No taking of power without collective organisation

62- 02/05/2023 **How do associations and cooperatives succeed in transforming individual weaknesses, convictions, or anger into positive collective energy? This article presents some of the citizenship laboratories and focuses specifically on their organisational uniqueness.**

Alternative organisations are present in all sectors. They distinguish themselves by their abilities to strengthen the autonomy and power of their members, encourage democratic governance, stimulate collaborative initiatives, and inspire societal transformations. Their existence proves that profitability is not the only motivation for teams, that the market laws are not universal , and that profit maximisation is not an end in itself.

Awakeners of consciousness, they invite us to move away from an instrumental and utilitarian vision of human resources and to build a different relationship with others, work, and the world.

Alternative organisations, what are we talking about?

Created to compensate for a deficiency, an injustice, to respond to an unsatisfied social need, to support disadvantaged populations or to defend great causes, associations and cooperatives succeed in improving the daily lives of men and women by relying on collective intelligence, mutual aid, and diversity. To their credit, initiatives that anticipate changes in the world, even managing to change it…

International Cooperative Alliance

The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society is the first cooperative enterprise. It was founded in 1844 by weavers from northern England too poor to buy basic necessities. They then took the initiative to regroup into a cooperative to negotiate better prices and take power over distributors. In doing so, they spread the concept of a new model of consumption, gained confidence in their ability to control a market and to manage a store according to their collective principles and values, recognizing each customer's voice as a member interested in the company's development.



the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the **Grameen Bank** and its founder, **Muhammad Yunus** (Bangladesh), for their pioneering work in microfinance and their positive impact on poverty reduction. This recognition helped to make the cooperative system and its ability to promote both economic development and social equity.



International fed. red cross red crescent

On the association side, we can

mention the **Red Cross and Red Crescent**, the largest grouping of humanitarian

organisations in the world. The movement, founded in 1863 by Henry Dunant (Switz

erland), had as its primary vocation to provide neutral, impartial, and permanen

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e Red Cross defines itself as a leading actor in emergency and first aid, auxi

liary to public authorities.



Regarding environmental defense, we remember the emblematic **Greenpeace**, an international organisation founded in 1971. The NGO raises the alarm on climate change, fights against deforestation, pollution, and nuclear energy. Greenpeace is known for its direct actions, demonstrations, and nonviolent civil disobedience, aimed at raising public awareness and provoking change. Greenpeace is a decentralized structure operating in more than 50 countries, where it promotes environmental sustainability and social justice through peaceful means.

Subversive and non-violent

These iconic examples are the fruit of the work of citizens and collectives determined to break with imposed norms and

limits. Each in its own way explores the fields of social, health, economic, and democratic innovation. A recent book * provides an overview of smaller French alternative organisations, from which the two examples below are extracted, one in mental health and the other in accounting expertise.



At the origin of the **Trame**, a platform for citizen inclusion and community mental health based in Seine-Saint-Denis (93), is a Mutual Aid Group that has adopted the values of peer support and sharing of experiences. La Trame recognizes the legitimacy of experiential knowledge of individuals, both regarding their illness and the use of mental health services. In this regard, La Trame pays certain users for specific tasks such as staffing or speaking engagements at conferences. It also encourages active participation of residents in creating local projects aimed at strengthening social ties within the community.

FINACOOP
Collectif déchiffreur de valeurs

Another example, this time in the field of accounting. In this highly regulated and traditionally capitalist sector, **FINACOOP** stands out as a black sheep. It is the first social and

solidarity economy Cooperative Company of Collective Interest (SCIC) in accounting, legal, and financial expertise. It sets itself apart with a model based on cooperation and solidarity between employees, clients, and partners. Decisions are made collectively and profits are distributed equitably and transparently. The company is also committed to ethical finance, reconciling financial profitability and social utility by offering legal and financial support (business plan, strategy and search for solidarity financing) in all phases of the life of organisations.

The raison d'être of these organisations is a shared singularity that has become the hallmark of their collective identity. As platforms for expression and projection into the future, they offer fertile ground for organisational alternatives.

