ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Technological incubators of popular cooperatives: reality of the incubation of solidarity economy enterprises with the participation of users of mental health services

Incubadoras tecnológicas de cooperativas populares: realidade da incubação de empreendimentos econômicos solidários com participação de usuários de serviços de saúde mental

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ABSTRACT: Technological incubators of popular cooperatives (ITCP - Incubadoras Tecnológicas de Cooperativas Populares) are organizations that are linked to universities and have an important role in the development of Solidarity Economy. With the rise of psychosocial rehabilitation, solidarity economy enterprises (Empreendimentos Econômicos Solidários - EES) became an alternative for mental health service users to be socially included. This study aimed at investigating which ITCPs are incubating EES with the participation of those users, at characterizing such ventures, and at identifying the main demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities that were found in the incubation process of such enterprises. It is a qualitative study that had 4 professionals in charge of the incubation of the EES linked to 3 ITCPs. The results pointed out that the demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities mainly relate to exercising self-management; production processes; interference from EES members' subjectivities in the collective work and to support initiatives and partnerships. The interventions from the incubation technicians were found to be essential to solve problems and to make the most of the facilities to achieve the users' psychosocial rehabilitation.

KEYWORDS: Rehabilitation; Work/economy; Mental health.

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RESUMO: As Incubadoras Tecnológicas de Cooperativas Populares (ITCPs) são organizações vinculadas às universidades que têm papel importante no desenvolvimento da Economia Solidária. Com o surgimento da reabilitação psicossocial, os empreendimentos econômicos solidários (EES) tornaram-se uma alternativa de inserção social pelo trabalho para usuários de serviços de saúde mental. A presente pesquisa objetivou investigar quais ITCPs estão incubando EES que contam com a participação destes usuários, caracterizar esses empreendimentos e identificar as principais demandas, desafios, dificuldades e oportunidades encontradas no processo de incubação de tais empreendimentos. Trata-se de estudo qualitativo que teve participação de 4 profissionais responsáveis pela incubação dos EES vinculados a 3 ITCPs. Os resultados apontaram que as demandas, os desafios, as dificuldades e as oportunidades relacionam-se principalmente com: o exercício da autogestão; os processos de produção; a interferência das subjetividades dos participantes dos EES no trabalho coletivo e aos apoios e parcerias. As intervenções dos técnicos de incubação se mostraram essenciais para a possível resolubilidade das dificuldades e aproveitamento das facilidades para efetivar a reabilitação psicossocial dos usuários.

DESCRITORES: Reabilitação; Trabalho/economia; Saúde mental.

This article originates from undergraduate research.

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INTRODUCTION

Technological incubators of popular cooperatives (ITCPs) are organizations that are linked to universities and use their resources and knowledge in training, qualifying, and advising workers in the development of self-managed enterprises. They were originated due to the increasing demand from workers for initiatives of that sort[1,2]. In that sense, in the mid-1990's, the program of the Technological incubator of popular cooperatives was started by Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - that institution is a pioneer in that path, and it has sparked many other University Incubators at the national level[3].

The efforts from those university incubators reach several social players and many dimensions. The most highlighted initiatives are the ones related to the incubation of enterprises, to the strengthening of solidarity economy movement (through the construction of networks and fora at several levels of civil society and the government), to the increased political representativeness, and to locally and regionally-based sustainable development[4].

The ITCPs are highlighted to be committed - on top of extension - to teaching and research activities, which are fundamental in order to prepare staff to operate in their own ventures or in support entities to solidarity economy[5].

The cooperatives incubated by the ITCPs are based on the principles of solidarity economy, whose characteristics are:

> collective ownership of means of production by people using them; democratic management of the company either through direct participation (when the number of member is not excessive) or through representation; sharing of net profits among members pursuant to criteria approved in discussions and negotiations involving all; destination of annual exceeding amounts (referred to as "remainders") also through criteria agreed to by all members (p.13)[6].

Although it operates in a logic which is countercapitalist and disseminates a more humane and altruistic production model, sometimes practicing solidarity economy becomes hard - even unfeasible, under such circumstances.

