

## Communication for food commons: a comparative analysis of community supported agriculture in Portugal

*Comunicación para los comunes alimentarios: análisis comparativo de grupos de consumo agroecológico en Portugal*

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This study departs from a commons framework of analysis to compare the internal communication practices of seven CSAs from Portugal. By looking at governance, economy, knowledge, technology and eco-social justice, our findings reveal there is no food *commoning* without communication. Based on action-research and militant ethnography methods, the study combines a focus group, visual methods and interviews, and contributes with an original approach to communication studies from a commons epistemology.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication commons, community supported agriculture, food commons, communication practices.

*A partir de un marco de análisis procomún, este estudio compara las prácticas de comunicación interna de siete grupos de consumo agroecológico portugueses. Observando la gobernanza, la economía, el conocimiento, la tecnología y la justicia eco-social, revelamos que no hay comunes alimentarios sin comunicación. Basado en métodos de investigación-acción y etnografía militante, el estudio combina un grupo focal, métodos visuales y entrevistas, aportando un enfoque original a los estudios de comunicación desde una epistemología de los comunes.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Comunes de comunicación, consumo agroecológico, comunes alimentarios, prácticas comunicativas.

*Com base num quadro de análise de bens comuns, este estudo compara as práticas de comunicação interna de sete grupos de consumidores agroecológicos portugueses. Olhando para governança, economia, conhecimento, tecnologia e justiça ecossocial, revelamos que não há alimentos comuns sem comunicação. Baseado em métodos de pesquisa-ação e etnografia militante, o estudo combina um grupo focal, métodos visuais e entrevistas, trazendo uma abordagem original aos estudos da comunicação a partir de uma epistemologia do comum.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Comuns de comunicação, consumo agroecológico, alimentos comuns, práticas comunicativas.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article explores the commons character of community-supported agriculture (CSA) based on the analysis of the communicative practices and tools adopted by different groups in the organization of agroecological collectives.

Following decades of cyclical economic and financial crises, aggravated by recent climate and health crises, food provision has become increasingly relevant. These disruptive events suggest the need to find sustainable, healthy, ecological, local and fair alternatives (Castells et al., 2017), which go beyond individualistic concerns of health and wellbeing (Schrang & Running, 2016). Alternative food networks emerge entailing a collective dimension of emancipatory character linked with community organizing, food sovereignty and eco-social justice (Edwards, 2016). Studying these phenomena through a communication perspective allows distinguishing the consumption of *food as a commodity* from the collective organizing of *food as a commons* (Moreira & Fuster Morell, 2020; Vivero-Pol, 2017; Vivero-Pol et al., 2018).

Recent literature on agro-food systems from a communications perspective mostly emphasizes external communication strategies, namely through the lens of (social) marketing (Brescianini, 2019; Brunori, 2007; Dias et al., 2016; Molero-Cortés et al., 2019), which often reveals critical standpoints on the guiles of greenwashing (Hope, 2020; Watson, 2017). These approaches, however, go beyond the scope of the present study, which focuses on the circulation of internal knowledge as an important aspect of collective action within social movements (Cammaerts, 2015; Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Mattoni, 2013; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2019). As “communication, community, and the commons stand in a dialectical relationship” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 304), communication has a fundamental role in the reproduction of the commons (Hess & Ostrom, 2007; Stehr, 2017). Whereas community-supported agriculture studies generally recognize the importance of internal communications in sustaining the initiatives, they rarely delve into the concrete (micro) dynamics of communication that take place within the groups (Broad, 2013) often fueled by precarious,

volunteer labour (Calvo, 2020; Linabary et al., 2021). Moreover, studies on the adoption of digital technologies for food networks highlight concerns on the predominant use of global proprietary technologies as opposed to platforms for commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2006; Espelt et al., 2019; Prost et al., 2018).

These are some of the fundamental aspects to understanding how communication affects food commons in practice –and how communication research can be transformed by this praxis (Barranquero, 2019; Fuchs, 2020)–. This paper contributes to filling those gaps with empirical evidence of collaborative communications for the (re)production of food commons within the community-supported agriculture movement. Based on a comparative study of Portuguese CSAs, the main question addressed is how communication affects the commons qualities of community-supported agriculture. To answer this, we analyze internal “commoning” processes of CSAs through their communicative practices that promote member’s participation, collective decision making, economic transparency, knowledge exchange, technological sovereignty and eco-social justice. The article begins with an introduction to community-supported agriculture as a movement to relocalize the agro-food system. Then presents the commons balance framework that guides our analysis (Fuster Morell, 2018). The following section outlines the research methodology and introduces the selected cases. The results section consists of the assessment of the commons qualities and communication needs of seven CSAs. Finally, we synthesize the results and the cross-disciplinary contribution of our research, which links commons epistemology with communication studies.

## COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE MOVEMENT AND THE COMMONS

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the neoliberal and globalizing “green revolution” brought about the strong industrialization of agro-food systems (Rosset et al., 2000). In response, counter-hegemonic ecological movements emerged all over the world, demanding food sovereignty and fair trade, fighting against pesticides, genetically

modified organisms, patented seeds, among other claims (Carson, 2002).

Community-supported agriculture began to emerge in the 1960s with the first Teikei (Alliance) groups in Japan, and later the CSAs in the United States of America and Europe (where these are also designated by the French term AMAP - *Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne*). According to a working definition advanced in 2015 by representatives from 22 European countries, CSAs are:

... a direct partnership between the group of consumers and producer(s) where the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming activities are shared through long-term agreements. Generally operating on a small and local scale, CSA aims to provide quality food produced in an agroecological way (Volz et al., 2016, p. 8).

Today the movement spreads across the globe, with over 12 500 active consumer groups in four continents, feeding more than two million people (Urgenci, 2021). According to the International Community Supported Agriculture Network (Urgenci), in 2015 there were more than 2 000 AMAPs involving roughly 300 000 people in France alone (Volz et al., 2016), while in Spain –where the cooperative model is more common– there were 75 CSAs involving roughly 7 500 consumers and farmers.

In Portugal, growth has been slow. The first AMAP was created in 2004 (Martins Soria, 2016) and by 2021 there were only seven active AMAPs/CSAs in the country. These groups have joined forces in Regenerar, the Portuguese Network of Solidarity Agroecology, created in 2018 to articulate local groups at the state level, while bridging with the international movement, namely through Urgenci, of which Regenerar is a member. The Charter of Principles of the Portuguese CSAs defines agroecology, proximity and *food as a commons* as the three guiding pillars:

Food is a cultural act, a common good, not a commodity. Healthy food for everyone is not just a fundamental right. It is a matter that concerns everyone and it is part of life itself. That is why it is a commons we all

have to look after from production to consumption. Food as a commons implies a principle of co-responsibility between everyone at all levels: co-responsibility in sharing production processes; co-responsibility in distribution, allowing access for all, co-responsibility in consumption... (AMAP, 2018).

#### “COMMONING” AND COMMUNICATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Commons have existed since time immemorial in the form of common lands for cultivation, forests for village supply, water for community fishery among other open and shared resources governed by communities, as opposed to the State-market / public-private dichotomy (Ostrom, 1990). Recently, there has been a growing demand for urban commons and, with the advance of digital technologies, commons-based peer-production collaborative economies emerged (Benkler, 2006; Harvey, 2013). Regardless of the context in which the concept is used, three essential elements characterize it: an open shared *resource*, governed by a *community* of users, with a set of *rules* for community governance (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). It is the dynamic interaction between these elements that constitutes the commons—hence the famous quote “there is no commons without commoning” (Linebaugh, 2008)—. Therefore, it is important to study the commons through the living, social processes that sustain them, including communication (Hess & Ostrom, 2007).

The commons balance framework proposed by Fuster Morell and Espelt (2018) is “an analytical tool that helps to visualize the democratic qualities of collaborative economy initiatives, differentiate models, provide insight into the sustainability of their design, and inform technological development” (p. 3). It originally defined five dimensions of analysis: governance model, economic strategy, knowledge policies, technological base and social responsibility (Fuster Morell, 2018), later adding an impact dimension to measure the number of people impacted by the initiatives (Fuster Morell & Espelt, 2019). Concerning *governance*, the framework addresses the type of organization (either a private company, democratic organizations, such as co-ops or associations, or

“pro-commons” public administrations) and whether the governance is based on open participation, providing tools (or not) for member’s engagement and decision-making. On the *economy*, the indicators are the goal (profit, non-profit or middle-profit) and transparency (whether economic information is accessible to members). Regarding *technology*, the framework examines the adoption of Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) and how (de)centralized the technological architecture is. As for *knowledge*, the use of copyleft licenses and open data formats are commons qualities to consider. Lastly, on *social responsibility*, the framework examines the relevance of the projects towards social inclusion and its environmental policies.

