Solidarity economic enterprise formed by waste pickers: a case study of the Águas Lindas waste pickers association, Belém, Pará

Empreendimento econômico solidário formado por catadores de materiais recicláveis: um estudo de caso da associação de catadores das Águas Lindas, Belém, Pará

Empresa solidaria económica formada por recicladores: estudio de caso de la asociación de recicladores de Aguas Lindas, Belém, Pará

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Abstract

Solidarity Economic Enterprises (EES), such as cooperatives and associations of recyclable material collectors, insert members (workers) informally into the job market, promoting

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income generation and a better quality of life. The way EES are organized is self-managed, democratic, and supportive, despite having specificities from one enterprise to another due to economic variables, public support, qualifications, and the life history of the members themselves. Given the above, the research aims to carry out an analysis of the organization process in the Associação de Recicladores das Águas Linda (ARAL), established in Belém, Pará, through the principles of Solidarity Economy, identifying whether it is configured as an Enterprise Solidarity Economic. To carry out the investigation, it was necessary to use a qualitative methodology of the descriptive, explanatory type, as this is a specific case study that aims to provide information about the association above. The results demonstrate that collectors collaborating through an EES have better working conditions and better-organized security to develop their activities. They carry out work in a self-managed manner where all enterprise associates perform crucial functions for its completion. They adopt this form of informal work out of necessity and still face many difficulties due to the restriction of the market for the sale of recyclable materials and the difficulties imposed on migrating from an association model to a cooperative model.

**Keywords:** Economy. Recycling. Solidarity. Solidarity Economy.

**Resumo**
Empreendimentos Econômicos Solidários (EES) como as cooperativas e associações de catadores de materiais recicláveis inserem os associados (trabalhadores) informalmente no mercado de trabalho, promovendo geração de renda e melhor qualidade de vida. O modo de organização dos EES desta categoria é em suma de forma autogestionária, democrática e solidária, apesar de apresentarem especificidades de empreendimento para empreendimento devido as variáveis econômicas, apoio público, qualificação e a própria história de vida dos associados. Diante do exposto, o referido trabalho tem como objetivo realizar uma análise do processo de organização e da Associação de Recicladores das Águas Linda (ARAL), localizada em Belém, Pará, através dos princípios da Economia Solidária, identificando se a mesma se configura como Empreendimento Econômico Solidário. Para realização do trabalho fez-se necessária a utilização de metodologia qualitativa do tipo explicativa descritiva, visto que, trata-se de um estudo de caso específico o qual pretende-se fornecer informações acerca da associação referida. Os resultados da pesquisa demonstram que os catadores agindo de forma coletiva através de um EES contam com melhores condições de trabalho, mais organização seguranca. Realizam um trabalho de forma autogestionária onde todos os
associated do empreendimento desempenham funções cruciais para a realização do mesmo. Adotam esta forma de trabalho informal por necessidade e ainda enfrentam muitas dificuldades perante a restrição do mercado de venda de materiais recicláveis e as dificuldades impostas a migração do modelo de associação para cooperativa.


Introduction

The Solidarity Economy (SE), historically, is linked to the labor associative movement in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe as part of a popular resistance from which immersed several enterprises of solidarity character influenced by the idea of mutualism cooperation and
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In Brazil, the ES emerged in the 70s, from mass unemployment, and in the following decades significant sectors of industrial production moved to countries where there were no workers' conquests, extinguishing jobs in several countries, among them Brazil (Singer, 2002). In Latin America the SE mainly concerns enterprises and initiatives which come from the association adopted freely by workers, seek economic gain, improvement in quality of life and citizenship, its logic does not follow marketing or monetary principles, self-management is used for joint growth, solidarity and democracy (Fernandes, 2016). SE is seen as a new way of instituting the economic act, not only being a "new economy" complementary to the dominant forms of the economy, having, therefore, the duty to adjust the dysfunctions of the economic system and should be treated as different modes of management, logic and dynamics, an alternative way of producing and reproducing (Freitas; Schiochet, 2021). For some authors such as Singer (2002) and in this paper, SE is seen as an alternative mode of production characterized by equal rights, in which the means of production do not belong to one person, is collectively owned by all associates of the enterprise (Lopes et al., 2016). In addition to having a relationship with the excluded from the market, helping them to overcome the existing vulnerability in informal forms of work, they propose services that promote a better quality of life and the local environment, this way is seen as a new relationship between the economy and society, contrary to the capitalist mode of production, established on the precepts of self-management, cooperation and solidarity, has as characteristic the right to collective property and individual freedom (Gaiger, 2008; Benini, 2008).

