

FROM NETWORKS TO COOPERATIVE ECOSYSTEMS

PRINCIPLES OF ECOSYSTEMIC ARTICULATION: when nodes stop looking toward the center and begin relating to one another, generating vitality.

APRIL 2026

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Introduction

Over recent decades, the social and solidarity economy has developed a strong **capacity for collective organization**. Cooperatives, intercooperation networks, federations, territorial hubs, second-degree cooperatives, and diverse forms of alliance have made it possible to build a more rooted and collective economy, responding to social needs and creating spaces of cooperation that place life at the center.

This fabric has been key in promoting transformative initiatives. However, as the field of the social and solidarity economy grows and diversifies, a question increasingly emerges across many organizations and territories: **how can we articulate this set of initiatives ecosystemically?**

This study starts from one central observation: building a network is not the same as articulating an ecosystem. Networks allow actors to connect, share information, coordinate actions, or promote joint projects. Ecosystems, however, function differently: they are living systems of interdependence, where actors not only cooperate but also co-evolve, generate collective capacity, and create the conditions for new economic and social possibilities to emerge.

The concept of **ecosystem comes from the theory of living systems and ecology**. In these systems, life is sustained through organizational patterns such as functional diversity, interdependence, the circulation of energy and resource flows, self-regulation, and adaptive capacity. When these patterns are applied to social and economic systems, they allow us to imagine forms of organization that are more resilient, distributed, and capable of generating territorial transformation.

In the current context – marked by intense economic globalization, ecological crises, political polarization, and a progressive loss of legitimacy in many democratic institutions – the proposals of the social and solidarity economy can emerge with renewed strength. Cooperatives and community organizations have the capacity to relocalize the economy, recover forms of sovereignty, and generate alternatives rooted in territories, while at the same time connecting with global networks of cooperation.

Within this framework, for many organizations that already work at the local scale **addressing life needs and forms of sovereignty**, it becomes necessary to move toward deeper forms of articulation. Ecosystemic articulation does not simply mean bringing entities together, creating coordination spaces, or promoting occasional intercooperation projects. It means weaving structural relationships between initiatives that share territory, resources, knowledge, and purpose, generating systems capable of self-producing new collective capacities.

Sources and Basis of the Study

This study is based on various sources, experiences, and learning processes accumulated over the years, linked to organizational support, applied research, and territorial articulation within the social and solidarity economy.

Among these foundations are **accompaniment processes** with cooperatives and community initiatives such as Aplec Iltif (*the gathering for the democratic evolution of rural areas*); **networking and participation processes** in second-degree organizations such as the Federation of Worker Cooperatives of Catalonia, the Solidarity Economy Network, the Coordinating Body of Solidarity NGOs, and Ecolise; as well as the **creation of cooperative and community infrastructures** such as Miceli.Social and Núria Social.

The study is also informed by various **applied research** projects in territorial economics, cooperativism, and community resilience developed in collaboration with different universities and with Community.Catalyst; research processes in bioregionalization and territorial regeneration carried out with Regenesi Group and Ecolise; and conceptual work in living systems theory, social biomimicry, and regenerative design developed from the Balkar.Earth institute.

Furthermore, this study has been made possible primarily thanks to the collaborative alliance with the **Pôle d'Équilibre Territorial et Rural de l'Ariège** (PETR Ariège), with whom the main territorial case studies have been developed in contexts such as Ariège (France) and La Garrotxa—especially in the old town of Olot and in Collsacabra—within an action-research process supported by the Erasmus+ program during the 2025–2026 period.

This set of experiences, alliances, and research has made it possible to **observe how different economic and community initiatives can evolve from simpler forms of cooperation toward territorial cooperative ecosystems.**

The Role of Place and Territory

A central element in ecosystemic articulation is awareness of place.

Many initiatives and networks can initially function without a situated territorial perspective. However, when ecosystemic work begins, a growing awareness progressively emerges of the territory in which activity takes place: its resources, its limitations, its ecological relationships, and its communities.

As actors cooperate and become interdependent, the territory ceases to be merely a space of activity and becomes a living system with which organizations establish an increasingly deep relationship.

