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## **Can cooperatives function as a primary model for organization in the postgrowth world?**

Gea D.M. Wijers

*Business, Management and Organisation, Faculty of Social Sciences, Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands*

Hollandseweg 1

6700 KN WAGENINGEN

[gea.wijers@wur.nl](mailto:gea.wijers@wur.nl) / ORCID: 0000-0002-8658-1808

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# **Can cooperatives function as a primary model for organization in the postgrowth world?**

## **Abstract**

The central question in this paper is: In what ways can cooperatives function as a primary model for organization in a postgrowth world? This question is addressed in two dimensions. First, what are the internal and external challenges to the cooperative organization as an inclusive social business model? The inquiry here distinguishes between cooperatives as either emancipatory or context-dependent organizations. Second, what is, in practice, the role of the institutional context in cooperative business strategy formulation? This section discusses the dichotomy between cooperatives as community-based or market-driven organizations. Findings provide insights into the social dynamics that tie together community-driven ideals, economic ambitions, institutional infrastructures and the cooperative model. The discussion on the cooperative potential allow for profound reflections on a postgrowth future. Conclusions are presented based on the paradox that a larger role of governments may be a major determinant of post economic growth success.

**Keywords:** Cooperatives; Transformation; Postgrowth economy; Institutional infrastructure; Community-driven

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the challenges and opportunities for the postgrowth economy to build on cooperative organizations. It is often claimed that co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. Given these values, cooperatives should be move towards adopting an inclusive social business model that provides access to goods, services and livelihood opportunities for low-income communities in commercially viable ways (Knickel et al., 2018). If this is co, could this business model also function as an essential building block for the postgrowth economy? This question is addressed in two dimensions. First, what are the internal and external challenges to the cooperative organization as an inclusive social business model? This part of the inquiry distinguishes between cooperatives as either emancipatory or context-dependent organizations in a study of current empirical research. Second, what is, in practice, the role of the institutional context in cooperative business strategy formulation? This section discusses the dichotomy between cooperatives as community-based or market-driven organizations. range of market opportunities provided by the cooperative configuration. The aim is to add to existing theories on postgrowth by providing a critical discussion of empiric findings on the cooperative as an inclusive social organization. Findings will provide insights into opportunities, threats, challenges and weaknesses the cooperative model has shown in practice allowing for profound reflections on a postgrowth future.

There are many distinctions that can be made between types of cooperatives based on, among others, their financial structure, type of membership, decision-making structures and size as well as the nature of the work that they are based upon (Bijman and Hanisch, 2012). We opt to concentrate on one of its founding social business models which is the small and medium size producer organization in agriculture, mainly from the dairy sector. Among the types of cooperatives (for instance, consumer cooperatives or worker

cooperatives) the producer cooperatives marketing a perishable food product like dairy, tend to enlist the highest level of participation and engagement by its independent members and therefore allows for a fundamental exploration of cooperative potential in a postgrowth economy (International Labour Organization, 2018).

## **2. Theoretical framework**

A cooperative can be defined as an autonomous association of people united voluntarily to meet their economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled business (International Cooperative Alliance, 1995). Several tensions in the cooperative model affect its functioning in practice, of which a selected few are juxtaposed in this theoretical framework. These tensions are understood as figuring on two juxtaposed sliding scales for (1) endogenous factors and (2) exogenous factors. In this way, choices between four extremities (emancipatory – societal microcosm vs. market-driven – community-driven) may result in the strategic organizational trade-offs that can create an internally and externally balanced and embedded cooperative organization.

On the one hand, based on its endogenous capacities, cooperatives are considered to have great potential to advance a sustainable economy through the empowerment of individual actors by creating economies of scale, collective voice and negotiating power.

Cooperatives are considered emancipatory organizations based on the idea that all people can create their own economic opportunities and, thus, cooperatives can be an instrument to change societies (Cheney et al., 2014). In many emerging economies the assumption of a ‘cooperative advantage’ that should result in the emancipation of rural populations and poverty reduction has been a driver in the governmental support to cooperatives (ICA, 2015; Worldbank, 2012; Valdivia, 2001).

On the other hand, based on its dependence on exogenous factors (such as government policies, societal legitimation and the biophysical environment) the cooperative

organization can be considered an institutional microcosm of the formal and informal rules that govern a society at large (Basu and Chakraborty, 2008). Being an embedded organization, a cooperative cannot function as an independent playground for individual social experiments unless these are deliberate efforts by committed members and local stakeholders in engagement with a wider societal context. Inherently, it is suggested, cooperatives reproduce the societal relations they are embedded in and the change of cooperatives requires context-specific approaches.