The commons balance framework has been employed in the comparative analysis of one hundred commons-based peer-production cases in Barcelona (Fuster Morell & Espelt, 2019), digital mapping citizen science projects (Fuster Morell et al., 2021), urban food networks (Espelt & Moreira, 2019; Moreira & Fuster Morell, 2020) and sustainable platform economies (Renau et al., 2021), among others. It is a flexible tool that can be adapted to meet particular research needs. When applied to cases with stronger similarity to each other, for instance, it makes sense to adapt indicators for greater granularity. Previous studies have highlighted the utility of the framework in comparative research, and some affirmed that future research should cover additional channels of communication besides platforms and public communications, combined with interviews for deeper understanding about the internal organization processes (Fuster Morell et al., 2021). In fact, the focus on institutional criteria such as the legal type of organization, may hinder the identification of the real pro-commons practices that support the initiatives. The present study proposes an adaptation of the framework to incorporate a communication perspective to assess the practices and tools that feed into food commoning processes (Table 1).

## METHODOLOGY

We develop a comparative analysis of the commons character of community-supported agriculture groups in Portugal based on the observation of internal communication practices and tools. Following

TABLE 1  
COMMONS AND COMMUNICATIONS: DIMENSIONS, INDICATORS AND CRITERIA FOR THE ANALYSIS OF  
COMMONING QUALITIES OF FOOD COMMONS

Commons dimension	Indicators of pro-commons qualities	Criteria		
		Fulfillment	Partially	Unfulfillment
Governance	<i>Type of governance</i> : how does communication flow?	Horizontal commons / peer governance	Some level of horizontality	Top-down / private governance
	<i>Open participation</i> : can members participate in governance and decisions?	Provides tools for participation	Some tools provided	No participation tools provided
Economy	<i>Value</i> : do members participate in value generation?	Active participation	Some participation	Very limited / no participation
	<i>Transparency</i> : is economic information available?	Any member can access economic info	Some info accessible	No economic info provided
Technology	FLOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software)	All tech tools are FLOSS	Some tech tools are FLOSS	No FLOSS
	<i>Analogical</i> : does it combine analogical means of communication?	Physical boards or info points at the delivery point	Some print materials	No physical means of communication

Knowledge	<i>Internal exchange</i> : does the group promote learning activities / communities?	Knowledge exchange activities	Some knowledge exchange initiatives	No knowledge exchange
	<i>External exchange</i> : does the group participate in external debates?	Knowledge sharing and outreach	Some knowledge sharing initiatives	No knowledge exchange
Social responsibility	<i>Social justice</i> : Does the project have a role towards social inclusion/justice?	The group fosters social justice	Some social responsibility inclusion policies	No inclusion policy or action
	<i>Ecological justice</i> : Is there participatory certification?	Participatory certification by members	Third party organic certification	No mechanisms of certification

Source: The author, adapted from Fuster Morell and Espelt (2018).

an action-research approach (Chen et al., 2018; Lewin, 1946) and militant ethnography methods (Juris, 2007), the qualitative research combines a focus group, visual methods and brief interviews.

### *Case selection*

The selected cases are the seven CSAs or AMAPs<sup>2</sup> (as they are most commonly known in Portugal) that form the Portuguese network Regenerar, which brings together 22 producers and roughly 300 consumers (Table 2 and Figure 1).

TABLE 2  
MEMBERS OF REGENERAR

AMAPs members of Regenerar network in Portugal				
Name	Year of creation	No. of Associate Producers	No. of Consumer families	Food provided as a commons
AMAP Famalicão	2014	1	5	Vegetables
AMAP Gaia	2015	1	5	Vegetables
CSA Partilhar as Colheitas	2015	4	180	Vegetables, fruit, meat, eggs, other transformed products
AMAP Porto	2016	6	42	Vegetables, fruit, olive oil, mushrooms, eggs, bread
AMAP Guimarães	2016	4	20	Vegetables, fruit, eggs, mushrooms
AMAP Sado/Alvalade	2019	4	20	Vegetables, cheese, bread
AMAP Maravilha	2019	2	17	Vegetables and pastry

Source: The author with data from the 3rd General Assembly (2020).

<sup>2</sup> The acronym in Portuguese stands for *Associação pela Manutenção da Agricultura de Proximidade*.

Although a systematic socio-demographic characterization of the Portuguese CSAs is yet to be done, our ethnographic work within the network in recent years allows us to outline the profile of consumers and producers in general terms. The first are mostly urban or peri-urban consumers, aged between 30 and 50, who live and work in the country's largest cities (Lisbon and Porto), satellite cities (Almada, Vila Nova de Gaia) or wider peripheries (Setúbal, Palmela, Farnalhão) –although in some cases with closer links to (neo)ruralities (Montemor-o-Novo, Alvalade do Sado, Cercal, Guimarães)–. Most of the consumers are motivated by access to organic products and healthy food, although some groups demonstrate a stronger activist and collectivist vocation (Faria, 2020). The associated producers are aged between 35 and 45 years old, have higher education degrees (other than agronomy) and moved to rural areas in the last decade to farm (there are some exceptions).