The principle of solidarity economy is the collective appropriation of the means of production, the democratic management of decisions by its members, and collective deliberation on the directions of production, on the use of surpluses (leftovers) and also on collective responsibility for the eventual losses of economic organization (Schiochet, 2009).

This practice has guided society to a new form of production, consumption and distribution of wealth established in the appreciation of the human being, work as a means of human liberation acting as an alternative to the capitalist mode of production based on the alienation of labor and wages. Self-management, being an important feature of SE, concerns democratic management in every sense: with the means of production, use of surplus income, losses and distribution of income, is a way to avoid unemployment and social exclusion from capitalist accumulation (Oliveira et al., 2016). In this new alternative mode of production predominates equality among all members, this means that participants in economic activity
must cooperate with each other, associates are responsible for production, marketing, consumption and savings. As there is no hierarchy among members, all members of the enterprise have the right to vote in all decision-making, ensuring collective ownership (Singer, 2002).

Thus, the Solidary Economic Enterprises (SEE) have a collective work and motivation of the workers who compose them, because the work of self-managed principle strengthens the bonds of trust and organizational transparency, while "the feeling of each worker to be an active part or subject of his own business or enterprise" (Benini, 2008). The self-management present in EES represents a form of denial of hetero management carried out by purely capitalist enterprises, is a way of overcoming the capital system on which exists through the SE, a democratization of management in which social relations are superimposed on all means of hierarchy, power and means of production are social, collectively administered, and there is therefore an integration between social relations and production, in which the partner of the enterprise is valued and essential for the operation as a whole (De Faria, 2017).

In this scenario of unemployment, social exclusion and lack of solid waste pickers enter the labor market informally through the SE, where, due to the scarce reality of the labor market these workers find in the selective collection and sale of recycled materials a way to obtain the necessary income to ensure their livelihood. They collaborate with the preservation of the environment by collecting in homes, streets, companies, recyclable materials that take time to decompose in nature, generating environmental damage. These workers deal with the real demand of the need for selective collection, forming a network of these waste pickers, associations and cooperatives, government and civil society.

In addition, it is important to note that the solidarity economy seeks to promote environmental sustainability through practices that minimize the environmental impact of economic activities. This includes the use of clean technologies, the production of ecological goods and services, the enhancement of natural resources and the preservation of the environment (Cattani, 2009). Note the ability of the solidarity economy has to influence the principles that guide sustainable actions, collaborating to mitigate the increasing environmental damage registered.
The Relationship Between Waste Pickers and the Solidarity Economy

The National Policy of Solid Waste - PNRS (Brazil, 2010) defines waste pickers as people who work in the collection, selection and sale of recyclable materials, being able to carry out the activity individually or in cooperative and associations of waste pickers. The actions of waste pickers contribute to the preservation of the environment, reducing the amount of waste in landfills collaborating for the reuse of materials.

From the activity of collecting recyclable materials, waste pickers give a new resignification to waste, which for most of society represents something worthless, for a portion of the poor population, "waste" is an excellent aggregate in the fight for social inclusion. In the scenario of labor crisis, increased consumption, production and disposal of goods, which corroborate for environmental degradation, the work done by waste pickers is of extreme significance for the economic, social and environmental optics (Gouveia, 2012).

Among the various popular organizations emerging in the country of facing unemployment, cooperatives and associations of waste pickers or waste pickers are highlighted by their growth over the years, these solidary economic enterprises enable an excluded portion of the labor market to obtain income, dignity, citizenship through selective collection and, at the same time, produce positive effects on the environment and society, environmental impacts caused by the dumping of solid waste.

Waste pickers are inserted in this activity for several reasons, some for being the only way found to ensure their survival and supply their immediate needs, others for income complementation, and some pass the activity from father to son, are organized in EES in a democratic, voluntary way, the enterprises are managed in a self-managed way, seeking to balance the social relations between the associates improve production and increase the surplus (Silva, 2017).

A cooperative is an autonomous entity formed by individuals who join voluntarily in order to meet their economic, cultural and/or social needs (Cardoso, 2014). These cooperatives function as jointly owned corporations, and their control is democratic and is an important instrument to focus on the development of social and economic development. They can contribute to income generation, social inclusion, environmental preservation and the construction of a more just and democratic society, whereas an association is a non-profit civil society that aims to unite a group of people or entities for common interests, social, economic, philanthropic, scientific, political or cultural (Cardoso, 2014).
The heterogeneity between cooperatives and associations of waste pickers is very large due to their organizational capacity, membership qualification, economic power, and whether they receive any public or private support (Mota, 2017). The members of an EES of waste pickers are diversified, both for the justification of joining the activity, education, qualification, many abandoned the activity of collecting performed individually for the security of having their own space for the realization of the activity, in addition to the best quality in performing their work, work performed informally without any employment relationship (Borges et al., 2015).