Considering the possible difficulties cooperatives may face, incubators act as an important support tool, by seeking ways and strategies to overcome their main challenges. In order to do so, ITCPs are committed to providing training to the population, especially to those unemployed or under poor living conditions, for example, by including cooperativism and the professional field chosen[7].

In the Brazilian scenario, ITCPs are organized in networks, in order to further improve solidarity economy in the country. They are the University Network of Technological Incubators of Popular Cooperatives (a network of ITCPs) and Unitrabalho.

There are several incubation challenges. The problems the population has, the resources available to start incubation processes, and the specific demands of each enterprise are all different. Towards that point, the challenges in solidarity economy enterprises (EES) with the participation from mental health service users (MHSU) also seek the effective initiatives incubators can provide. The union between that population and the solidarity economy models is recent, and it deserves proper attention so actions are effective[8].

The redefinitions of knowledge and actions in the mental health field that arose from the process of psychiatric reforms allowed the rise of a new field of study, reflection, and practice within that topic: psychosocial rehabilitation[9], which assumes individuals exercise their citizenship and establishes contractuality at three levels in their lives, one of which being work[10]. Therefore, the Brazilian psychiatric reform movement, by adopting psychosocial rehabilitation as a model, states the importance of discussing work as a right and as guiding the lives of those subjects[11].

In that sense, EES may serve as psychosocial rehabilitation devices, as the inclusion they provide causes MHSU to not seeing or recognizing themselves as people living with certain disorders, but rather as workers who have an opportunity to develop their social potential, by taking over responsibilities, establishing relationships, creating bonds with the team and with other workers. That is due to the several implications that arise from being part of a group that generates income: arrive at the enterprise location, managing money and sales, taking part in meetings, taking decisions, calculating profits, and sharing them[12].

Despite their being devices for social inclusion of their users, the work conducted at the EES which has the participation of MHSU do not only involve advantages and benefits, but rather difficulties which are specific to each enterprise and group of people composing it.

Considering what is exposed and that ITCPs can significantly contribute to creating, developing, and consolidating EES formed by MHSU, this study aimed at:

- Identifying which ITCPs in the Network of ITCPs are incubating EES with the participation of MHSU, and characterizing these enterprises;

- Identifying the main demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities found in the by ITCP teams in the process of incubating such enterprises.

METHODOLOGY

This is a study with a qualitative approach which used three forms to collect data.

Form 1 included personal and professional aspects of research subjects such as age, gender, education level, profession, and length of experience in incubation of EES.

Form 2 sought to identify and characterize the EES with the participation of MHSU from a standpoint of their groups' length of existence, their composition (if only formed by MHSU or by mixed groups), of their origins (either from mental health services or not), their dimension (number of people), developed activities, among others.

Form 3 aimed at investigating the main demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities are found by the EES with the participation of MHSU. The questionnaire composed semi-structured questions.

Subjects

Four professionals from incubators in charge of the incubation process of EES with the participation of MHSU took part in the study. Those four professionals belong to the following incubators: INCOOP/UFSCar (a Regional Incubator of Popular Cooperatives that preceded the Multi-Disciplinary Center for Studies, Training, and Intervention in Solidarity Economy – NuMI-EcoSol/UFSCar) ITCP-FGV e ITCP-UFRGS. Two subjects belonged to INCOOP/UFSCar.

Data collection

Before the research started to be developed, its project was sent to the Human Being Research Ethics Committee, and it was approved under protocol no. 0231.0.135.000-11. Only after its approval was the collection of data started, on January 2012. It was finished a month later.

The ITCPs were identified through a list with all ITCPs composing the network available on the network website at the time. ITCPs were contacted through their websites, whose addresses were found through search engines. Besides those websites, the ITCPs which were initially contacted provided contact information for other ITCPs. In the beginning, all incubators in the Network of ITCPs were contacted by phone. Later, the incubators who could not be reached by phone were sent e-mail messages.

44 ITCPs were identified in total. Among those, 24 contacts were made by phone and 12 by e-mail; the remaining ones could not be reached by either of the two methods.

