarity. On the other hand, the UN (2018b) highlights that consumer cooperatives are important actors also in achieving responsible consumption and production patterns (SDG 12), due to their ethical and values-based identity. According to COPAC, consumer cooperatives influence SDG 12 by innovating sustainable resource management, through consumer cooperatives by launching consumer awareness campaigns, ensuring sustainability along the supply chain by fostering cooperation between producers and consumers, which shortens value chains, improves product traceability and encourages environmentally friendly practices (COPAC, 2018b; Moxom et al., 2022). Moreover, partnerships between cooperatives create more inclusive and transparent supply chains, benefiting both producers and consumers (ILO, 2023b).

However, most of the literature written on the connection between cooperatives and the SDGs is descriptive, discussing case studies, with little research on the cooperative processes and underlying structures and mechanisms that enable an advancement to the Sustainable Development Goals. The *Transforming Our World: A Cooperative 2030* series, consisting out of 17 briefs, one for each Sustainable Development Goal, for example, solely outlines case studies and does not analyse how cooperative structures are addressing each SDG (Joannidès et al., 2016; UN, 2018). Therefore, my theoretical framework will serve as a foundation for analysing the cooperatives' practices, allowing for a better understanding of the processes and structures that generate the impacts highlighted during the "International Year of Cooperatives 2025".

3. Theoretical Framework

To analyse a consumer supermarket cooperative in Barcelona, I integrate the frameworks of performativity, and embeddedness, alongside the degeneration and regeneration theses, to examine how the cooperative addresses SDG 11 and SDG 12, fosters alternative futures and navigates the challenges posed by their broader capitalist environment. J.K. Gibson-Grahams' scholarly work challenges capitalisms' presumed hegemony (2006a; 2006b; 2008). Their work critiques "capitalocentrism", the discursive framing of capitalism as the singular, dominant economic structure, arguing that such narratives depreciate the existence of diverse economic practices. Subsequently, Gibson-Graham advance a pluralist ontology of economic relations,

drawing on feminist, queer, and poststructuralist methodologies to reimagine how alternative economies are theorised and enacted (Gibson-Graham, 2006b).

Central to Gibson-Grahams' framework is the critique of essentialist representations of capitalism, arguing that these representations marginalise non-capitalist practices, such as cooperatives, by framing them as peripheral. This narrative reinforces the myth of capitalist invincibility (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). To counter this, Gibson-Graham adopt an anti-essentialist lens inspired by feminist and queer critiques of fixed identity categories. Hence, they propose reimagining capitalism not as a unified, but heterogeneous system coexisting with other economic forms. In the same way that gender is reconceptualised as a fluid and performative construct, "*we may begin the process of engendering new political visions*" (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 21). By framing economies as sites of multiplicity, diverse practices, such as market, non-market, and communal, interact in complex ways. This ontological shift is visualised in their "iceberg" metaphor, which reveals the volume of alternative practices beneath capitalisms' visible surface (Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Gibson-Graham, 2008). By mapping these practices, Gibson-Graham destabilise the notion of capitalist dominance and underscore the vitality of non-capitalist economic relations already embedded in daily life.

Performativity

Gibson-Graham further extend Judith Butlers' (1990) theory of performativity to argue that economic systems are not preexisting structures but realities enacted through daily practices, narratives, and representations (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). The theory of performativity emphasises the role of language and action in shaping economic realities. For instance, replacing terms like "alternative economies" with "diverse economies" normalises non-capitalist practices, while participatory actions such as cooperative labour cultivates postcapitalist subjectivities (Gibson-Graham, 2008). These discursive and practical interventions form the basis of what Gibson-Graham term a "politics of possibility" (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). By reframing cooperatives not as exceptions but as constitutive elements of a plural economy, Gibson-Graham expand political and individual agency through representational and practical shifts. For example, Barcelona's supermarket cooperatives exemplify how performative practices, such as participatory decision-making processes, can challenge dominant economic narratives. The

cooperative navigates the tension between market competitiveness and egalitarian principles, embodying what Gibson-Graham describe as the “undecidable space” of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008). By centering such cases, their work demonstrates how localised practices can denaturalise capitalism and broaden social imaginaries.

Gibson-Grahams’ metaphor of the “iceberg” and frameworks of capitocentrism, performativity, diverse economies, and politics of possibility reveal the plurality of economic practices already in existence and offer a roadmap to dismantle capitalocentric discourse (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Gibson-Graham, 2008). Through discursive reframing, their work redefines economic transformation as a process of *nurturing* emergent alternatives rather than *resisting* dominant systems. This approach challenges the hegemony of capitalist narratives and cultivates emancipatory possibilities for the future (Alhojärvi, 2020). The concept of embeddedness provides a framework to discuss the ways in which the cooperative aligns with local and global priorities to mediate between different interests.

Embeddedness

The concept of embeddedness is central to understanding the role that cooperatives play in improving community inclusivity, resilience, safety, and sustainability and strengthening sustainable production and consumption patterns. Embeddedness refers to the extent to which economic activities are integrated with social relationships, setting cooperatives apart from conventional, market-driven enterprises (Granovetter, 1985; Levi, & Pellegrin-Rescia, 1997). Embeddedness describes how cooperatives are rooted in their local communities, enabling them to foster community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability (Filippi et al., 2011; Lomuscio et al., 2024). Moreover, the concept of embeddedness encompasses two forms: Territorial embeddedness, which connects cooperatives to the communities in which they are set, ensuring that their activities are attuned to local needs, and relational embeddedness, which highlights the significance of participatory governance and democratic work practices within the cooperative itself (Su et al., 2020; De Bernardi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, several dimensions of proximity shape the embeddedness of cooperatives. Cognitive proximity emerges when cooperatives depend on local knowledge and expertise from

the community. Social proximity is evident in the way cooperatives address community needs addressed by members and the wider community. Organisational proximity is fostered through collaboration and mutual support among cooperatives. Lastly, institutional & geographic proximity facilitates ongoing interaction, knowledge exchange, and the cultivation of a shared cooperative ethos (Boschma, 2005). Embeddedness provides the context in which cooperative values, such as democracy, egalitarianism, and solidarity, can be enacted within the cooperative and transmitted into the broader community (Lomuscio et al., 2024). Therefore, embeddedness is a crucial mechanism through which cooperatives establish a strong foundation in their communities and withstand external pressures that might otherwise compromise their principles (Filippi et al., 2011).

Degeneration and Regeneration

Operating in a competitive capitalist market comes with challenges. The “degeneration thesis” states that cooperatives are likely to adopt more conventional, profit-oriented practices over time, potentially eroding their distinctive cooperative ethos. Yet, here, embeddedness can act as a buffer, reinforcing social and community ties that help cooperatives resist such tendencies, reaffirming their foundational values. This process is described by the “regeneration thesis”, offering a counterpoint to the “degeneration thesis”, illustrating how cooperatives can actively renew their participatory structures, reassert their founding principles, and foster a culture of social responsibility, even after periods of drift or compromise (Cheney et al., 2014).