Informality is worrying when thinking about possible eventualities, such as: accident in the workplace, retirement, and rights to which these workers will not have due to the very essence of the organization of the activity. However, waste pickers who associate with cooperatives and/or associations enjoy better working conditions compared to waste pickers who perform individual activity in dumps, landfills, and streets (Mota, 2017).

The waste pickers present in the EES seek through the activity the satisfaction of their human needs, work collectively with the means of production, organize themselves in assemblies or meetings for making decisions regarding the operation of the enterprise, experience and knowledge for the best viability of the activity. The collective organization allows them to obtain a greater economic surplus, to be shared equally among members, although some enterprises make a distinction in the distribution of earnings, does not disqualify them as EES, still manage it in a self-managed and participatory way. This differentiation of gain sharing is part of the complexity of structure, functioning and dynamics of SEs such as selective collection cooperatives (Mota, 2017; Montavani; Leite, 2015).

The work being carried out collectively provides more security to waste pickers, enables investment in infrastructure, machinery, which improve working conditions, self-management provides a better understanding of the duties, rights, and obligations of all associates, as well as knowledge of the structure of production and sense of belonging avoiding alienation from work. These EES improve the planning capacity according to the physical conditions of the associates, time, formulating a regular and fair working day, as well as adequate sanitary conditions and work safety (Mota, 2017).

Thus, from the perspective of Solidarity Economy, each associate has responsibility to ensure the operation of the enterprise, with standards, goals to be followed, focused on a common goal, survival. The adhesion to the enterprise must be spontaneous and, in its organization still faces difficulties due to the lack of training, financial subsidy and advisory
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(Borges et al., 2015).

Objective

Conduct an analysis of the process of organization and administration of the Association of Recyclers of Águas Lindas (ARAL), established in Belém, state of Pará, Brazil, through the principles of Solidarity Economy, identifying whether it is configured as Solidary Economic Enterprise.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods have been around for thousands of years, as long as people share ideas and traditions orally, interview others, etc. Only in the last 25 years those methods received some attention as a legitimate tool to understand behavior and answer important research questions in social and behavioral sciences (Salkind, 2022). The qualitative work was characterized by a single case study, of explanatory descriptive character with the purpose of providing greater understanding about the subject addressed, in addition to describing characteristics of the object to be studied (Gil, 2019).

Qualitative research is a means to explore and understand social phenomena, the purpose of the work was to analyze, understand, and provide more information about the functioning, management of the association of waste pickers, and the case study allows the study to be outlined and deepened (Creswell; Creswell, 2021).

According to Lakatos (2017), the case study allows a more in-depth survey of data on a given case, aims to understand a given situation and describe the complexity of the facts, which in this case focuses on understanding the operation and management of the association of waste pickers ARAL. The chosen association was one of the two existing associations in the only sorting shed present in Belém and Belém Metropolitan Region (RMB), the Association of Recyclers of Águas Lindas (ARAL) located on the banks of the São Joaquim channel in Belém.

For analysis and identification of the principles of Solidarity Economy present in the functioning of the ARAL, it was analyzed whether the association presented a process of self-management, existence or absence of hierarchy, level of solidarity, how the activities were managed, the process of emancipation or alienation of the associate, in addition to the
obstacles found in the management of the enterprises.

The data collection to be analyzed was performed through semi-structured interviews during the months of June, August and November 2018, with the president of the association and sporadic participation of one or another associate, the interview was mediated and supervised by an employee from Belém City Hall (PMB) allocated in the shed. The interviews were recorded so that all details were collected and, subsequently, the recordings were transcribed for analysis of the information collected. The semi-structured interview allows the possibility of restructuring it during its realization, considering that it is useful, because the data to be analyzed can be observed directly (Lakatos, 2017).

Results and Discussions

In Belém, on the banks of the São Joaquim Canal in the neighborhood of Maracangalha Avenue, is located the Sorting Center for Recyclable Materials, financed and provided by the Belém City Hall; the sorting center is administered by the Municipal Sanitation Department (SESAN) and its Solid Waste Department (DRES). In this center is located the Association of Recycling of Beautiful Waters, which is the object of study of this work. The PMB provides the trucks that waste pickers use to collect materials on the streets and in companies, buses that are responsible for the movement of workers from their homes to the shed and vice versa, in addition to fuel and energy. However, waste pickers bear the costs of the internet, which assists the administrative work carried out in the association beyond the feeding of the members.