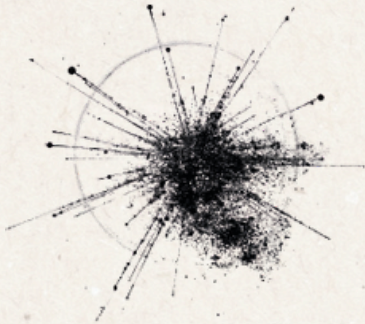
This perspective connects with the **concept of the bioregion**, which understands territories as interconnected ecological, social, economic, and cultural units. At this level, organizations do not only operate within a territory but become expressions of the territory itself, establishing relationships of reciprocity and symbiosis with the ecological and community systems that sustain them.



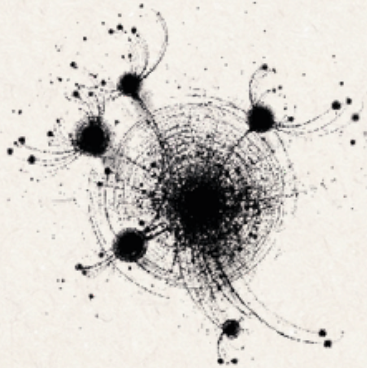
Foto 1: Aplec Itirí 2025 Collsacabra

Paradigms of System Organization

To understand what it means to articulate an ecosystem, it is useful to observe different paradigms of social system organization.



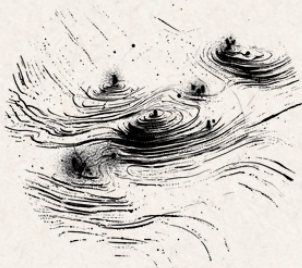
1. Centralized system In this model, power is concentrated in a hierarchical center. Decisions, information, and the capacity for action emanate from this center and are distributed toward the periphery. This model has been dominant in many modern institutions.



2. Decentralized system In the decentralized system, peripheral nodes appear with a certain degree of autonomy, but they remain oriented toward the center. Nodes often compete or seek recognition and power in relation to this center. This model allows for more flexibility than the centralized one, but it does not necessarily generate true distributed capacity.



3. Distributed or ecosystemic system At this level, nodes establish relationships among themselves, generating more complex flows of information, resources, and cooperation. The capacity for action is distributed and the system can self-regulate. This model is closer to the functioning of a cell or a living ecosystem.



4. Bioregional system A deeper level can be described as bioregional articulation. In this paradigm, organizations not only cooperate with one another but also form part of a living territorial system. At this level, organizations become expressions of a bioregion, maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the territory.

Purpose of the Study

This study explores how initiatives in the rooted, cooperative, and/or solidarity economy can activate processes toward forms of ecosystemic articulation that enable:

- strengthening interdependence between initiatives
- generating collective capacity and territorial innovation
- relocalizing the economy and sovereignties
- building more resilient and regenerative economic systems

Drawing on living systems theory, this work identifies principles for the ecosystemic articulation of the rooted economy, understood as the **transition from a decentralized paradigm to a distributed one**.

Principles of Ecosystemic Articulation: From Networks to Cooperative Ecosystems

1. From the center as reference → to shared purpose

In decentralized systems, nodes look toward and reference the center when designing actions. In distributed systems, actors coordinate through a shared purpose.

For example, during the implementation process of the project between Ariège and La Garrotxa, work was not organized from a central structure that directed the processes, nor with the intention of replicating best practices from different places. Instead, it was guided by a shared purpose: strengthening village participation, rooted, cooperative and solidarity economies, and local governance across European rural territories.

2. From delegation → to coordinated autonomy

Decentralized systems delegate functions and tasks. Distributed systems generate autonomy with responsibility and interdependent roles.

For example, in the Pailhès project, different residents activate community spaces and initiatives autonomously—culture, food, gatherings, or space management—while coordinating through a logic of commons and mutual support, without depending on a single central structure.

3. From dependent nodes → to emergent interdependence

Decentralized nodes depend on the center and its structure. Distributed systems create relationships among nodes.

For example, the village councils of Ariège do not operate in isolation nor in subordination to a single administration; instead, they share learnings, challenges, and tools across municipalities, generating a mutual support network between villages.

4. From central coordination → to polycentric governance

In the decentralized model, the center coordinates. In the distributed model, governance emerges from multiple decision-making spaces.

For example, in a centralized coordination model, dynamics of control in decision-making can arise, generating few participation spaces that are concentrated in the hands of a small number of people. In contrast, a more distributed governance expands participation, and levels of responsibility are multiplied.