4. Methodology

4.1 Case Selection: Consumer supermarket cooperative

I chose a plausibility probe case study approach as my primary methodology to study the mechanisms and processes of the cooperative (Levy, 2008). A plausibility probe allows for an initial exploratory investigation, a starting point from which I can explore the topic and theoretical frameworks (Eckstein, 1975). By probing the mechanisms, processes and structures of this particular case, I can assess whether the theoretical framework is suitable to analyse cooperative structures in relation to the SDGs, laying the foundation for further, more exhaustive

research (Levy, 2008). As Bent (2006: 241) states, *“the case study is a necessary and sufficient method for certain important research tasks in the social sciences”*.

My case study is situated in a consumer supermarket cooperative, which is a collectively owned and democratically managed supermarket. The cooperative is based on seven core principles: Voluntary and inclusive membership, democratic governance by members, shared financial involvement, organisational independence, dedication to educating members on cooperative values and operations, collaboration between cooperatives, and a commitment to the long-term well-being of their communities (ICA, 2025b). In contrast to conventional supermarkets, which are primarily driven by profit maximisation, the supermarket cooperative prioritises ethical, sustainable food distribution and active community participation (Karavioti, 2023). The cooperative itself has roughly 400 members and is five years old¹.

I chose the consumer supermarket cooperative because it requires active participation from their members, who typically contribute a few hours of volunteer labour every four weeks, which enables me to gain valuable ethnographic insights through participant observation. The manageable time commitment and straightforward onboarding process made the supermarket cooperative an accessible and practical choice for my research. Subsequently, as part of my research, I have become a member of one supermarket consumer cooperative in order to examine how the latter corresponds with the United Nations’ assertions that consumer cooperatives play a pivotal role in meeting SDG 11 and SDG 12. Ultimately, my thesis as a plausibility probe aspires to inform further research, providing a foundation upon which further studies of cooperatives in the context of the UN’s “International Year of Cooperatives 2025” can expand on.

Catalonian Context: Situating the cooperative in Barcelona

When discussing a cooperative based in Barcelona, it is essential to consider the historical and political context of Catalonia. The region has a long tradition of cooperative organising and grassroots political engagement, often grounded in principles of autonomy, mutual aid and resistance to centralised authority. As a response to exploitative working conditions caused by industrialisation in the late 19th century, worker cooperatives emerged in Barcelona. Subsequently, Barcelona became a prominent centre of collectivist activity, through the actions

¹ In order to maintain anonymity of the cooperative, I am not offering more information.

of groups like the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), which advanced cooperative labour structures and mobilisation (Karavioti, 2023). This historical legacy continues to influence present-day cooperatives in Barcelona.

The limitations of the state in effectively addressing contemporary social issues in recent years has led to the rise of alternative frameworks for designing and delivering public services and policies (Aguilar, 2014; Woods et al., 2016). The global financial crisis of the late 2000s had a significant impact on Barcelona, worsening unemployment, austerity measures, and social exclusion (Zurbriggen & González, 2014). Innovative practices such as worker-owned cooperatives, consumer cooperatives and community currencies like the ‘Rec’ illustrate how Barcelona seeks to reconfigure the distribution of economic and political power (Karavioti, 2023). These initiatives aim to decrease reliance on exploitative global markets and foster more equitable and sustainable local systems. In doing so, many of these cooperatives challenge conventional growth-oriented models, therefore potentially affecting interpretations of concepts such as “inclusive and sustainable development”. This position might conflict with global development frameworks such as the United Nations’ vision of “inclusive and sustainable development” (UNDP, 2017), particularly outlined in this years’ official theme for the 2025 International Day of Cooperatives: *“Cooperatives: Driving Inclusive and Sustainable Solutions for a Better World”* (COPAC, 2025).

The United Nations, particularly in its 2025 “International Year of Cooperatives” framework, promotes a vision of “inclusive and sustainable development”, rooted in the decoupling of economic development from environmental degradation and social exclusion. The underlying assumption is that economic growth can be made sustainable, if managed correctly through technological innovation, improved governance and responsible business practices (IYC2025, 2025). Subsequently, there is a stark contrast between Barcelona-based cooperatives' views on development and growth and the UN’s belief that growth can be made sustainable if managed appropriately. In order to examine how a consumer cooperative in Barcelona addresses SDG 11 and SDG 12 and might challenge conventional growth-oriented models, I use three interrelated qualitative methods: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) participant observation, and (3) institutional document analysis.

4.2 Research Methods and Questions

This study is based on a plausibility probe case study research design, guided by the theoretical contributions of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b, 2008), which question capitalocentric assumptions in favour of a pluralist and performative understanding of economic practices. Within this framework, cooperatives are not viewed as deviations from capitalist norms but as constitutive sites of economic experimentation, capable of enacting alternative modes of organising, valuing, and relating through performativity and embeddedness. I chose this framework, as it enables a deeper exploration of the cooperatives' underlying processes, allowing me to understand *how* the cooperative is addressing SDG 11 and SDG 12, rather than solely offering a descriptive analysis. I chose SDG 11 and SDG 12, as the latter two are linked to consumer cooperatives (UN, 2018; COPAC, 2018a; COPAC, 2018b; Moxom et al., 2022, COPAC, 2023). Subsequently, based on SDG 11: *Sustainable Cities and Communities*, and SDG 12: *Responsible Consumption and Production*, my research questions are as follows:

1. *How does the consumer cooperative in Barcelona improve local community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability?*
2. *How does the consumer cooperative strengthen sustainable production and consumption patterns within Barcelona's food system?*

To examine how a consumer cooperative in Barcelona addresses SDG 11 and SDG 12 and navigates broader socio-economic constraints, I use three interrelated qualitative methods within my plausibility probe case study: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) participant observation, and (3) institutional document analysis. Each of these methods was selected for its capacity to highlight different dimensions of the cooperatives' performative enactments, embeddedness and degeneration and regeneration. Together they enable a nuanced analysis of how the cooperative fosters alternative economic futures while negotiating the pressures of its broader capitalist environment.