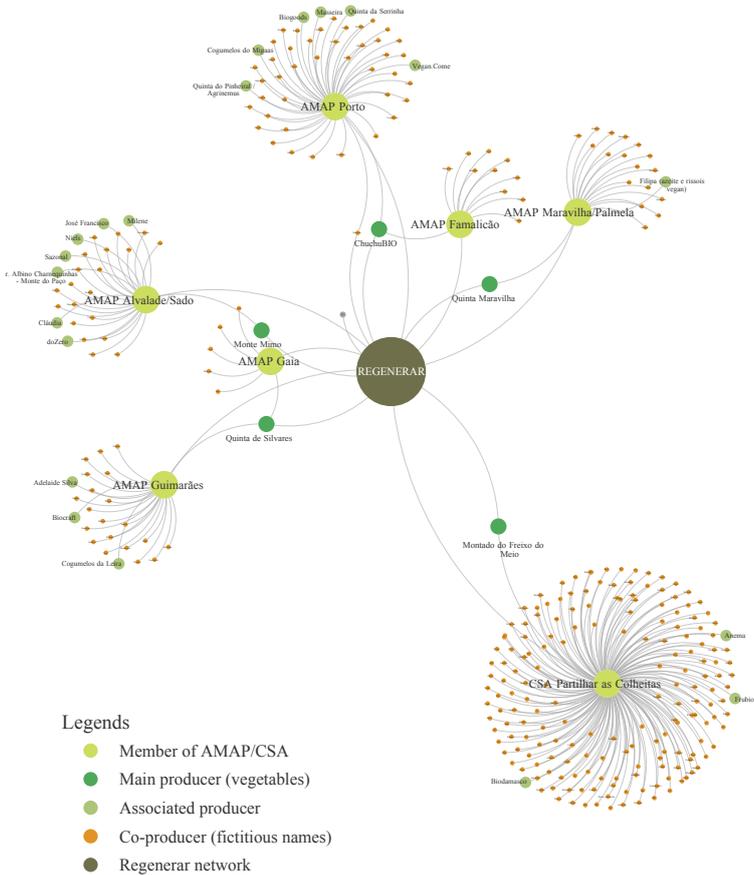
### *Data collection methods*

The research is informed by active participation of the author in both AMAP Porto and in the Regenerar network.<sup>3</sup> Specific data for this study was collected during an online meeting on Jitsi, in December 2020. With the motto “To communicate is to put in common”, attributed to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the objective of the meeting was to share the communication processes and practices of the AMAPs in Portugal, enabling the sharing of knowledge among network's members. Fifteen people participated, including five producers, four consumers, two researchers and four observers interested in creating new AMAPs in Portugal. An experienced facilitator mediated the four-hour focus group session. During the meeting participants did a “live survey” of the communication tools in use by each AMAP and shared best practices and communication needs. The session was recorded and transcribed and generated a set of documents that were used for

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<sup>3</sup> The author is involved with the movement since the first national meeting of CSAs in 2015, is a co-founder of the national network, a member of its driving team and a “co-producer” in AMAP Porto.

FIGURE 1  
MAPPING THE MEMBERS OF THE PORTUGUESE NETWORK OF  
SOLIDARITY AGROECOLOGY, REGENERAR\*



\* An interactive version of the map is available at <https://kumu.io/regenerar/rede-das-amap-csa-em-portugal>

Source: The author, with data from the 3rd General Assembly of Regenerar (December 2020).

the analysis (Table 3). Data was confirmed and updated in May 2021 through brief structured phone interviews.

TABLE 3  
LIST OF COLLECTED DOCUMENTS FOR ANALYSIS

Document	Date of collection
Session plan “Comunicar é pôr em comum”	December 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2020
Session transcript (six pages)	December 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2020
Survey of communication tools in use by each AMAP (one table)	December 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2020
Results of the focus groups session regarding communication needs (three pages)	Updated on May 2021
Communication proposal presented at the III General Assembly building upon the results from the session	December 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2020
Photo-documentation of communication artifacts used in AMAPs’ delivery points (infopoint, panels, barometer)*	December 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2020
	2018-2021

\* More than just cultural objects, the visual documents inserted in this study represent communicative practices (Rose, 2016) and serve as source of evidence of commons-oriented artifacts used by some of the cases in the delivery points  
Source: The author.