A second tension that merits consideration in assessing the cooperative model for a postgrowth economy presents itself in relation to the marketplace. At the organizational level, cooperatives are caught in a clash of discourses on social organizations and investor owned firms (Haddad et al., 2017). In a non-profit and community-driven understanding of cooperatives, their main function is to fill in institutional voids and respond to market failures in serving the interests of producers, users and other stakeholders by providing services and products otherwise inaccessible (Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives, 2018).

For others, the cooperative is considered as a direct competitor of investor-owned enterprises and part of the competitive struggle for positions on the marketplace. This market-driven understanding acknowledges that cooperatives are not necessarily inclusive as they prioritize the needs of specific stakeholder groups with the exclusion of others (Bernard and Spielman, 2009). In this perspective, the cooperative needs to provide return on members' financial investments and maximize its profits.

In practice, a diversity of hybrid cooperative configurations has evolved that resolve these tensions in distinct ways. Additionally, it seems the role of governments as facilitative or constrictive as well as disinterested or controlling goes beyond the assumption of context dependency of an institutional infrastructure. In what ways this effect may work out is also illustrated in the practical descriptions included in the chapters.

### **3. Methods**

This article systematically discusses cooperative potential based on literature study, empirical findings in own and other research and the implications of existing theories. It is a focused exploration of endogenous and exogenous challenges for the 'resurgence of cooperatives' in a postgrowth world (Schneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier, 2010). Central to the discussion are the juxtaposition of inherent tensions in the cooperative business model and their evaluation considering the empirical realities in cooperatives all over the world. The analysis of these realities takes place within theorizations on a 'postgrowth' society and the transformation into a 'new economy'. This discussion can form a catalyst to our thinking on what cooperatives could bring to a postgrowth economy, as demonstrated by fact-based research on agricultural cooperatives. This article contributes to academic knowledge generation for organization and management studies and cooperative studies. It fills a gap in our current knowledge on what we need to consider if the cooperative business model is to play a role in the postgrowth economy.

### **4. An emancipatory organization or a microcosm of society?**

It is often assumed that cooperatives can serve as redistributive structures by being inclusive and democratic membership-based organizations that support social equality and community development (Majurin, 2012). Working within a collective system is considered to have the potential to empower marginalized groups, providing them with a support system, allowing own agency and open markets that they cannot reach as individual producers. The emancipatory effect of cooperatives, however, is constricted by multiple barriers in both the organizational structure and the institutional context of the organization (Bijman, Muradian and Chechin, 2016). Two examples of gender mainstreaming in dairy cooperatives and an Ethiopian example on reaching the poorest households can illustrate some of the problems with the emancipation of marginalized groups by the cooperative.

#### **4.1 India: gender empowerment in a single-sex and a mixed dairy cooperative**

Dohmwirth's research (2014) looks at the potential of dairy cooperatives for women's empowerment in South India. Dairy production is of great importance for rural economy in India and women contribute significantly to this activity. The results of her study indicate that there are economic benefits for women participating in dairy cooperatives, however, the outcomes for women's empowerment are ambiguous. Only in some domains do women in dairy cooperatives rank their empowerment status higher compared to non-members. The results point to the fact that economic gains provided by cooperatives may not always lead to greater empowerment for women.

Dohmwirth used a control group from a single-sex cooperative to check if this focused cooperative could enhance the emancipatory effect. They, however, indicated even lower levels of empowerment compared to non-members. Looking at studies about other single-sex groups with similar findings, the following arguments could be supported. Firstly, women in single-sex cooperatives may be 'forced' by men to participate in an income-generating program since it is the only option to access its benefits. Secondly, men may feel threatened to lose their dominant position within the household or village, if income-generating activities are only provided to women. This politically driven effect leads frequently to an increased control of men over women's activities and incomes, especially under conditions characterized by a lack of employment and resources (Dohmwirth, 2014).

#### **4.2 Indonesia: inequality regimes in an Indonesian cooperative**

Wijers (2019a) conducted research on the inclusion of women in dairy cooperatives. Women are important actors in smallholder farmer milk production. Therefore, female input in the dairy cooperatives is essential to dairy development in emerging economies.

Within dairy value chains, however, their contributions are often not formally acknowledged or rewarded. A multileveled institutional perspective is used to explore the case of dairy development in the KPBS Pangalengan mixed-sex dairy cooperative on West Java, Indonesia.

Highlighting the impact of the institutional context on the assumed emancipatory effect of cooperatives, she finds that the ambitions for pro-poor and inclusive development that are voiced in recent Indonesian governmental strategic plans have not materialized in concrete measures. In politics, it seems, the scant rhetoric of gender mainstreaming seems to outstrip efforts to develop projects aimed at equalizing gender relations. Social inequality persists as an important barrier to economic development at all levels of society, including in gender relations. The crosscutting dimensions of education, property ownership, human capital and social class at work at KPBS seem to diminish the 'cooperative advantage' as access to resources is captured by the selected 'elites' instead of offering equal access.