4.2.1 Interviews

Interviews offer valuable insights into individuals' personal experiences in a cooperative. To capture a broad range of perspectives, I reached out to seven members with diverse backgrounds,

selected based on gender, age and length of membership. Whilst I purposely aimed to ensure that interviewees come from diverse backgrounds, span different age groups and genders with different levels of involvement, I was also limited by outside factors. I, for example, only asked people, who seemed talkative and open, if they would be willing to talk to me. In the end, four members accepted, so I held four semi-structured interviews with members of the cooperative occupying varied roles; one female employee in her 40s, one new male member, who is a young professional and two members who have been with the cooperative for a few years (one of them is female and retired and has been with the cooperative from the beginning, and the other one is male, retired and has been with the cooperative for three years). For more information see the *Interview Table* below. The interviews were designed to cover peoples' experiences in decision-making, community engagement, value tensions, and institutional change, aligned with the indicators and observable practices that I identified in regards to SDG 11 and SDG 12. Three interviews were held via email exchange, and one interview was held in person in a café. During the in-person interview, I took notes and elaborated on them afterward to capture additional details. These notes, along with the email interviews, were then analysed using qualitative coding to identify indicators related to SDG 11 and SDG 12.

Interview Table

Person	Person Information	Interview Process	Interview experience	Core Topics
Paid member (employee), female, in her 40s	She co-founded the cooperative and is one of four paid members.	In person interview: After my welcome session, I approached her, as she seemed talkative and friendly (she led the welcome session). She said she is happy to meet up in person.	We met in a café for a one hour chat.	Cooperation with other cooperatives and organisations. The strategy and finances of the cooperative Agroecological movement in Barcelona, and the cooperative movement in Spain Challenges the cooperative faces within competitive capitalist market logic

New member, male, young professional	He joined the cooperative at the same time as me.	Email exchange: I approached him during our welcome session, as he seemed talkative and friendly. He said that he is happy to answer some questions via email and provided me with his email address.	He replied instantly with his answers.	Reasons for joining the cooperative Loneliness epidemic in young generation Experiences in working circle The impact the cooperative has already had on his life and way of seeing food Conscious consumption patterns and awareness of sustainable production
Old member, female, retired	She has been part of the cooperative from the beginning.	Email exchange: I approached her during a shift. She said that she is happy to answer some questions via email and provided me with her email address.	She did not reply after my first email, so after a week I gave her a nudge and then she replied with her answers.	Reasons for joining the cooperative and how the cooperative affects the rest of her life The working circle she is part in and how collective decision-making has empowered her Collaborations with other cooperatives and organisations Challenges the cooperative faces
Old member, male, retired	He has been part of the cooperative for three years.	Email exchange: I approached him during a shift. He said that he is happy to answer some questions via email and provided me with his email address.	He replied instantly and said that if I have any further questions he is more than happy to answer them.	Reasons for joining the cooperative and participation in the governance structures How the cooperative has changed his consumption patterns Challenges the cooperative faces Member representation in decision-making processes and lack of diversity in representations

4.2.2 Participant observation

In addition to interviews, I undertook participant observation over five months, whereby I attended the welcome sessions, participated in monthly volunteer shifts and partook in a working circle. This method allowed me to directly observe interpersonal interactions, collective routines and spatial arrangements that embody the cooperatives' organisational ethos and values. I chose

participant observation to examine how diverse economic practices, subjectivities and imaginaries are enacted through everyday practices, a methodological priority consistent with Gibson-Grahams' emphasis on performativity (2006b). This approach enabled the identification of key moments in which values such as cooperation, mutual aid and democratic participation were performed. This method proved particularly useful in capturing what is often missed in interview accounts: non-verbal communication, informal mechanisms, and affective atmosphere that constitutes the lived experience of cooperative membership. I qualitatively coded my field notes looking for SDG 11 and SDG 12 indicators, such as signs of 'cooperation', 'inclusivity' and 'democratic participation'.

4.2.3 Institutional Document Analysis

To complement the insights gained through interviews and participant observation, I conducted a content analysis of 9 institutional documents produced by the cooperative. These include: five monthly newsletters, two welcome session presentations, one working circle strategy document and key website and social media content. The analysis sought to trace how the cooperative constructs its identity, navigates democratic decision-making processes and frames its embeddedness. In summary, whilst interviews provide me with an insight into people's personal experiences in a cooperative, participant observation allows me to observe moments and happenings within the cooperative and through institutional document analysis I gain a valuable insight into how the cooperative presents itself, what they communicate and what their formal communication style is, by analysing welcome session slides, the monthly newsletter and publications by the cooperative. I conducted a content analysis, scanning the documents for SDG 11 and SDG 12 indicators, using qualitative coding to identify key themes such as 'care', 'community solidarity' and 'sustainable production'.

Data collection and analysis table

Method	Information	Completes	Data Analysis
<i>Interviews</i>	I interviewed members of the cooperatives: 1 interviews was held in person 3 interviews were held via email exchange	4 x interviews 1 x employee, female 1 x new members, male 2 x members who	During the in-person interview, I took notes and elaborated on them after the interview. The interview notes and

Method	Information	Completes	Data Analysis
		have been with the cooperative for a few years, female and male	email interviews were then analysed using qualitative coding to identify indicators related to SDG 11 and SDG 12
<i>Participant Observation</i>	Participant observation over five months. I attended the welcome sessions, participated in monthly volunteer shifts and partook in a working circle. After each session or shift, I took notes of observations at home.	2 x welcome session 5 x monthly volunteering sessions 1 x working circle meeting	I qualitatively coded the field notes looking for SDG 11 and SDG 12 indicators, such as signs of 'cooperation', 'inclusivity' and 'democratic participation'.
<i>Analysis of institutional documents</i>	Analysis of website, newsletters, the welcome session presentations and social media content Trace how the cooperative constructs its identity, navigates democratic decision-making processes, frames its embeddedness and negotiates potential tensions between values and market positioning	2 x welcome session presentations 5 x monthly newsletter 1 x working circle strategy document 5 months of website and social media content	I conducted a content analysis. I analysed the documents for SDG 11 and SDG 12 indicators, using qualitative coding to identify key themes such as 'care', 'community solidarity' and 'sustainable production'

4.3 Ethical considerations

All participants were briefed on the study, assured of anonymity and confidentiality and provided with the opportunity to withdraw at any time. Participants were informed of my role as a researcher, oral consent was obtained and consent forms signed. No identifying information is recorded in any of my notes. Field notes, which were taken after each session, are stored securely. I ensure complete anonymity and confidentiality, by never writing any names down, nor describing any relevant, identifying characteristics of the interviewees or people that are in the cooperative. I do not use any information that could identify the cooperative or people, the location is not disclosed, and no comments are made on the people's looks or easily identifiable characteristics. My thesis passed IBEI's ethical clearance process.