### *Data analysis methods*

Data was analyzed through the application of an adaptation of Fuster Morell’s (2018) commons balance framework, as explained in the previous section (see Table 1). The indicators incorporate the perspective of communication to assess the commoning qualities of community-supported agriculture groups. In a context in which participation and involvement of both farmers, consumers and “co-producers”<sup>4</sup> is key, the analysis focuses on the internal communication mechanisms put in place by these actors for the governance of their food communities. The

<sup>4</sup> The term “co-producers” has been adopted by the members of Regenerar to name consumers, aiming at reflecting the long-term commitment to sustainable food production by all members involved.

application of a conceptual framework centered on concrete dimensions of analysis, allowed the systematic interpretation of data to guarantee the objectivity of the study.

**RESULTS**

Our analysis shows how community-supported agriculture groups adopt communication tools and practices to collectively organize commons-oriented food systems. In this section, first we present how their communicative approaches to governance, economy, knowledge, technology and social responsibility affect their commons qualities, and then we reflect about their communication needs.

*Commons qualities of CSAs through a communications perspective*

The application of the commons balance framework reveals distinct levels of fulfilment of commons qualities by each CSA (as summarized in Table 4).

TABLE 4  
COMPARISON BETWEEN CASES ACCORDING TO THE  
COMMONS BALANCE FRAMEWORK

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Governance	Communication flows	Light grey	White	Dark grey	Dark grey	White	White	Dark grey
	Open participation	Light grey	White	Dark grey	Dark grey	White	White	Dark grey
Economy	Value	Light grey	White	Dark grey	Dark grey	White	White	Light grey
	Transparency	Light grey	White	Light grey	Light grey	White	White	Light grey
Technology	FLOSS	White	White	Light grey	Light grey	Light grey	White	Dark grey
	Analogical comms	Dark grey	White	Dark grey	Dark grey	White	White	Dark grey
Knowledge	Internal	Light grey	White	Dark grey	Dark grey	White	White	Light grey
	External	Light grey	White	Light grey	Light grey	White	White	Dark grey
Social responsibility	Social justice	Light grey	White	Dark grey	Dark grey	White	White	Light grey
	Ecological certification	Light grey	Light grey	Dark grey	Dark grey	Light grey	Light grey	Dark grey

Cases: 1. AMAP Porto, 2. AMAP Famalicão, 3. AMAP Sado / Alvalade, 4. AMAP Palmela, 5. AMAP Gaia, 6. AMAP Guimarães, 7. CSA Partilhar as Colheitas.

Legend: Dark grey: fulfilment; Light grey: Partial fulfilment; White: unfulfillment.

Source: The author.

Below, we develop a comparative analysis of the seven cases for each dimension.

*On governance:* All groups are informal associations, except CSA Partilhar as Colheitas, which is managed by a cooperative and represents the largest group in the Regenerar network, with about 180 members. This CSA organizes monthly meetings online, has set up an online forum where all members can participate in working groups and different debates. It is also the only group with paid communications staff. Two other groups stand out in terms of commons-oriented governance: AMAP Sado/Alvalade, which adopts sociocracy for collective organizing and decision-making, and whose members actively participate in the distribution process and have well-established agreements (contracts) between producers and consumers; and AMAP Maravilha, which is organized in working groups, holds regular meetings, monthly collective working parties, and at least two annual assemblies, where decisions are made by consensus.

In the case of AMAP Porto, which is mostly run by associate producers, there is some level of members participation, although limited to non-mandatory volunteering tasks to help organize the weekly distribution and an annual meeting to report on the evolution of the group and to discuss important issues. The remaining three groups do not hold meetings or provide any participation tools for their members –these are also the smallest groups, where usually one sole producer takes responsibility for all the management and organization–. In these cases, communication flows are top-down, from producer to consumer, without any channels for horizontal communication between members.

*On economy:* Concerning mechanisms for members' participation in economic value generation, AMAPs Sado/Alvalade and Maravilha stand out again. In the first case, members have access to economic information inherent to the farming production, such as investments, hours of labor, income, and the group considers volunteer collective workdays<sup>5</sup> as economic input. In 2020, the group promoted a successful

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<sup>5</sup> Known as “ajudadas”, helping days when members of the AMAPs volunteer for jobs that need to be done on the farms.

FIGURE 2

AMAP'S DEFINITION AND PRINCIPLES IN QUINTA MARAVILHA, PALMELA\*



\* There is a panel in the wall of the room where distribution takes place with the fundamental principles of AMAP. A tasklist is usually available at the delivery point

Source: Sara Moreira (August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019).

crowdfunding campaign to invest in a greenhouse to improve production during the winter season.

In the case of AMAP Maravilha, members are deeply involved in the discussion of the economic strategy and actively participate in ways to tackle the viability of prices versus fair income for farmers –for instance, in 2020, the group decided to pay holidays and the thirteenth month of the year to farmers–. The group also set up a “prosumers” exchange scheme, promoting the active role of consumers in providing products to the group.