5. From vertical information → to fluid information

Decentralized systems control information. Distributed systems require transparency and the free circulation of knowledge.

For example, participatory and open processes (such as Karma Fest or Jardins de la Muralla) promoted in the Old Town of Olot combine shared diagnosis, applied research, community labs, and open training spaces, enabling knowledge to circulate among residents, farmers and producers, young people, schools, cooperatives, organizations, and public administrations.

6. From specialization → to an ecology of diversity

Decentralized nodes are often specialized but isolated. In an ecosystem, diversity generates value when it is connected.

For example, in the Old Town of Olot, food projects, artistic spaces, schools, social organizations, craft workshops, restaurants, consumer cooperatives, and care spaces coexist and cooperate. The strength of the system does not come from a single sector, but from the relationships between productive, cultural, and community diversities.

7. From projects → to living systems

The decentralized model works through projects. The distributed model builds long-lasting infrastructures and systems from a systemic perspective.

For example, experiences such as Utopiastadt or Aplec Iltir, observed during the project, do not function as one-off projects but as permanent community infrastructures capable of hosting new uses, actors, and processes over time.

8. From control → to generative trust

Decentralized systems tend toward control from the center. Distributed systems require trust, facilitation, and relationships.

For example, care circles, intergenerational or intercultural mentoring, and mutual support spaces that are part of the proposal create relational conditions that allow projects to evolve based on trust, rather than solely on technical or administrative supervision.

9. From organizational logic → to territorial rootedness

The decentralized model thinks in terms of organizations. The distributed model thinks in terms of territory, community, and ecosystem.

For example, projects are not designed only to strengthen specific entities, but to regenerate the Old Town as a living ecosystem connected to La Garrotxa, local farming, short supply chains, cultural spaces, and the everyday life of the territory.

10. From a sum of actors → to collective capacities

The decentralized model adds up organizations. The distributed model generates emergent system capacity.

For example, the process led by PETR Ariège shows how the connection between residents, elected officials, technicians, cooperatives, and community initiatives generates a form of collective intelligence capable of fostering new forms of local democracy and territorial regeneration.



Foto 2: Trobada comunitària al Núria Social del Barri Vell d'Olot (2026)