4.4 Indicators & observable practices

To critically examine the supermarket cooperatives practices, I conceptualised a model to evaluate their potential set out by the UN Year of Cooperatives. Firstly, I translated SDG 11 and SDG 12 to the Barcelona context, naming SDG 11 *The improvement in community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability* and SDG 12 *The strengthening of sustainable production and consumption patterns within Barcelona's food system*. Then, I identified indicators for SDG 11 and 12, based on information obtained from the UN website on SDGs, ICA and relevant articles (Wanyama, 2014; COPAC, 2018a; COPAC, 2018b; Moxom et al., 2022; UN, 2025a; UN, 2025b). Lastly, I identified observable practices in the supermarket cooperative to measure each indicator as follows: For SDG 11, the first indicator, (1) the facilitation of participatory governance and community engagement, which empowers residents to shape their urban environments, is observed through (1) the degree of engagement and inclusion of members in decision-making processes. The second indicator is (2) fostering a sense of inclusion and community solidarity. Here, the observable practices I will be studying are (2.1) the level of engagement of the cooperative with and in relation to the local community, and (2.2) how cooperative members create a culture of care. The third indicator for SDG 11 is (3) the support of local, inclusive and sustainable economic development, which strengthens community resilience. This indicator I will measure by looking at (3) how the cooperative balances growth with their values.

For SDG 12, the first indicator is (1) cooperatives ensure sustainability along the supply chain by fostering cooperation between producers and consumers, which shortens value chains, improves product traceability and encourages environmentally friendly practices. This indicator is measured by the observable practice (1) how the cooperative prioritises short food supply chains and agroecological production to reduce dependence on industrial agribusiness. The second indicator (2) cooperatives strengthen partnerships between cooperatives to create more inclusive supply chains, is measured by the observable practice (2) how the cooperative strengthens ties with other cooperatives, producers, and solidarity economy networks. The last indicator (3) cooperatives innovate sustainable resource management, by launching consumer awareness and education campaigns is measured by (3) how the cooperative shifts narratives from “cheap and convenient” food to ethical, community-driven food systems through educational campaigns and

participatory events. For both SDGs, I analyse not just what the cooperative does, but also how each topic is being discussed. The rhetoric around a subject, as well as the ways of organising and operating or talking reveals a lot about the values that shape practices. Hence, the reflexivity behind each practice, the ‘discourse’, I will also use as an observable practice to analyse each indicator.

Indicators and observable practices visualised in a table

UN SDG	Barcelona context	Indicators	Observable Practices	
SDG 11 ‘Sustainable cities and communities : Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’	<i>The improvement in Barcelona’s community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability</i>	(1) The facilitation of participatory governance and community engagement, which empowers residents to shape their urban environments	(1) The degree of engagement and inclusion of members in decision-making processes	Discourse
		(2) Fostering a sense of inclusion and community solidarity	(2.1) The level of engagement of the cooperative with and in relation to the local community	
			(2.2) How cooperative members create a culture of care	
		(3) The support of local, inclusive and sustainable economic development, which strengthens community resilience	(3) How the cooperative balances growth with their values	

SDG 12 'Responsible Consumption and Production: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns'	<i>The strengthening of sustainable production and consumption patterns within Barcelona's food system</i>	(1) Cooperatives ensure sustainability along the supply chain by fostering cooperation between producers and consumers	(1) How the cooperative prioritises short food supply chains and agroecological production to reduce dependence on industrial agribusiness
		(2) Cooperatives strengthen partnerships between cooperatives to create more inclusive supply chains	(2) How the cooperative strengthens ties with other cooperatives, producers, and solidarity economy networks
		(3) Cooperatives innovate sustainable resource management, by launching consumer awareness and education campaigns	(3) How the cooperative shifts narratives from "cheap and convenient" food to ethical, community-driven food systems through educational campaigns and participatory events

4.5 Limitations

Throughout the research period and process of writing this thesis, I encountered three main limitations: Time constraints, the language barrier and anonymisation of information. My main limitation relates to the time constraints of the study. My involvement with the cooperative spanned five months, which limited the depth of my research. A longer period of participant observation would have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the cooperatives' dynamics and processes. Additionally, with more time, I would have been able to conduct a greater number of interviews, thereby enriching the data and strengthening the overall analysis. Another limitation I encountered during participant observation was the language barrier. While many cooperative members were willing to communicate with me in Spanish, the primary language used in group discussions and daily interactions was Catalan. As a result, certain nuances and contextual details were inevitably lost during my participant observation.

As an active member of the cooperative I am researching, I recognise that my positionality inevitably shapes the research process. My direct involvement offers valuable insider perspectives and access to lived experiences within the cooperative. However, it also introduces the potential for bias, as my personal investment in the success and values of cooperative models may influence data interpretation and the framing of findings. To address this, I consistently reflect on my beliefs, assumptions, and relationships with participants and critically examine how my positionality informs my analysis. The triangulation of sources, using interviews, participant observation and document analysis, is intended to improve the rigor of the analysis and the overall research findings. Moreover, I have prioritised anonymity and confidentiality, and the respectful representation of all participants. However, the anonymisation of information means that I have had to leave out details, which would have enriched the analysis of the cooperative. I hope that the limitations encountered in this thesis can be addressed by future lines of research.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 SDG 11 ‘Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’

SDG 11 focuses on making communities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. According to the UN “International Year of Cooperatives 2025”, consumer cooperatives significantly support the latter through three main indicators identified: (1) the facilitation of participatory governance and community engagement, which empowers residents to shape their urban environments, (2) fostering a sense of inclusion and community solidarity, and lastly through (3) the support of local, inclusive and sustainable economic development, which strengthens community resilience. In the Barcelona context, SDG 11 translates to *the improvement in Barcelona’s community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability*. Therefore, my observable practices for the SDG 11 indicators are (1) the degree of engagement and inclusion of members in decision-making processes, (2.1) the level of engagement of the cooperative with and in relation to the local community (2.2) how cooperative members create a culture of care and (3) how the cooperative balances growth with their values.

5.1.1 The potential of inclusive governance structures

- *Indicator: The facilitation of participatory governance and community engagement*
- *Observable Practice: The degree of engagement and inclusion of members in decision-making processes*

The supermarket cooperative functions through a structured, yet decentralised governance model comprising the general assembly, governing council, coordinating committee and working circles. While the general assembly is the highest decision-making body where all members participate in shaping policies and major initiatives, the governing council is elected by the general assembly, overseeing administration, legal compliance, financial management, and cooperative staff supervision. The working circles cover communication, finance, IT, governance and community and drive the day-to-day functioning of the cooperative. The coordinating committee serves as a communication bridge between different working circles, ensuring efficiency and cohesion in operations. Whilst the assembly and governing council are held depending on necessity, the working circles are held bi-weekly, and the coordinating committee comes together every month to update each other on the progress of each working circle. Apart from four paid employees, all labour is voluntary, with members contributing three hours monthly.