Through those contacts, the number of incubators that have EES with the participation of MHSU were found to be nine. Out of those, only eight could be reached. Through those, nine professionals were identified to be responsible for the incubation of the related EES, and two of those belong to the same incubator, despite working at two different EES with the participation of MHSU. Among those nine professionals, only four completed their forms, signed their consent forms (*termo de consentimento livre e esclarecido*), and sent them by e-mail to the researchers. The remaining five have not engaged in correspondence.

Therefore, the final number was four subjects, who were linked to three ITCPs.

Analysis of data

The data collected through forms 1 and 2 were analyzed in a descriptive fashion, and the content of answers from form 3 was submitted to Thematic Analysis[13].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data from the forms, it was possible to identify three categories, and four subcategories were found in the third one. They are:

- Characterization of the study subjects;
- Identification and characterization of the EES with the participation of MHSU;
- Identification of the main demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities of the EES with the participation of MHSU:
  - Exercising self-management;
  - Production processes;

- The interference from subjects' subjectivities in the EES in the collective work;
- Support and partnerships.

Characterization of the study subjects

According to Table 1, subjects are equally distributed regarding their genders and marital statuses. Three of them have the same workloads and a differentiated situation regarding their profession, their professional background, and their length of work at the incubator.

The professions mentioned by the subjects regarding incubation responsibilities are possibly observed to relate to distinct identifications and only one of the subjects mention a different profession: federal civil servant. Those data reflect the current situation most ITCPs, whose teams comprise professors, few clerical workers, undergraduate and graduate students, and incubation coordinators and technicians who were hired with funds from intervention and research projects listed on procurement process terms and conditions.

If on one side hiring incubation technicians is beneficial, as it enables constant advising to the EES incubated by the ITCPs, on the other, their week contracts, which are always determined by the execution time of each project, hinders the continuity of ITCP actions.

In regards to professional training, the subjects are distinguished trough their various undergraduate courses (and graduate fields, in the case of two of them who attended graduate school).

In regards to their length of work at their current ITCPs, results are very diversified. There is a gap of 11 years and 6 months between the subjects with the longest and the shortest lengths of work. On the subjects' weekly workloads, only one works 20 hours a week. All the others have the same workloads.

Taking part in meetings, management processes, and community events were the actions reported by more than one subject, as shown in Table 2. Participation in fora and in events on solidarity economy and ITCPs are also duties of the ones responsible for the incubation process. They are important for exchanging knowledge, establishing partnerships, discussing problems.

Table 1 - Characterization of the subjects

Subjects/Personal data	Subject 1	Subject 2	Subject 3	Subject 4
Age	23	27	30	51
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
Marital Status	Single	Single	Married	Married
Profession	Executive coordinator at the ITCP.	Technical coordinator of projects in Solidarity Economy	Incubation technique	Federal Civil Servant
Professional Training	Nursing Degree in 2011.	Biological Sciences Degree in 2008.	Chemical Engineering Degree in 2005, Master's (Program: Petroleum Sciences and Engineering, Concentration Area: Exploitation, finished in 2008).	Teaching-licensed History and Geography undergraduate degree, Master's in Geography/Territory, finished in 2011.
Length of work at current incubator	6 months	2 years and 5 months	1 year and 5 months	12 years
Weekly workload	20 hours	40 hours	40 hours	40 hours

Table 2 - Activities developed

Subject/ Activities	**Activities one performs at their incubator**	**Activities that are directly related to the EES with the participation of MHSU**
Subject 1	Participation in incubator meetings, drafting of reports, participation in the Municipal Forum of Solidarity Economy, general incubator tasks (replying to e-mails, solving problems), organization of incubator events	planning of activities in the enterprise, participation in meetings, training in solidarity economy and related topics, performing tasks related to the enterprise along with its members.
Subject 2	Technical coordination involving: planning and holding meetings, coordinating the work of scholarship holders, representation in general activities; Operation and financial management of projects; Drafting reports for funding agencies from time to time; Participating in the Municipal Solidarity Economy Forum; Supporting the Community Bank; Negotiating and keeping partnerships with social spaces of the municipality; Participating in general weekly meetings; Mobilizing the community towards the creation of an EES for food production in the territory.	Supervision of the Vegetable Garden Group (*Grupo Horta*), which consists of: Participation during the meetings with all group members; Motivating members in order to prevent them from quitting the project, and managing conflicts which arise in the everyday relationships among members; Training members to manage the Vegetable Garden by themselves; Technical training for the production of organic vegetables; Identifying territory inhabitants who wish to take part in the Group; Negotiating with the coordination of Youth Center for maintaining the partnership and for their donating the grounds to plant the Vegetable Garden; Identifying and striving to keep scholarship holders in the team.
Subject 3	incubation of enterprises in the field of cleaning products and solid waste.	Incubation of EES of cleaning products
Subject 4	Management; Incubation of EES/Trainer of trainers/Coordination of an Area.	Supervision of incubation activities; Advising in the scope of GerAÇÃO-POA (public agency that coordinates the activities for members), Creation of the Association of Mental Health Service Users; Participation in fora related to the topic.