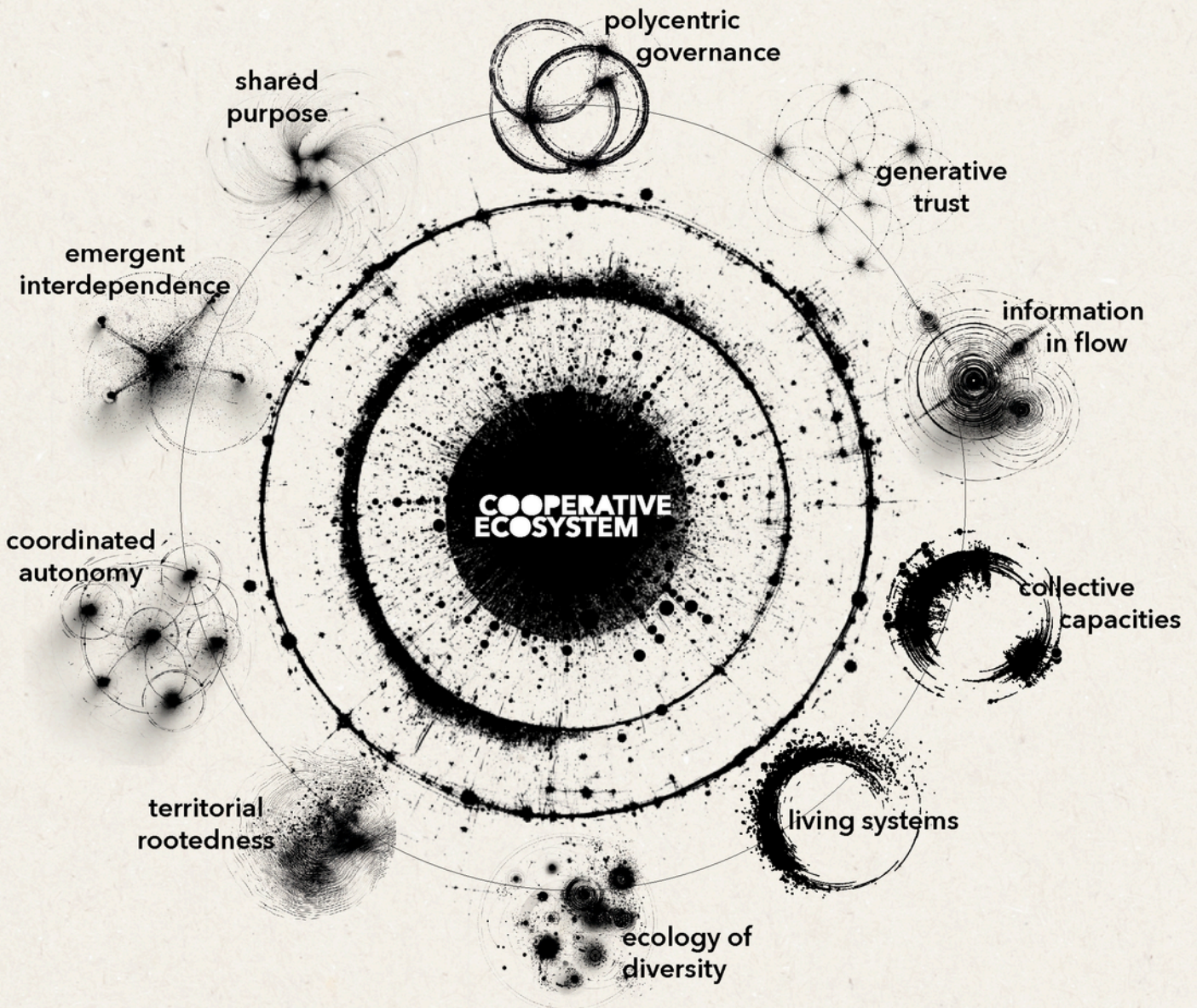
Systemic Anti-Patterns

To make this leap in depth, it is necessary to take into account systemic anti-patterns—those unconscious practices embedded in organizational culture that prevent evolution toward a more distributed paradigm. For example:

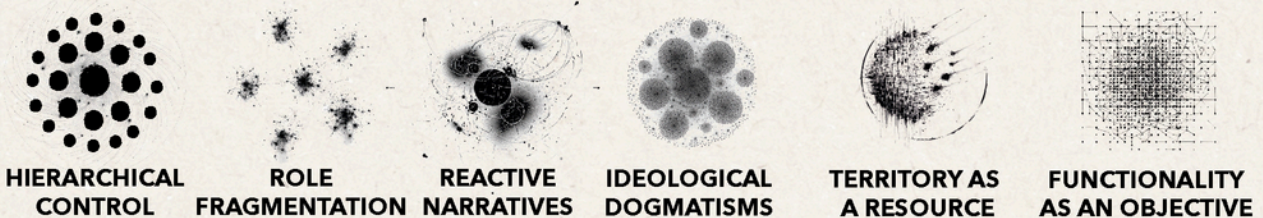
- **Hierarchical control** occurs when the structure creates administrative, technical, or communicative dependency, so that all initiatives must pass through it in order to exist, access resources, or gain legitimacy. This reinforces the centrality of the structure rather than territorial autonomy.
- **Functionality as an end goal happens** when strategy is not the objective, but rather the system itself functioning. The organization focuses only on “making meetings, projects, grants, or structures work,” while losing sight of whether these are actually regenerating relationships, capacities, and community vitality.
- **Ideological dogmatism** arises when alliances are built only between actors who share exactly the same ideological or discursive framework, making it difficult to cooperate with different but necessary initiatives for sustaining broad and diverse territorial ecosystems.
- **Simple and reactive narratives** occur when communication is constantly based on reacting to conflicts, urgencies, or completed actions, without generating deeper, more propositional narratives capable of building a shared long-term imaginary.
- **Role fragmentation** happens when, within the same organization, communication, care, production, or advocacy teams operate as separate compartments, competing for resources or visibility and hindering a transversal, ecosystemic perspective.
- **Territory as use and service** appears when a territory is perceived only as a space in which to implement projects, attract resources, or carry out activities, without building reciprocal relationships with local communities, natural ecosystems, and the specific needs of the place.

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SYSTEMIC ANTI-PATTERNS



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