In the monthly newsletter each working circle gives updates on their actions and in each email there is an option to directly join the working group and email them directly. New members are welcomed into decision-making spaces from the outset. I myself was invited to join a working circle immediately and was encouraged to contribute, regardless of my professional background. This governance system exemplifies what Gibson-Graham (2006b) call a performative economy, whereby shared responsibility and democratic decision-making are enacted on a daily basis. In the working circle meeting, I felt included from the get go, my input was taken seriously, and I felt a strong sense of belonging, demonstrating cognitive proximity (Boschma, 2005) and territorial embeddedness (De Bernardi et al., 2024), whereby local knowledge and values shape economic activity. Members are directly embedded in the cooperatives' operations. However, these ideals exist along structural tensions. Collective organising is time-intensive, often blurring boundaries between labour and leisure. As one member, who's been with the cooperative for three years, noted:

“It is really demanding in terms of time ... So this is a loop that includes and attracts a certain type of member and excludes the rest.”

In practice, members with more time and financial flexibility, such as retirees and child-free professionals, participate mostly, while those with caregiving duties or precarious employment are often absent. This uneven distribution of power and representation reflects how capitalist inequalities infiltrate alternative spaces. The cooperatives’ inclusive model, though aspirational, is limited by broader systems of exclusion, which reflects the dynamics of degeneration (Cheney et al., 2014). Whilst time and labour burdens risk reproducing exclusionary patterns, the cooperative also demonstrates regenerative potential by actively working to expand and improve its governance structures. For example, members can join meetings over the phone, an effort of the cooperative to include a more diverse member body. Hence, the cooperative illustrates the lived tensions and negotiations that define hybrid organisations. What emerges is a complex interplay between regeneration and degeneration. While the cooperative advances SDG 11, by enhancing community inclusivity in decision-making processes and empowering residents to shape their urban environments, it also mirrors the constraints of the capitalist system in which it operates.

5.1.2 Community Engagement: Blurring the lines between co-owner, participant, and consumer

- *Indicator: Fostering a sense of inclusion and community solidarity*
- *Observable Practice: The level of engagement of the cooperative with and in relation to the local community*

What initially surprised me during my research was the centrality of *community* in people’s narratives. Across interviews, informal conversations, welcoming sessions, and volunteer shifts, participants consistently emphasised the sense of community as the primary reason they joined and stayed involved in the cooperative. The emphasis far outweighed any mention of food systems, ethical consumption or sustainability, topics one might assume would dominate discourse within a consumer supermarket cooperative. For example, one woman I regularly volunteered with, a retired member who has been part of the cooperative from the beginning, actively engages in the community working circle. She spoke with genuine passion about the cooperatives’ gatherings, activities and social initiatives. It became evident that, for her and

many others, the cooperative is not just a site of consumption but a place of belonging, a meaningful social space. As the retired member reflected:

“...I would say that somehow it changed my perspective on how it is possible to organise, showing me that there are other ways which are more communitarian, less quick probably but surely more empowering than the classic enterprises.”

Her comment captures what Gibson-Graham (2006b) term “politics of possibility”, the enactment of alternative social and economic realities through everyday performances that reshape how people relate to one another and imagine collective life. This performance is evident in daily interactions. During our working circle meeting, which took place in the supermarket, people shopping would often stop by to greet us, catch up, or even pause their shopping, buy a snack, and join us. These spontaneous exchanges highlight the cooperatives’ territorial embeddedness through its deep integration into the local social fabric and its relational embeddedness by responding to community rhythms (Lomuscio et al., 2024). In many ways, the supermarket feels more like a community center than a grocery store. The cooperative is highly conscious of this role and is actively seeking to deepen its ties to the local community, as a paid member told me in an interview. Plans to expand the cooperatives’ event programming and organising gatherings reflects a deliberate strategy to strengthen social cohesion and shared identity. As Boschma (2005) and Su et al. (2020) suggest, such social proximity fosters community resilience and inclusivity, central components to SDG 11.

What distinguishes this cooperative from a conventional supermarket is not only its emphasis on participation but its structural disruption of capitalist role separation. Here, members are simultaneously consumers, co-owners, and contributors. I witnessed this fluidity of roles firsthand during my first shift: On my first shift, unsure of how to operate the till, a member who had come in to shop, casually leaned over the counter and showed me how to use the till. This small moment revealed a deeper dynamic; the dissolution of rigid roles. The shopper was not just a consumer but also a participant and co-owner, just like me. These interactions blur the distinctions between worker and consumer, collapsing the hierarchical boundaries that typically organise economic activity. In doing so, the cooperative enacts what Judith Butler (1990) describes as performativity, the continuous constitution of identity and structure through repeated

social action. The cooperative is not just governed horizontally, it lives horizontally. As Gibson-Graham (2006b) argue, this performativity creates postcapitalist subjectivities, reshaping how people imagine and engage socially. Therefore, the cooperative does not just address SDG 11, through the strengthening of community inclusivity and resilience, but through its participatory governance and relational culture, these performative practices have the potential to broaden the social imaginary, showing that other ways of relating and organising are not only possible but already unfolding. A longer research period would allow for a more detailed study of how subjectivities are reshaped and individual and collective agency expanded.

5.1.3 Transformation of values: Culture of care

- *Indicator: Fostering a sense of inclusion and community solidarity*
- *Observable Practice: How cooperative members create a culture of care*

During my first shift at the cooperative, I witnessed an older man, who is a member of the cooperative but had not completed his required monthly shifts, attempt to make a purchase. At the till, the system flagged his account in red, indicating that he was not entitled to the member discount. He became visibly upset, raising his voice and questioning the restriction: *‘What, you’re telling me I’m not allowed to get a discount here?’*. The manager intervened and calmly explained that the discount is contingent on members completing their shifts. The man, who appeared agitated, insisted that he had been recovering from an injury and was therefore unable to work, but still expected to retain his member privileges. Eventually, the manager made an exception and allowed him to shop with the discount. Afterwards, they stood outside the store for approximately 25 minutes, during which he talked at length and she listened attentively. Whilst the conversation was in Catalan, and a language barrier existed, it became clear that the conversation had moved beyond policy enforcement into a form of informal social care. He shared personal struggles, and she seemed to take on a role akin to that of a social worker, de-escalating the situation, validating his experience, and providing emotional support.