Subjects are observed to strive to get the EES to reach self-management.

A singular element is also listed, the personal efforts of professionals, which are demonstrated through the attempt to motivate members in order to prevent them from quitting the project, to manage conflicts which arise in the everyday relationships among members, and in the attempt to identify and engage scholarship holders in the team.

Identification and characterization of the EES with the participation of MHSU

Table 3 points towards interesting information - only one enterprise solely comprises MHSU, the other EES comprise mixed groups; that is, users and people in different conditions.

Table 3 - Characterization of the EES with the participation of MHSU

Characteristics/ITCPs	INCOOP/UFSCar		ITCP-FGV	ITCP-UFRGS
Names of the EES with the participation of MHSU	Recriart	Community Vegetable Garden in the Youth Center (*Horta Comunitária do Centro da Juventude*)	Limpet Valongo	GerAÇÃO/POA
Number of subjects in the EES	15	05	12	34
Number of mental health service users in the EES	15	01	02	04
Origin of users	Psychosocial Care Center (*CAPS - Centro de Atenção Psicossocial*)	Family Health Care Unit (*USF - Unidade de Saúde da Família*)	Psychosocial Care Center (*CAPS - Centro de Atenção Psicossocial*)	Psychosocial Care Center (CAPS - Centro de Atenção Psicossocial), outpatient wards, and primary health care (*USF* and *Unidade Básica de Saúde* - Basic Health Care Unit).
Working hours of the EES	10 hours weekly	9 hours daily	20 hours weekly	50 hours weekly
Activities performed	Production of recycled paper, which is used to make handmade products; selling of such products.	Production of organic vegetables for consumption from members and their families.	Production of brooms made of pet bottles	Production of recycled paper, candles, and screen printing.
Other professionals operating in the enterprise besides the incubation technician	4 nursing orderlies, 1 occupational therapist, 1 psychologist, and 1 professor from the Nursing Department of the University.	There are no other professional.	There are no other professionals.	Professionals linked to the field of arts and design. Other professionals may operate, as per the demand
Length of existence	6 years	2 years and 8 months	7 years	10 years
Monthly average value of withdrawals	50 *reais*	There are not money withdrawals	150 *reais*	30 *reais*

To Dakuzaku[14], the work cooperatives that have "special populations" (p.252)[14] should not be restricted to those populations, as living with people under other conditions promotes social inclusion. In that sense, the mixed cooperatives seem very positive, as they allow for exchange of knowledge, skills, and destruction of stigmas in the daily lives of EES.

In regards to the withdrawals, those were observed not to exist in the Community Vegetable Garden. As pointed out in the Table, they do not exist. Vegetables are produced in a public lot where their trade is not authorized. They are destined to be consumed by members themselves and their families.

It is important to say that withdrawals have very small values, and the highest of them is found to be much inferior to minimum age, which renders the inclusion of workers incomplete from an economic standpoint, as the income they receive from that activity is not enough for them to support themselves. Regarding that aspect, the work by Tagliaferro[12] questions whether enterprises that generate low income can be considered work or any activities which occupy a worker's idle time.

It is necessary to discuss that aspect and reflect on strategies to deal with that problem, as one of the main risks from those initiatives that generate no income is them being seen as therapeutic workshops or mere entertainment spaces.