In the case of CSA Partilhar as Colheitas, some economic information is available to members and the online forum has been used to make

collective decisions about economic issues. Whereas regarding AMAP Porto, there is an annual economic report to inform members about the evolution of the economy of the group, and members participate in a common fund through a yearly fee. In the case of Famalicão, Gaia and Guimarães, no economic information is provided.

FIGURE 3  
AMAP'S BAROMETER\*



\* On the last delivery of 2020, members of AMAP Porto shared their thoughts on diverse issues affecting the group.

Source: João Costa (December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

*On technology:* Google-based forms and spreadsheets are the most common digital tools used by the groups to organize orders (AMAP Porto, Sado/Alvalade, Guimarães, Palmela). The cases that stand out in terms of the adoption of Free/Libre Open Source software to manage orders are: CSA Partilhar as Colheitas, which has developed its own digital platform besides the online forum based on Wordpress; and AMAP Gaia, which adopted Open Food Network's platform Katuma.

In the case of AMAP Sado/Alvalade, the group demonstrates concerns towards the ownership of technological tools used (mentioning the move from WhatsApp to Telegram for ethical reasons), but still depends on proprietary software to organize internally, and occasionally

resorts to Loomio for decision-making, besides having physical boards at the delivery point. AMAP Maravilha uses WhatsApp for urgent and brief communications and says “everything started to work better from the moment we organized ourselves with Discord, through which anyone can have access to what the other groups are working on” (personal communication, May 2021).

In the case of AMAP Famalicão, farmers organize orders through one-to-one SMS and phone calls, but most of the communication happens in-person, on a weekly basis. In Porto, the group promotes participation and horizontal communication through messaging apps (one WhatsApp group for all members, another one for producers), and farmers use a unidirectional mailing-list for announcements.

*On knowledge:* some groups demonstrate an advanced level of knowledge exchange internal to the group, of which a study group on agroforestry for collective learning of techniques to improve the productivity of the farm in the case of AMAP Maravilha is a good example, as are the open days at CSA Partilhar as Colheitas, which also delivers a print newspaper with news from the farm every fortnight together with the food baskets. In the case of AMAP Sado/Alvalade, the sharing of knowledge on food and farming has led to the creation of a community: “people learned that they can do things together and be active in the community” (personal communication, May 2021).

Externally, members from those three groups, as well as from AMAP Porto, occasionally participate in public events, projects, seminars and other agro-food-related activities. Knowledge sharing is an especially important aspect promoted by CSA Partilhar as Colheitas in their external communications with a clear strategy for outreach. In the case of AMAPs Famalicão, Gaia and Guimarães, there do not seem to be knowledge exchange mechanisms in practice, except for day-to-day interaction in the delivery point, except in the case of AMAP Gaia, where producers are seldom present, and consumers generally do not know each other.

FIGURE 4  
BULLETIN OF CSA PARTILHAR AS COLHEITAS (APRIL 2021)



Source: CSA Partilhar as Colheitas (2021).

*On social responsibility:* AMAP Sado/Alvalade and Maravilha are more aligned with a social justice approach as they discuss and put in practice ways to democratize access to organic food for activists and people with less economic possibilities, for instance through work exchange and other collaborations. In the case of CSA Partilhar as Colheitas, the cooperative employs about 20 people in a rural area suffering from depopulation. Whereas in the case of Famalicão, Gaia, Guimarães and Porto there is no known policy or initiative concerning

social inclusion, in Porto there has been an initiative of food donation to charity during the Covid-19 confinement in 2020. Concerning the ecological dimension, all associate producers from AMAPs Porto, Famalicão, Gaia, Guimarães and CSA Partilhar as Colheitas are third party organic certified. The latter promotes some degree of participatory certification through frequent open days at the farm. In the case of AMAP Sado/Alvalade and Maravilha, producers are not organic certified but they have mechanisms in place for participatory certification by members.

### *Communication needs*

In a focus group session in December 2020, participants highlighted the lack of communication governance and the low involvement of members of the different AMAPs in the internal communication of the network. Additionally, knowledge about tools, processes and the use of communication technologies seems to be unevenly distributed. The heterogeneous literacy of the different AMAPs regarding the use of digital communication tools unveils the need for specific training on how to use and benefit from digital platform-supported communication before attempting to implement and manage collective decision-making methodologies through these means. Overall, participants agree that these instruments are supposed to facilitate the interactions and aim to bring AMAP members together. As such, some suggested it would be helpful to have an instruction guide on “how to” apply participatory decision-making methodologies, its etiquette and ethics, with the expectation that, through more “intuitive” and agile tools it would be possible to prevent information losses.