This moment encapsulated a central tension in the cooperative model: balancing the economic needs of the organisation with its commitment to social care and community wellbeing, highlighting the tensions and potentials of cooperatives as hybrid organisations. The cooperative must function as a business to remain viable, but it also makes space for compassion and flexibility. What was striking was not just the decision to bend the rules, but how this incident

became an enactment of care, a lived expression of values that challenge the rationality of market logic. Through Judith Butler's lens of performativity (1990), extended by Gibson-Graham (2006b), I understand this moment as one in which economic identities and relationships are not fixed but reconstituted through interaction. The manager was not simply enforcing cooperative norms, she was performing an alternative economic relation grounded in attentiveness, solidarity and care. This exemplifies the "politics of possibility" (Gibson-Graham, 2006b); a deliberate departure from capitalocentric structures through repetitive, embodied acts that shape new imaginaries. This moment of tension also illustrates how the cooperative functions as a hybrid organisation. It must sustain itself as a business while continuously negotiating its embeddedness in community life, highlighting that economic action is always socially situated (Granovetter, 1995; Lomuscio et al., 2024). Importantly, these dynamics have implications beyond the store. As one member shared in an interview:

"To begin with, the cooperative has widened my circle of acquaintances and, in some cases, my friends as well. In addition, I think in a more collective way, thinking about the well-being of everyone."

Here, the cooperatives' embedded practices ripple outward, fostering more collective, care-based subjectivities. Subsequently, the cooperative challenges neoliberal boundaries between public and private, offering participatory approaches to welfare and care. This example highlights the importance of social proximity (Boschma, 2005), as the cooperatives' close and trust-based relationships with its members and customers not only support community safety and resilience but act as a buffer against extractive tendencies of neoliberalism. When members don't fulfill their obligations, they are not met with penalties, but with dialogue, embodying what Gibson-Graham (2008) call "postcapitalist politics". Hereby, the cooperative exceeds the functional role of a supermarket. It becomes a site where economic participation doubles as emotional support. Community safety and resilience is cultivated through practices of listening and recognition. Thus, while the cooperative contributes to SDG 11 by fostering a sense of community solidarity and safety, its work goes deeper. It offers a vision of care-based economies where solidarity, not efficiency, is the organising principle. In doing so, it challenges the presumed inevitability of capitalist norms and joins the diverse constellation of practices that Gibson-Graham (2006b; 2008) identify as forming the "iceberg" beneath capitalism's surface.

5.1.4 Inclusive and sustainable development

- *Indicator: Support local, inclusive and sustainable economic development*
- *Observable Practice: How the cooperative balances growth with their values*

Throughout my time at the cooperative, it became evident early on that the cooperative views “inclusive and sustainable development” differently to the United Nations. The United Nations, particularly in its 2025 “International Year of Cooperatives” framework, promotes a vision of “inclusive and sustainable development” rooted in the decoupling of economic development from environmental degradation and social exclusion (IYOC2025, 2025). The underlying assumption is that economic growth can be made sustainable, if managed correctly through technological innovation, improved governance and responsible business practices. However, the cooperative in Barcelona challenges this assumption. Its practices suggest a critique of the notion that economic growth can be both inclusive and sustainable in the way the UN imagines.

While the cooperative does not explicitly adopt the terminology of “degrowth”, its practices, values and structural decisions resonate with post-growth thinking. There is no aspiration to scale indefinitely; instead, it emphasises sufficiency, local embeddedness, and community resilience, values that depart from growth-centric paradigms. Cunico et al. (2022) identify two key traits of degrowth-aligned cooperatives: (1) stabilising once operationally viable; and (2) prioritising local community strength over business expansion. The consumer cooperative I studied exhibits both of these characteristics. While it may not explicitly adopt the language of the degrowth movement, its organisational model, values, and practices align with the broader push for an economy centered on human and ecological well-being rather than profit and scale (Johanisova, 2014). Hence, the cooperative does not want to grow according to the UN, but only wants to grow until it reaches a viable scale that allows it to operate without external funding.

The example highlights an important tension, a rupture, between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up lived experiences. The cooperatives’ actions reveal how universal policy discourses, such as those advanced by the UN, can fail to account for the diversity of regional histories, socio-political contexts, and grassroots innovations. What is promoted as “inclusive and sustainable growth” at the global level may be reinterpreted, and in some cases, outright rejected, by actors on the ground who are living through and responding to the contradictions of

the current system. In this context, the Barcelona cooperative does not just offer an alternative model of economic organisation; it actively challenges the assumptions embedded in international policy discourse. The time constraints of this thesis limit the analysis of the exact mechanisms through which the cooperative challenges top-down approaches. Nevertheless, the consumer supermarket cooperative problematises the compatibility between global institutional discourses and grassroots realities. It repositions cooperatives not as tools for solely delivering Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) handed down from above, but as active sites of critique, resistance, and transformation from below.

5.2 SDG 12 ‘Responsible Consumption and Production: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns’

SDG 12 focuses on achieving responsible consumption and production patterns. The “International Year of Cooperatives 2025” highlights that consumer cooperatives are important actors in achieving responsible consumption and production patterns (SDG 12), due to their ethical and values-based identity. According to the UN (2018) and COPAC (2018b), consumer cooperatives address SDG 12 in three main ways: (1) Cooperatives ensure sustainability along the supply chain by fostering cooperation between producers and consumers, which shortens value chains, improves product traceability and encourages environmentally friendly practices, (2) cooperatives strengthen partnerships between cooperatives to create more inclusive supply chains, and lastly (3) cooperatives innovate sustainable resource management, by launching consumer awareness and education campaigns. In the Barcelona context, SDG 12 translates to *the strengthening of sustainable production and consumption patterns within Barcelona’s food system*. Therefore, my observable practices for the SDG 12 indicators are (1) how the cooperative prioritises short food supply chains and agroecological production to reduce dependence on industrial agribusiness, (2) how the cooperative strengthens ties with other cooperatives, producers, and solidarity economy networks and (3) how the cooperative shifts narratives from “cheap and convenient” food to ethical, community-driven food systems through educational campaigns and participatory events.

5.2.1 Agroecology

- *Indicator: Cooperatives ensure sustainability along the supply chain by fostering cooperation between producers and consumers*
- *Observable Practice: How the cooperative prioritises short food supply chains and agroecological production to reduce dependence on industrial agribusiness*

The cooperatives' sourcing practices, prioritising local and agroecological products from Catalonia and Spain, reflect a conscious effort to build territorially embedded and ecologically resilient food systems. Although discussions during interviews and welcome sessions offered limited insight into the specific mechanisms of producer selection, what emerged clearly was the *why* behind the cooperatives' decisions: a shared commitment to agroecology, regional solidarity, and a rejection of exploitative supply chains. This emphasis on ethical orientation over procedural transparency is itself telling. By sourcing primarily from local producer cooperatives that practice agroecology, a holistic approach integrating ecological farming, cultural traditions and regional food sovereignty (Karavioti, 2023), the supermarket cooperative reflects what Gibson-Graham (2006b) call a "politics of possibility", a rejection of capitalist inevitability in favour of grounded, lived alternatives. It seeks not to solely distribute food, but to reconfigure food systems toward equity, sustainability and local empowerment. This vision is particularly relevant in Barcelona, where food self-sufficiency remains severely constrained. With only enough farmland in the province to feed roughly 10% of the population (DIBA, 2021), and with widespread soil degradation threatening future yields (Rodríguez-Berbel et al., 2022), the cooperatives' commitment to agroecology becomes a performative intervention in the face of a structural ecological crisis.