Identification of the main demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities of the EES with the participation of MHSU

Form 3 directly dealt with the identification of the main demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities of the EES.

The Thematic Analysis that was applied to the form allowed identifying four subcategories. Only two of them will be shown and discussed in this article.

Exercising self-management

Self-management is an exercise involving skills of both EES members and incubation technicians and/or other professionals, leading to collective take part in activities involving: showing one's opinion before the group, accepting and understanding other opinions, sufficiently understanding the EES, its proposal, and demands. Those are social skills that need to be learned many times.

On the exercise of self-management, the answers from the subjects showed challenges and possibilities regarding the participation of users in the EES.

Such challenges are related to the increased involvement and participation of users in management actions; that is, one of the requirements that were shown in the definition of self-management that was previously described for that practice at the EES. The account below shows how little users are involved in management actions.

> *"Neither of those two [member-users of the EES] managed to get involved in the management activities that members were given so far" (P3).*

One of the subjects also pointed out who difficult it was for users to take over management activities, as shown in the testimony below.

> *"The proposal is that users take an active position in the management and organization of production, but they need help many times" (P4).*

The users' lack of engagement in management activities and their need for help in the execution of self-management actions that were noticed by the subjects shows how difficult it is for the group to advance in that process, which is an important principle of solidarity economy.

In the study by Tagliaferro[12], the same difficulty was showed by team member who deal with CAPS users in an EES. The author points out that certain urgent decisions were taken by the team and taken to the group afterwards.

Therefore, the users' participation in the self-management process is noted to be below the recommended by the premise of solidarity economy.

Another subject points out self-management as a challenge, linking it to the production issue:

> *"Reaching a production management level that enables constant quality production throughout the year, having vegetables to offer every day" (P2).*

Data in the forms also pointed out the existence of actions initially thought of by the incubation technicians, who aimed to foster self-management in the EES. Some actions or strategies promoted improvements for related demands; others, in turn, were not found to have as much efficiency. The possible reasons mentioned point towards the lack of continuity for those actions, the lack of communication among the team, and also regarding the incubation team's posture and way of dealing with things:

> *"The attempt for self-management is sometimes strengthened and sometimes weakened. The team does not have a standard posture and way to deal with the team, and that makes the incubation more fragile. I believe the clearest example is the self-management of the group - although there are strategies, there are times self-management is left aside" (P1).*

That account shows that there may be difficulties related to the members and also to the team and its organization.

The possible difficulties of the team regarding their performance in the EES may originate from the mislead or incomplete understanding of psychosocial rehabilitation and work under the premises of solidarity economy. Not always are the concepts of autonomy and self-management clear for the team[14]. Regarding members' difficulties, Alcântara[15], points towards aspects that deserve attention. The low or inexistent education which is common to those individuals significantly limit their growth and engagement. Lack of skills for mathematic reasoning and trouble expressing oneself orally are described by the authors as characteristics of users who, for those reasons, refrain from giving opinions or expressing themselves before their work groups. Those attributes are held to be important for a management process, for example.

Production processes

In solidarity economy, the relationship between self-management and production causes modes of production to also be governed by collective participation, and, unlike the hegemonic model, solidarity economy has, as one of its characteristics, collective ownership of modes of production by the individuals who compose the EES[6].

Horizontal power, which is intrinsic to the self-management principle and originates from collective ownership of the capital, renders all members responsible for their production practices; that is, their working pace, production quality, flexibility in the flow of orders. Those are all aspects which were reported by the study subjects.

The study subjects found out members are somewhat reluctant whenever production needs to be raised.

> *"The sudden production increase as a result from additional orders, which implies a sudden increase in the workload, is not always well received by the members" (P1)*

The schedules and the pace of work, despite being flexible and collectively agreed to, may trigger pressure, which may generate suffering in the workers, as shown in the study by Barfknecht et al.[16].

Members possibly feel a more intense pressure when they need to increase production because of an order, for example.

The members indicated increase in productivity as one of the challenges of EES with the participation of mental health users, as shown in the testimony below.

> *"Increasing productivity in order to meet big orders that are arriving" (P3)*

Regarding the products, two demands appeared. The first one relates to quality, and it is also mentioned as a challenge.