Additionally, the need for face-to-face training to introduce these digital communication tools appears as a condition to accelerate the understanding and agile development of operational competence for effective internal communication among the CSAs members. Moreover, participants in the focus group highlighted the need for a common repository with shared documentation –including information about best practices and the array of communication tools in use by the CSAs, and what they are used for–. Besides knowing how to use the communication tools available, the need to create a

specific working group for internal communication was raised, which would be responsible for the dissemination of communications and for promoting interactions. Participants suggested a member of each AMAP should integrate the communication group to improve the network's communication flow.

Other than the content of the communication, the way of transmitting it appears as an influencing factor for its assimilation. The participants agree that the experience on how to disseminate content should be adapted according to the audiences, to “be joyful and easy to relate”, which could happen during the tasting of products, “to please various audiences”. The group acknowledged that it should be left to the discretion of each of the different AMAPs to choose the terms and uses of their communication tools, as well as the way they should document their initiatives and share their practices with other AMAPs and the general public.

Although this focus group aimed at identifying (internal) communication needs for the self-management of the groups, participants voiced some concerns regarding the external communication of the AMAPs. The group believes that it is necessary to define a common identity for the AMAPs to better communicate their objectives, activities and initiatives through its own language, describing the movement and its members to external audiences. Decisions about what and how to communicate would also encompass audiences: to whom is each message intended, which information would be shared with everyone and which would be directed to specific groups. Therefore, the communicative needs of the network raise additional questions about the governance of communication, the roles and responsibilities concerning the channels for dissemination and which communication tools to use.

## SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

Our research proposed an adaptation of Fuster Morell's (2018) commons balance framework of analysis to assess how communication affects the commons qualities of community-supported agriculture. The application of the framework allowed to illuminate how the formal

TABLE 5  
SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATION TOOLS USED BY  
COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE GROUPS

Communication tools	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Horizontal messaging (WhatsApp, Telegram)	x		x	x			
Unidirectional messaging (newsletter, mailing-list, SMS)	x	x			x	x	
Meetings	x		x	x			
Decision-making tools			x				
Physical boards	x		x	x			
Communication roles			x	x			x
Communication staff							x

Cases: 1. AMAP Porto, 2. AMAP Famalicão, 3. AMAP Sado / Alvalade, 4. AMAP Palmela, 5. AMAP Gaia, 6. AMAP Guimarães, 7. CSA Partilhar as Colheitas.

Source: The author.

description of community-supported agriculture can diverge from daily practices, showing that the ways groups communicate are indicative of the engagement of members in their communities. In this section we synthesize and discuss the main findings of the comparative study of “commoning” processes through a communications perspective, guided by the five main dimensions of analysis of the commons balance: governance model, economic transparency, knowledge exchange, technological sovereignty and eco-social justice.

### *Communication for peer governance*

Instead of looking at the type of organizations as an indicator of commons governance per se, we propose to look at the way these organizations develop and negotiate their peer governance systems (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019) in practice through communicative action, independently of being co-ops, informal associations, private companies or public administrations. The adoption of open tools for participation and mechanisms for horizontal communication allows one to assess their commons-based character as to whether information flows top-down or horizontally; the virtual or face-to-face nature of communication spaces

for collective consensus or consent-based decisions; the existence of decision-making by imposition or notification. What is shared, how it is shared, and who it is shared with, has implications in the quality of what is understood as a community. All groups refer to different ways of communicating in the collective, with a greater or lesser degree of participation and horizontality, and point out various tools, such as online discussion forums, collaborative documents or messaging applications to facilitate communication and decision-making among members. The definition of etiquette rules about the use of these tools and the decentralization of processes in multiple groups/layers of discussion and work are in line with Ostrom's (1990) classic principles for governing a commons. The study highlighted some concerns about hermetic communication processes (Ostrom & Walker, 1991), such as the creation of silos in which information does not circulate (or only reaches a few), and ways of fighting against them so that coordination is transparent and participatory, as in the case where the groups adopt sociocracy as a dynamic governance methodology (Christian, 2016). This allows streamlining the mechanisms for internal communication and decision-making, even if an imbalanced expertise on tools and techniques by different members seems to generate tensions and fragilities.

### *Communication for a commons-oriented economy*

Addressing the economic dimension of the commons from the perspective of communication makes it possible to distinguish the degree of involvement and participation of members in the co-construction of a commons economy. The economic objective becomes the collective process of deciding and acting on the economy itself. Beyond making economic information accessible and transparent, it is important to understand what the community decides to do with it. As such, we found evidence of pro-commons economic practices based on communicative actions, such as crowdfunding for collective investments campaigns, information on labor needs on farms, or calls for *ajudadas*, whose results are also seen as economic input. In all these steps, communication is key and goes well beyond accountability and management reports: it involves calling people to deliberate and

participate in the processes, favoring a solidarity economy that is worked in common.