This shift toward regionalised, sustainable food networks is not framed as a technocratic solution but as an ethical and collective response, as within the cooperatives' discourse, the emphasis is not on short supply chains as a market advantage, but on rebuilding social and ecological relationships through food. As several interviewees suggested, agroecology is not just a farming technique but a political and cultural act. This illustrates how the cooperative enacts relational embeddedness, positioning itself within a web of shared practices, responsibilities, and solidarities that link consumers, producers and land (Lomuscio et al., 2024). According to Gibson-Grahams' (2008) vision of diverse economies, such practices represent a break from capitalocentric logics. Rather than positioning local, ethical sourcing as secondary to

profitability, the cooperative redefines values itself: regional justice and long-term ecological sustainability. This is not about resisting capitalism but about refiguring the terms on which economic activity is understood.

These practices also speak to the regenerative potential of embedded economies. In the face of an ageing agricultural sector and declining rural employment (DIBA, 2021), the cooperatives' preferences for local agroecological producers is a form of regeneration. Instead of compromising its values under market pressure, the cooperative strengthens them through organisational and institutional & geographic proximity, collaborating with like-minded producer cooperatives that share its vision of food sovereignty. This territorial embeddedness is crucial. As De Bernardi et al. (2024) and Lomuscio et al. (2024) argue, territorial embeddedness connects cooperatives to the communities in which they are set, ensuring that their activities are attuned to local needs. Whilst a longer research period might have given me deeper insights into the specific mechanisms behind producer selection, highlighting the time limitations of this research, the cooperatives' sourcing logic, although not methodically articulated, enacts this embeddedness in everyday decision-making. On the one hand, the cooperative ensures sustainability along the supply chain, addressing SDG 12, on the other hand, its procurement strategy is also a site of political and performative resistance to essentialist views of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Through the lens of performativity, the cooperative emerges as an active agent in diversifying economies and reimagining food systems, reframing them as spaces of solidarity, regeneration and possibility.

5.2.2 Solidarity Economy Networks

- *Indicator: Strengthening of partnerships between cooperatives to create more inclusive supply chains*
- *Observable Practice: How the cooperative strengthens ties with other cooperatives, producers, and solidarity economy networks*

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the difficulty of sustaining the cooperative within a capitalist food system dominated by large supermarket chains. As one employee explained:

“It is very difficult to compete with the opening hours, prices and variety of products of the large chains. In order for people to understand the meaning of the cooperative and why

some foods are more expensive (everything that has to do with animals, for example, since the conditions in which they are kept and how they are cared for, has a very different price than that of the macro-farms) they have to come in and be willing to listen, and it is not always easy. We are also very used to seeing all the fruits and vegetables the same and shiny but this is not the case naturally, it is a consequence, among other things, of the food waste that occurs in the fields for aesthetic reasons. As we said, changing people's habits is always difficult.”

This reflection illustrates the core tension at the heart of the cooperatives’ everyday practices: While it aspires to cultivate ethical consumption and solidarity-based relationships, it must simultaneously navigate market norms that reward convenience, uniformity and low prices. Here, the degeneration thesis (Cheney et al., 2014) becomes evident as a structural pressure that complicates the cooperatives’ capacity to maintain its cooperative ethos. Rather than resisting these pressures in isolation, the cooperative has actively fostered relational embeddedness, by joining a broader network of aligned cooperatives across Spain. As described by the paid employee, this collaboration includes a shared visual identity and mutual support mechanisms, such as resource sharing, collective buying and coordinated communication. These actions exemplify what Lomuscio et al. (2024) term organisational proximity; collaboration and mutual reinforcement among similarly structured entities. Crucially, this intercooperation does more than offer strategic resilience: It enacts what Gibson-Graham (2006b) conceptualise as performative diverse economies, challenging essentialist views of capitalism. By coordinating with other cooperatives rather than competing, the supermarket enacts a post-capitalist ethic of mutuality, refusing the scarcity-driven logic of zero-sum exchange. In this way, solidarity becomes not just a value but a performative practice; a way of *doing* economy that actively constitutes an alternative to essentialist capitalocentric norms. This is further reflected in the internal practices of the cooperative, as members emphasised the importance of learning not only within their organisation but through connections with other cooperatives, NGOs, and associations. As the member, who's been part of the cooperative from the beginning, states:

“Most members learn a lot of things from other members of the cooperative and from the information that the cooperative distributes internally, but also from the connections and

collaborations that the cooperative has with other cooperatives and organisations (NGOs, associations, foundations etc).”

Such relational embeddedness fosters new subjectivities through participatory practices, as articulated by Filippi et al. (2011), Su et al. (2020), Lomuscio et al. (2024) and De Bernardi et al., (2024). These practices align with what the regeneration thesis frames as a counterweight to degeneration; where solidarity networks and shared values renew a cooperative ethos in the face of market pressures. These networks also generate practical mutual benefits. Monthly newsletters inform members of cross-cooperative discounts, such as waived membership fees at a local energy cooperative or special offers at a cooperative-run bistro, thus reinforcing both community cohesion and economic interdependence. The benefits cannot be further discussed, due to anonymisation. However, this is a material manifestation of territorial embeddedness (Lomuscio et al., 2024): The cooperatives’ rootedness in a local economic ecosystem built on trust and reciprocity.

In addition, these findings reflect how the cooperative challenges the very assumptions underpinning capitalist competition. Rather than viewing other cooperatives as market rivals, this cooperative positions itself as part of a plural economic landscape, echoing Gibson-Grahams’ (2006b; 2008) “iceberg” metaphor, where a broad range of economic practices exists beneath the visible tip of capitalism. The cooperative thus becomes not just a vehicle for achieving SDG 12’s sustainable production and consumption goals, through strengthening partnerships between cooperatives, but becomes a site of performative transformation, nurturing mutual learning and support and thereby challenging essentialist capitalist market logic. In sum, the cooperatives’ approach to survival is not framed solely through efficiency or competition, but through embeddedness. Organisational proximity supports the cooperative in resisting capitalist absorption (degeneration) and renewing its founding principles (regeneration), ultimately illustrating how embedded and performative practices enable the cooperative to navigate, negotiate and reshape the capitalist structure within which it operates.

