

Expanded abstract

Conceptualizing integral cooperatives: an exploratory study

Objectives

In the Iberian context, the proliferation of *integral cooperatives* has generated a diversity of interpretations, ranging from radical visions that see them as tools for social transformation to more conventional readings that treat them as multisectoral market entities. The paper tests the hypothesis that the plurality of definitions does not reflect an *essentially contested concept*—an enduring ideological dispute over a single core meaning— but instead results from an unfinished process of conceptual formation typical of emerging social phenomena. The objective is to determine whether a set of shared attributes can sustain a minimal, operational concept and whether the observed heterogeneity reflects consistent organizational patterns. The paper thus represents an initial step toward the conceptual refinement of *integral cooperativism*, providing the groundwork for more detailed empirical and comparative inquiries.

Research design and methods

To test its central hypothesis, the study adopted a sequential mixed-methods design, combining qualitative content analysis and quantitative cluster analysis. The research process unfolded in four stages, each logically building on the previous one to connect textual interpretation with statistical classification.

In the first stage, a non-probabilistic sample of 118 integral cooperatives was compiled from Spain and Portugal. The only inclusion criterion was explicit self-identification as an “integral cooperative,” verified through cooperative registries and sectoral networks. Cases were retained only when an active or digitally archived website was available, since organizational portals served as the primary data source.

The second stage involved a qualitative content analysis of these websites, treated as artifacts of communicated organizational identity. Texts describing the organizations’ origins, objectives, and activities were coded using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach supported by Qualcoder v3.5 software. The coding scheme captured three analytical dimensions: structural aspects (economic activities), teleological orientations (intended impacts), and relational stance (relationship with public institutions). The unit of analysis was the thematic paragraph, and codes were refined through iterative reading.

In the third stage, the qualitative codes were operationalized into quantitative variables to enable statistical comparison. These included a binary variable for the presence of a primary activity (*ACTPDL*), a categorical variable for the relationship with public institutions (*RELINS*: no mention, collaboration, or conflict), and two discrete numerical variables reflect-

ing the scope of external aims in the cooperatives' discourse. *DESARR* recorded references to community, sustainability, or inclusion initiatives (goals that enhance the existing social and productive order) whereas *TRANSF* recorded references to cultural, economic, or political transformation. Absences were coded as zeros, since the lack of reference to external aims was considered analytically meaningful, denoting a cooperative that may be primarily oriented toward satisfying members' internal needs.

Finally, the fourth stage applied a hierarchical cluster analysis to the resulting data matrix, using Gower distance to accommodate mixed variable types and the average linkage method for aggregation. This exploratory procedure grouped organizations according to similarities in their communicated identity without imposing predefined categories. The number of clusters was determined by visual inspection of the dendrogram and validated through silhouette analysis. All computations were conducted in R version 4.4.2.

Findings

The analysis reveals five recurrent identity profiles (C1–C5) distinguished by their institutional stance, structural organization, and developmental or transformative orientation. These clusters range from cooperatives closely aligned with public institutions and moderate development aims to autonomous or explicitly antagonistic projects pursuing broad transformative goals. Together, these patterns indicate that current definitional plurality reflects a multifaceted phenomenon rather than an irreconcilable ideological dispute over a single, monolithic concept.

Across clusters, a shared core supports a minimal, operational definition: *integral cooperatives are self-managed organizations, formal or informal, that articulate multiple economic activities within a single associative structure*. This shared attribute (multisectorality) distinguishes them from other cooperative forms and appears in two communicated variants: identities anchored in a primary activity, and configurations that articulate multiple activities without explicit hierarchies. Qualitative evidence further suggests two underlying integration logics: an internal or functional mode, in which activities converge to address the same need, and an external or diversification mode, in which activities are expanded to respond to different needs.

Combining teleological orientations (*DESARR* and *TRANSF*) with organizations' historical trajectories yields a tripartite interpretive typology. *Traditional cooperatives* correspond to organizations with longer trajectories in the cooperative field, low transformative orientation, and limited to moderate development aims; their discourse emphasizes stability, consolidation, and continuity of collective work. *Radical cooperatives* represent a contrasting configuration: short-lived and, in most cases, discontinued projects characterized by maximal transformative claims, low development orientation, and an explicit rejection of state structures and capitalist market logics. *New cooperatives* are predominantly recent organizations combining moderate-to-high development aims with low transformative rhetoric, oriented toward practical objectives such as local impact, sustainability, and social inclusion.

Implications and limitations

Conceptually, the findings advance an initial framework that (i) delimits the phenomenon via a minimal definition anchored in multisectorality; (ii) surfaces two plausible organizational logics of multisectoral integration (internal/functional vs. external/diversification); and (iii) organizes heterogeneity into a three-part typology (traditional, radical, new). Rather than determining the “true” meaning of the integral cooperative, this framework redirects attention to empirically observable configurations—how activities are combined, to what ends, and with which institutional stances—thus offering a tractable agenda for comparative research and policy dialogue.

Empirically, the study should be read with caution. It is based on a non-probabilistic sample of 118 cases and on organizational websites as sources of communicated identity, which may not fully reflect actual practices. Variable selection and coding choices limit dimensional coverage, and the resulting clusters (and the typology derived from them) should be understood as interpretative rather than definitive. These limitations call for mixed-method follow-up using observational data sources to validate or refine the proposed distinction between internal/functional and external/diversification logics, and to assess the coherence and empirical robustness of the identified types.