### *Tech sovereignty for food commons*

In Portugal, the food sovereignty movement does not yet seem to consider technological sovereignty as a relevant aspect in the construction of food commons. Only one case explicitly demonstrated concerns with proprietary software. All the others in general seemed to be focused on plain, agile and cost-free technological solutions to quickly solve problems and address group needs, such as communication between members (WhatsApp or Facebook groups) and order organization (Google forms and spreadsheets). The absence of a critical stance in relation to the origin of technological tools contrasts with the strong awareness in regards to the origin of food. There are exceptions that recognize there is a problem with the use of such tools, but do not have the time, resources or knowledge to try other solutions. On the other hand, non-digital technologies play an important role in the group's internal interactions and serve as a way for inclusion and participation.

### *On knowledge as a commons*

Far from the days when community practices were so ingrained in the daily lives of communities that there was no written law for their governance and knowledge was passed down orally from generation to generation (Illich, 1983), today it is often in urban settings –with low communitarian memory– where groups of people are experimenting with commons-based practices. Knowledge sharing is an essential part for the development and sustenance of the CSAs we studied and happens both internally within the groups and externally to other publics. From collective groups of study on agroecological techniques, to meetings between producers to share experiences, to the participation in international projects and networks.

### *From social responsibility to eco-social justice*

One can distinguish between actions that seek social inclusion as civic responsibility, and those that intend to bring about deeper changes and that are concerned with social justice. Communication is key because it

is through it that communities discuss and arrive at new understandings about emancipatory inclusion, for instance, how to guarantee access to food for all regardless of the financial situation.

Regarding Fuster's environmental indicator, we seek to make another distinction that is related to certain communication practices specific to groups that have agroecology as a basic principle. The most common way of ensuring that production methods are environmentally friendly is through organic certification issued by an external entity, often displayed in the form of a label assigned to producers. When we talk about commoning processes, it makes sense to take into account other ways of involving the community in the "participatory certification" of agroecological production methods. This type of certification depends on the existence of meetings, visits, discussion, evaluation, and mutual aid between members of a CSA. For that to happen, communication processes and practices need to be put in place.

### *Impact*

A later version of the commons balance framework (Fuster Morell et al., 2019) includes an impact dimension to measure the number of adopters or people involved in the economic initiative. Although this study presents the size of each group in quantitative terms, measuring impact according to the relevance of their communications would require a new round of research. In his studies on the impact of ICTs in agroecological cooperativism in Catalonia, Espelt (2020) concludes "professionalized CSA's with better ICT adoption and constituted as agroecology platform cooperatives, have a greater impact and an increased potential for promoting a food consumption model based on agroecology" (p. 269). In fact, the largest group analyzed, with more than 180 members, is the only one that has a professional structure in the organization of the CSA and paid communication staff. In the remaining cases, communications are considered important to the maintenance and socialization of the groups, but are in no way formalized nor remunerated, since they are not recognized as a strategic pillar for strengthening and expanding the CSAs.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to examine how communication affects the commons qualities of community-supported agriculture. It compared seven Portuguese CSAs through the application of a commons framework to analyze the communication tools and practices that feed into their governance models, economic strategies, knowledge policies, technological base and social responsibility. Our findings reveal that the existence or absence of communication is a condition that can transform hierarchical *governance* into peer governance, fostering effective members participation and collective decision-making; an opaque *economy* into a participatory process of value generation, as members are informed and actively contribute to the sustainability of the community; the blackbox of *knowledge* into vivid learning communities of practice; and social responsibility into *eco-social justice*. It also brought evidence of the disconnection between the food sovereignty and *tech sovereignty* movements. The study unveiled the need for technical training, strategic development and better-defined roles in a context where communication work is volunteer and precarious.

The main contribution of this article is the adaptation of Fuster's commons balance framework to incorporate a communication perspective, which constitutes an original approach as it brings commons epistemology to communication studies. Through the analysis of communications we are able to understand how communities work in practice, beyond their institutional profiles. The ways groups communicate reveal the level and quality of participation and the involvement of all in the communities they belong to. This leads us to suggest there is no commoning without communication.

Although the study is limited to a small set of Portuguese agricultural organizations, it opens new avenues of research, as the same framework can be applied in the future to extend the research to similar organizations from other geographic regions, as well as other organizations with different economic activities besides food consumption.

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