5.2.3 The Power of Education

- *Indicator: Cooperatives innovate sustainable resource management, by launching consumer awareness and education campaigns*
- *Observable Practice: How the cooperative shifts narratives from “cheap and convenient” food to ethical, community-driven food systems through educational campaigns and participatory events*

One of the most significant contributions of the supermarket cooperative lies in its role as an active site of nurturing diverse economic practices, not only through its sourcing and distribution practices, but through its embedded educational ethos. Rather than functioning solely as a point of sale, the cooperative cultivates what Gibson-Graham (2006b) call a “politics of possibility”, where daily economic practices enact and perform alternative futures. This performativity is most visible in how the cooperative fosters agroecological awareness. Products are not simply consumed, they are contextualised² through detailed information about their origins, environmental impact and production methods, transforming shopping into an interactive and reflective experience. As one member explained:

“There are people who come to us because the food is “healthier” or tastier. But everyone, sooner or later, starts to notice things like where each product comes from, what material it is packaged with... and they start to become interested in how it was made. So, as a result of coming, many people stop thinking only about the benefit that the cooperative brings to them (which is very legitimate) and start thinking also about the good that it does to the environment and the surroundings.”

This shift from individual preference to collective conscious consumption is a core aspect of what Gibson-Graham (2006a) identify as performative subject formation, where everyday actions and interactions within the cooperative setting cultivate post-capitalist identities grounded in care, awareness, and interdependence. The cooperatives’ design reinforces this mission, through elements in the shop that make it a convivial³ space. Due to the anonymisation of the research, I cannot discuss the specific elements in the space, limiting the depth of the analysis. However, without discussing the specific reasoning, the convivial space reflects territorial embeddedness (the cooperatives’ rootedness in local practices and values) through institutional and geographic proximity to the community, as the cooperative fosters a shared

² In order to maintain anonymity of the cooperative, I am not offering more information.

³ In order to maintain anonymity of the cooperative, I am not offering more information.

normative framework around food, sustainability, and community (De Bernardi et al., 2024). This embeddedness aligns closely with the regeneration thesis, which states that cooperatives can resist the normalising pressures of capitalist logic by reassessing their core principles. In an environment where economic transactions are typically separate from ethical reflection, the cooperatives' insistence on transparency, traceability and shared learning stands as a deliberate and regenerative act. Moreover, by encouraging critical reflection on food systems, the cooperative denaturalises the dominant narrative of "cheap and convenient" food and challenges essentialist views on capitalist food consumption. Instead, it repositions consumption as a relational and ethical act; a move that mirrors Gibson-Grahams' (2006b; 2008) "iceberg metaphor" by illustrating the large, hidden body of diverse economic relations that underpin food production and distribution.

In choosing where to source, how to communicate, and what to make visible, the cooperative becomes a site where social and environmental transformation is enacted through sustained embodied practices, such as labelling and storytelling. The cooperative strengthens SDG 12 through consumer awareness and education campaigns, by cultivating institutional and geographic proximity, enabling members to understand and internalise agroecological principles. Ultimately, the cooperative is both a supermarket and a grassroot classroom. It challenges the boundaries between economy, education and activism and in doing so, redefines what a supermarket can be.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated how a consumer supermarket cooperative in Barcelona embodies a deeply embedded space in the community. By applying the framework of territorial and relational embeddedness across cognitive, social, organisational and institutional & geographic proximity, I was able to unpack how the cooperative is rooted in its local context. This embeddedness is cognitive in its embrace of local knowledge and participatory governance, social in its cultivation of solidarity, care and mutual aid, organisational in its networks with fellow cooperatives and institutional & geographic in its local commitment to the education of shared values and agroecology. Together these proximities enable the cooperative to foster inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability, while advancing sustainable consumption and

production practices in Barcelona, key pillars of SDG 11: *Sustainable Cities and Communities*, and SDG 12: *Responsible Consumption and Production*. My plausibility probe case study, combining participant observation, interviews and institutional document analysis, revealed how these practices actively reconfigure peoples' subjectivities and challenge capitalist norms.

To address the first research question: *How does the consumer cooperatives improve community inclusivity, resilience, safety and sustainability in Barcelona?*, the cooperative does so through its cognitive and social proximity to the community. Cognitive through the engagement and inclusion of members in decision-making processes and embrace of local knowledge and participatory governance and social in its engagement with the local community and the creation of a culture of care, particularly through the cultivation of solidarity and mutual aid. My analysis affirms that while democratic inclusion and horizontal governance are sources of strength, they also entail trade-offs, particularly in terms of time, access and representation. These frictions do not signify failure but rather reflect the reality of nurturing diverse economic practices within capitalist constraints, which I highlighted through the degeneration and regeneration theses. Beyond the alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 11, the cooperative enacts what Gibson-Graham (2006a) call a diverse economy, where alternatives to capitalism are lived. In doing so, the cooperative problematises the alignment between top-down global policy frameworks and bottom-up lived experiences, exemplified in divergent views on "inclusive and sustainable development". While SDG 11 remains an important benchmark, this cooperative challenges the embedded growth logic and repositions itself as a critical agent of systemic transformation rather than solely an instrument of institutional goals.

In response to the second research question: *How does the consumer cooperative strengthen sustainable production and consumption patterns within Barcelona's food system?*, the cooperative does so through its organisational and institutional & geographic proximity to the community. Organisational through its strong ties with other cooperatives, producers, and solidarity economy networks and institutional & geographical in its local commitment to the education of shared values and agroecology, through prominent educational campaigns and participatory events. The cooperative performs a "politics of possibility", embodying economic relations grounded in solidarity rather than competition. Moreover, the case of this consumer

cooperative underscores the performative nature of economic life, challenging essentialist views on capitalism. The cooperative is not simply addressing Sustainable Development Goal 12, it is embodying an alternative way of organising, relating, distributing and consuming.

The methodology of a plausibility probe case study has allowed me to analyse the structures and practices in one cooperative, which enabled me to address broader mechanisms connected to cooperatives. I am fully aware of the scope and limitations of this thesis, such as the reduction of descriptive elements due to anonymisation, language barriers and time constraints, and hope that these gaps can be filled by future research. Future lines of research need to further explore the underlying structures affecting the connection between cooperatives and the SDGs, as well as investigate the compatibility between global institutional discourses and grassroots realities. This Barcelona-based consumer cooperative reframes cooperatives not just as delivering pre-defined development outcomes, but as autonomous spaces for nurturing diverse economies. In this light, the cooperative does more than fit into the Sustainable Development Goals; it expands what sustainable development can mean. The future it envisions is already in motion through everyday acts of sharing, organising and educating. It is within these messy, relational practices that diverse economic practices and “politics of possibilities” take shape as lived alternatives grounded in care, compromise and community.

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