



Self-Management and Popular Cooperativism in Latin America: Lessons from Argentina and Brazil

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On May 7, 2026, the third session of the online “Global South Cooperativism” seminar series took place, organized by the International Association for Popular Cooperation (IAPC) and co-organized by the Academic Forum of the Global South, the Josué de Castro Faculty of Brazil, and the 24H+ Economy Secretariat of Ghana. This edition focused on Latin America and featured two speakers: Andrés Ruggeri, researcher at the University of Buenos Aires and coordinator of the Facultad Abierta Program, and Antonio Rodrigues, director of the production area of the MST of Ceará, Brazil. After a first session dedicated to cooperativism theories and a second to Asia more broadly, this Latin American edition continued building a mosaic of Global South experiences, each rooted in its own context,



yet united by a shared question: why organize collectively, and how? Both presentations offered a vivid account of what it means to build a popular economy under adverse conditions, and of cooperativism not as a business model, but as a political project.

The Argentine Experience: Worker Self-Management Through Crisis

Andrés Ruggeri presented more than two decades of history of the Worker-Recovered Enterprises (ERTs, *empresas recuperadas por los trabajadores*) movement in Argentina. The slogan “Occupy, Resist and Produce” by the MST from Brazil inspired over a hundred factories and businesses to be occupied by their workers to prevent mass closures driven by a decade of extreme neoliberal capitalism, in the context of the 2001 crisis in Argentina.

Ruggeri described the typical arc of a recovery process. It begins with what he called “*empresarial vaciamiento*,” the deliberate deterioration of a company by its owners, often as a prelude to fraudulent bankruptcy. Workers arrive one Monday to find the doors locked and a note saying the factory has closed. From that moment, the conflict intensifies through occupation, resistance, and often confrontations with police attempting evictions. Only after that prolonged struggle does the process of self-management consolidation begin. This origin, Ruggeri emphasized, is what distinguishes ERTs from cooperatives that start from scratch. Here, there is a fundamental dispute over private property. The hegemonic logic of capitalism holds that workers are not owners and have no right to run an enterprise. Challenging that logic is the first act of every recovery.

From that urgency emerged the demonstrated capacity of the working class to manage production collectively, make decisions by assembly, and build forms of internal democracy in spaces previously ruled by vertical command. When the movement was at its strongest, in 2001 and 2002, it managed to push legislatures to expropriate enterprises in conflict and hand them over in concession to workers’ cooperatives. Today, with over 415 enterprises and approximately 14,100 workers, the movement remains active, though it faces a particularly hostile context under the current government, where closures now outpace new recoveries. A telling sign of this hostility is a proposed bill known as the “*Ley de Defensa de la Propiedad Privada*” (Translator’s Note: The current administration formally introduced this bill to the Argentine Senate on Thursday, March 26, 2026), which would severely limit or effectively block expropriation processes. As Ruggeri noted, this is not only an attack on recovered enterprises but on all popular experiences that struggle for land, territory, and collective workplaces.

ERTs must compete in the capitalist market to survive, which creates constant tensions around working hours, income distribution, and strategic decision-making. Lack of



capital, severely restricted access to credit due to legal precarity, and the absence of sustained state support are structural obstacles. But the central lesson Ruggeri proposed is both economic and political. Self-management recovers employment, yes, but above all, it democratizes work itself, transforming relations that are absolutely vertical under capitalism into spaces of collective decision-making and shared responsibility.

The Brazilian Experience: Land, Cooperative, and Agroecology in Ceará

Antonio Rodrigues, director of the production area of the MST in Ceará, presented a model of cooperativism that the movement has had to deliberately reinvent. Traditional cooperativism had already existed in Ceará for decades, and had largely failed, operating as a business enterprise, multi-class cooperatives and centrally managed, removed from the political life of its members. What the MST built instead is what Rodrigues called alternative cooperativism: single-class cooperatives (only small producers settled in agrarian reform territories), collectively governed, focused on agroindustrialization, and oriented toward community life as a whole. The difference, he emphasized, is not technical but political.