« *Without knowledge, the citizen has no ability to act, and without organisation of collective action, they have no means of exercising their power* » (Béji-Bécheur et als. 2021)*

What can be learned from the governance of associations or cooperative companies?

These non-profit or limited-profit organisations are less hierarchical, less bureaucratic, and more focused on human and environmental needs than capitalist enterprises (Parker, Fournier, Reedy, 2007)**. They do not aim for profitability or wealth accumulation, nor do they aim to reward capital, but instead aim to achieve their missions with a double ambition of being socially useful and covering their costs independently from any power, if possible.

Their existence depends on the commitment and expertise of their teams, so they pay special attention to internal empowerment dynamics: developing solidarity ties among members, respecting convictions and diversity, developing a

shared project, desiring to meet needs, learning to acquire new skills, and recognizing capacities through opportunities for roles.



Self-organisation, voting, decisions by consent characterize alternative organisations

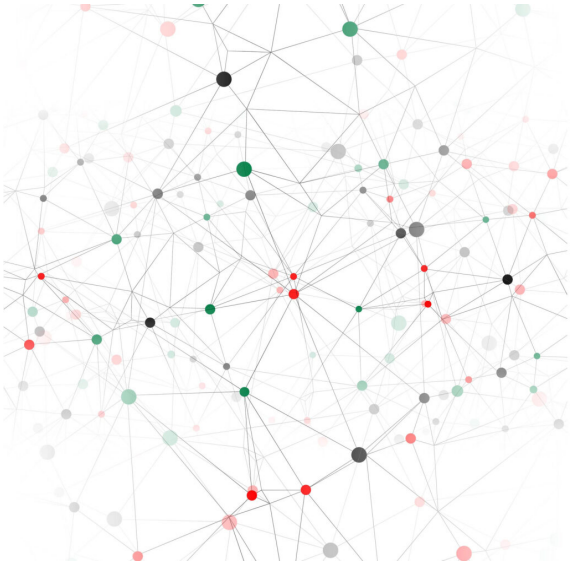
Based on the principles of participatory democracy, these organisations emphasize the importance for everyone to be able to speak up, whether it be in developing operating rules, participating in decisions or agreeing on control instances. By organizing regular consultations and debates that sharpen critical thinking and sometimes tensions, they learn to manage contradictions and find common ground.

But “encouraging participation” goes against usual patterns. It requires cultural assimilation as well as teaching of animation, consultation, and co-design methods. This collective emulation also involves experimentation in sub-groups and development of frameworks specifying the rights and responsibilities of participants. It is also recommended to make these highlights desirable through the richness of their content and their warm and friendly atmosphere.

On the contributor’s side, it is necessary to take into account the multiple obstacles that prevent full and complete participation, such as feelings of illegitimacy, lack of knowledge, as well as more prosaic obstacles such as lack of time and mobility difficulties.

“*Only a real strategy of participation, shared, organized, materialized by different media, training, and with sufficient financial resources allocated, is capable of eliciting this*

desire and contributing to the transformation of modes of roduction/consumption. In this respect, public authorities play a structuring role through the measures implemented, whether at a coercive, incentive or discursive level. (Béji-Bécheur et al. 2021)



Network development of alternative organisations © Harryarts on Freepik

Particular form of organisation, particular mode of growth

An alternative organisation cannot increase its size by following a traditional internal growth approach without risking losing its identity and becoming a conventional company. To avoid this pitfall, it can develop in networks, partner with other organisations, or model itself through the creation of new entities.

However, this prototype remains fragile; competition is deleterious to it, as is the race for gigantism, projects, and funding." (Béji-Bécheur et al. 2021)

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* Béji-Bécheur, A., Vidaillet, B., & Hildwein, F. (2021). Organisons l'alternative!: Pratiques de gestion pour une

transition écologique et sociale. Éditions EMS.

**Parker, M. F., & Reedy, V. (2007). P. The dictionary of alternatives.