> *"Improving the product quality in order to keep sales" (P3).*

The second one regards to the creation of new products and designs, and it was reported by one of the subjects as a need.

> *"We need training and the creation of new products with open doors to the market" (P4).*

When work is an end rather than a means, the product quality, as well as the creativity to create such products must be properly valued by members. As pointed out by Alcantara[15], the quality of a product requires attention, as that factor in a competitive market may result in better sales - or in more new contracts, in the case of services - and income.

Users' refusal to rotate positions is also pointed out by one of the subjects as a difficulty. It shows how difficult it is for the users to take over the several stages of the production process, as shown in the testimony below:

> *"The main difficulty is related to production. The group demands all members know how to perform in all broom production steps so that the group is capable of organizing itself whenever there are "gaps" - for example, when somebody misses work or when a problem generates a bottleneck. Such procedure also allows the users to do different things. Despite everybody knowing all stages, mental health service users tend to dedicate to a single task, and they have trouble taking over different tasks" (P3).*

The same subject talks about the workshop as a strategy to deal with those difficulties.

> *"We conducted a workshop on rotation of tasks, explaining the production path step by step. In each step we elicited the main difficulties, their relationship with the previous step, and what needed to be observed in order to ensure the product quality. Thus, the quality issue was not only mentioned in regards to the finishing stage, but rather to the whole process. Everybody could think together and talk about the expected difficulties and quality" (P3).*

That was a strategy that was verified to be related to two demands shown in the EES: the need for rotating tasks members developed and the quality of production.

The technicians and/or professionals who operate in the EES as user-members progressively realize the need for incorporating new aspects in their routines, regarding market aspects, production quality, and establishment of partnerships, for example. On the other hand, these professionals face the responsibility of providing autonomy to the members instead of holding the knowledge to themselves and establishing a vertical relationship with them[14].

Leite et al.[17] points towards the need for establishing a horizontal relationship among the members and professionals in the EES, and simultaneously getting the latter's attention regarding management and production matters. In order to do that, the authors suggest those issues be taught in practice through sectorial workshops, in which production and selling experiences, for example, are made possible.

An EES with the participation of mental health users who need to be trained for production may have such need in

a constant or permanent way, and they may even need help to deal with simpler work-related issues, such as frequency, punctuality, rules, and other important aspects[18].

Despite the problems involved, the EES also had some factors of ease, as shown in the testimonies below:

> *"The huge food market (the whole population), the increased demand for organic produce; the fact that the production technology is simple" (P2)*

> *"Easy for the members to move around, external recognition of their work, the great number of orders, adherence to the activities in EES" (P1)*

Hence, the production technologies, the relationship between supply and demand, the transportation of the members, and the external recognition of their work are some of the important aspects which guide or improve the success of EES.

Progress is also perceived, as verified in the accounts below.

> *"There is collective participation regarding proposals for overcoming our challenges. That is why results are achieved, such as a more optimized organization of production, higher productivity (...)" (P3).*

> *"I could notice those advances ever since I joined EES, four years ago, and how they influence the quality of products, the organization, solidarity economy values, space for trade" (P1).*

The study by Tagliaferro[12] shows that advances in production can be perceived throughout time by the professionals who supervise the EES with the participation of mental health users. These advances are related to the increased interest in learning how to make new products and performing tasks. Creativity and coordination are also enhanced, thus improving the product quality.

CONCLUSIONS

The results pointed out that the demands, challenges, difficulties, and opportunities relate to exercising self-management, production processes, interference from EES members' subjectivities in the collective work, and to support initiatives and partnerships.

Self-management was clearly established as one of these challenges. Such solidarity economy principle requires postures and skills that were not available in all mental health service users who take part in the surveyed EES. It also requires support from the incubation team, which needs to be structured and organized to deal with this demand.

The study showed the posture of incubation technicians and teams, as well as the management of the adaptation pace for each member as being essential to solve problems and to make the most of the facilities to achieve the users' psychosocial rehabilitation.

The results produced in this study are expected to contribute to the process of incubation of EES with MHSU, and to trigger further research on the action of ITCPs on this population.

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