The reasons for organizing production this way are deeply historical. After years of struggle to conquer the land, the MST understood that democratizing the means of production did not stop at land access. Labor itself needed to be organized. As Rodrigues put it, “We transformed theory into land, land into production, and production into autonomy.”

In Ceará, this takes concrete form with over 200 settlements, more than 11,000 organized families, and five agroindustries in operation across the state. The case of COOPALC (Cooperativa Regional de Produção Agroindustrial Luiz Carlos), a cashew and fruit processing cooperative, illustrates the model. Built around two production lines, fruit pulps (cashew, guava, mango) and cashew nuts (roasted, toasted, and natural almonds), the cooperative has developed its own brand, Terra Conquistada, which today reaches supermarkets, restaurants, fairs, and institutional buyers. One of its most concrete achievements was eliminating the intermediary that previously captured much of the value of the harvest. The cooperative now sets prices directly, and that margin stays with the members. It has also developed an organic certification line, adding further value and market differentiation.

Rodrigues highlighted the centrality of women and youth in this process. The agroindustries are spaces where young people from the settlements take on management and operational roles, and where women play a leading part in production. This is not incidental but intentional. The cooperative is understood as a tool for community transformation, not only economic output.



Rodrigues was straightforward about persistent challenges, among them seasonality, vulnerability of beekeeping to drought and climate change, bureaucratic obstacles in regularizing agroindustries, and the ongoing difficulty of convincing members to reinvest earnings rather than distribute them immediately. Building cooperative consciousness, he acknowledged, is a continuous process of internal education. At its core, the MST's cooperativism is inseparable from land disputes. Organizing production collectively is not possible without first conquering the territory where that production takes place.

Interactions: Searching for Sustainability

The session included a Q&A exchange that extended some of the central themes of both presentations.

Asked about strategies to strengthen and sustain cooperatives over time, both speakers pointed to the relationship between political momentum and institutional support. Ruggeri noted that when the ERT movement was at its most visible and legitimate, around 2001 and 2002, it obtained expropriation laws and modifications to bankruptcy legislation. As that momentum weakened over time, so did state support. Under the current government, he said plainly, there is no public policy for anyone except corporations. Rodrigues added that internal sustainability also depends on building the cooperative consciousness to reinvest earnings rather than distribute them immediately, a process that requires ongoing political education within the membership.

A second question addressed the challenge of building solidarity across the full productive chain. Ruggeri was straightforward about the limits. Cooperatives generally do not control their value chains, and attempts to build sectoral networks, a graphics network, a metalworking network, a solidarity textile chain linking indigenous cotton producers in Chaco to spinning and weaving cooperatives, have rarely succeeded in sustaining themselves. Products are different, machinery is different, and without a broader movement or state policy pushing in that direction, coordination breaks down. The goal remains important, he said, but no clearly successful model exists yet.

Conclusion

The third session of the “Global South Cooperativism” series demonstrated, through two very different contexts, that popular cooperativism is not a fixed model but a living practice, built in motion, shaped by political struggle, material conditions, and the collective will of those involved. Cooperatives are processes constructed along the way, and the Latin American experiences presented make that clear with honesty.

Both experiences share that organizational processes in Latin America are interconnected and have a common origin. They emerged as responses to neoliberal



policies that concentrated land and capital, closed productive units, and pushed workers and peasants toward marginalization. The recovered factories in Argentina and the agrarian reform settlements in Brazil are two forms of the same struggle over who controls the conditions of work and production, and who has the right to organize collective life. As the session's moderator put it in closing, organization is never individual, and the way out is always collective.

What both experiences also share is the centrality of internal democracy as both a means and an end. The general assembly and horizontal decision-making are organizational tools and transforming practices for the people. Workers and peasants who begin to decide collectively over their own territory and labor are not the same as those who started. That transformation is, perhaps, the deepest achievement of popular cooperativism.

Listening to experiences from different continents, Asia, Latin America, and soon Africa, enriches this reflection precisely because there is no single path. Each context brings its own tensions, its own history of resistance and organization. What they share is the conviction that collective solutions are possible, and that organizing is the first step toward building them.

The seminar series continues with a session focused on Africa on May 29th. Those wishing to follow this process can register through the [IAPC-ROOTS website](#).