ARAL was founded in 2005, at its beginning it operated within the Aurá Landfill located in the municipality of Ananindeua in the Belém Metropolitan Region, which had its activities closed in 2015. With the opening of the Triage Center, ARAL migrated to it in 2012. Its way of operating works like most associations and cooperatives, the material is collected door to door in condominiums, houses, schools, private companies, located in the neighborhoods of Marambaia, Marco, Pedro Miranda, Sacramento, Promorar, Mirandinha, all located in Belém. In addition to collecting the material carried out door to door, the association collects in large generators, since they are small or large private companies, some supermarkets (not all because some already have their own selective collection process).

The migration to the Triage Center provided a greater organization of these workers, more safety and better quality of work, compensating for the "loss" in profit that comes with
the maintenance and different mode of operation of the work than carried out amid the garbage. Following these improvements, there will be separated sessions to identify some of the main characteristics of EES found in the association.

I) Self-management: According to the concept of self-management adopted in this paper represented by the social appropriation of the means of production, overlapping of social relations, egalitarian division of power and responsibility, the said association is composed of 49 members who are divided into 35 who carry out the activity from door to door and collection in large generators, 6 are in charge of driving the cars/trucks, 6 work in the sorting of materials collected, and 2 in the administrative part of the association. Since one person deals with the financial work and another with the administrative part relating to the operation of the association, this person is the president of the same. For decision-making, weekly assemblies are held, or when there is need, all decisions are conceived by the partners without distinction of power even if there is a division of tasks and earned by performing the heaviest work, which comes down to collecting recyclable materials from door to door.

II) Improvement in quality of life: The choice to participate in an ESS allowed these waste pickers an improvement in the quality of their work, giving them more dignity, security, recognition and democratic organization a better quality of life, because they are no longer subject to the risks that the activity of scavenging in open dumps, streets, could represent to them. Through the interview with members, it is common sense that although they did not "earn" the same as they earned when they worked in isolation and did not contribute to the functioning of the association, this gain is represented in the best willing infrastructure and support they receive from the PMB and civil society in their collection neighborhoods.

III) Solidarity: The assemblies held by the enterprise do not only serve to make decisions regarding the operation of the association, but also to provide support to members who eventually go through some difficulty. All members contribute with 10% of their biweekly surplus for the maintenance of the association, food, internet service, and other needs. The division of earnings is made differently between those who perform a manual work and those who perform an administrative work, according to the interviewees this is a fair form of distribution adopted by them because the associates who perform the collection on the streets perform a more tiring work.

IV) Collective property: None of the associates is considered to own the association or head of the others, it has a founder, a president, since some specific knowledge that the
associate named president has the power to help in the operation of the enterprise, whereas such a president is elected by assembly and may be replaced if the majority deems it necessary.

V) Cooperativism: The association is formed by people excluded from the formal labor market who seek better quality of life and at the same time contribute to the improvement of the environment in the place where they operate, through the activity of collecting recyclable materials organizing together acquire the necessary income for their subsistence, accumulate knowledge and experiences beneficial to the operation of the enterprise.

Conclusions

The association faces some difficulties related to its operation, either by restricting the limited market sale of the material to a single company, Riopel Comércio Aparas de Papel Ltda. Riopel buys most of the material, which gives its price as well as weighing the material on its own scale to then calculate what will be paid to the association, while the middleman buys more precisely pet bottles and bottle "Qboa" to sell to a company that produces eco sustainable hoses. The fact that in Pará there is no company competing with Riopel capable of buying the material collected not only by ARAL as well as all other associations and cooperatives of waste pickers located in Belém and RMB is a major obstacle in increasing the income of these waste pickers, because, even if indirectly a monopsony is formed by the company to which it submits associations and cooperatives to the prices it deems relevant to the material it is buying. ARAL intends to become a cooperative, but the obstacles for an association to become cooperative are many, the example of ARAL is that due to its poor functioning due to lack of knowledge in management and organization that would contribute to the productivity of work, or the lack of materials sold that are few and no longer yield much, just enough for workers to be able to guarantee their livelihood, do not allow a reserve fund to help in the operationalization and in case of unforeseen events, as well as to pay the municipal, government fees necessary to become a cooperative.

Final Considerations

As a cooperative the association can count on working capital that would help its management, would provide the possibility to ensure the recyclable material not to sell it every 15 days, but once a month, would give these workers more rights than the possibility to trade
with companies outside the State. The association is organized according to the principles of ES, which qualifies as a Solidary Economic Enterprise aimed at the inclusion of waste pickers excluded from the labor market, income generation, social development, quality of life and environmental sustainability, although the surplus is distributed differently among members does not disqualify the enterprise as being solidary, as it was said the forms of organization of association and cooperatives are very different.

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