The study shows how, formally, no explicitly gender inclusive formal policies and regulations as imposed on cooperatives. Informally, social norms projected on gender positions by the Indonesian patriarchal system and the Islamic revival are generally accepted. These can be considered important to maintain mechanisms that sustains a diversity of inequality regimes. Gender disempowering norms have re-institutionalized in recent processes of deepening political and religious austerity.

She summarizes by proposing that culture, mentality, local history and climate are strong predictors of the structure, representation and identity of the cooperative as well as the opportunities open to its members (Wijers 2019a, Conclusion).

These examples again underline the embedded nature of the cooperative. 'Empowering' marginalized groups and 'being empowered' are not isolated acts but are embedded



institutions at multiple levels of society as well as co-depend on the human capital accrued in, among others, social class and education (Batliwala, 2007). The effect of functioning within an emancipatory organization, therefore, cannot be separated from the norms and values this organization is embedded in. In the life-cycle of a cooperative these legal aspects are even considered of critical importance to the organization's survival. Vaguely defined property rights form a prime cause for cooperative degeneration (Cook and Burrell, 2009). Formal institutional constraints to empowering marginalized groups affect cooperatives. They can be categorized with Nippierd (2002) as constraints related to:

- Property ownership
- Inheritance rights
- Control over land
- Membership rights

A systematic and explicit empowerment for distinct groups is thus required within the cooperative organization to provide opportunities to groups of change agents. Two

Next to marginalization based on gender, the emancipatory effect of the cooperatives is often considered to facilitate pro-poor growth.

### **4.3 Ethiopia: Reaching the rural poor**

Bernard and Spielman (2009) published an important article on their research with rural producer organizations in Ethiopia. Based on a cooperative and national household survey data, we find that poorer farmers tend not to participate in these organizations although they may directly benefit from them. Also, when they do participate, they are often excluded from decision-making processes. With this they show to what extent the idea of cooperatives as inclusive and community-based organizations can be applied to agricultural cooperatives in the Ethiopian context. This limited capacity of rural producer

organizations to effectively reach poorer households and include them into their operation as equal members has also been argued by other authors in other regions. Among others, Basu and Chakraborty (2008) show that participation in Indian village dairy cooperatives does not equally include the poorest households and the richest households are able to have greater 'voice' in decision making. For Mongolia, Hilliova et al. (2017) show that the poorest tend to not be members of the village cooperative. In their analysis of cooperatives' inclusiveness of smaller herders and farmers and cooperatives' governance structures the top-down approach to cooperatives assigned roles to them that de facto turned them into the implementors of governmental policies.

Important for social equality and the regenerative capacities of a cooperative in the postgrowth economy is considered the heterogeneity or homogeneity of its membership. On the one hand, for a long time, a critical positive role has been assigned to the homogeneity of member interests for the sustainability of a cooperative. Member commitment was considered critical because it can be a measure of how well a cooperative is able to differentiate itself from an investor-owned firm (Fulton, 1999). Heterogeneity was said to lead to a divergence of interests, higher transaction costs and problems of common ownership. This has long been understood to mean that well-functioning cooperative needs to be homogeneous in its membership base. In parallel to the founding cooperative ideology based on solidarity and class struggle losing its importance, the homogeneity argument is losing force.

On the other hand, however, as Cook and Burrell (2009) argue, heterogeneity may stimulate creative problem-solving capacities and organizational regeneration. Also, it may be the most important factor for a cooperative's emancipatory actions and inclusion of marginalized groups. This heterogeneity can be categorized into farm-level heterogeneity (f.i. based on size or location); member-level heterogeneity (f.i. based on age, education or risk preference) and product-related heterogeneity (f.i. based on quality

or kind of product) (Höhler and Kühl, 2018). The positive attitudes towards the heterogeneity of membership in cooperative agribusiness are growing (Höhler and Kühl, 2018). Even building on heterogeneity is the multistakeholder cooperative that holds promise for the pro-commons economy.

#### **4.4 Multistakeholder cooperatives**

Gonzalez (2017) explores an alternative and, in theory, a more inclusive cooperative model, the multistakeholder cooperative (MSC). As opposed to conventional agricultural cooperatives made up of farmer members only, the multi-stakeholder model is defined by bringing together producers, consumers and restaurateurs in one single enterprise. This collaboration should be able to overcome the limitations of farmer cooperatives to be more focused on the economic than social and environmental benefits. Heterogeneous in membership, the challenge is to bring all stakeholders together on the mission and strategy the cooperatives employ. Generally, the mission statement of the MSC will reflect the interdependence of interests rather than singular objectives. In practice, this turns out also to be a weakness as difficulties in reaching agreement absorbed transaction costs and social relations were prioritized over market competitiveness.

As Gonzalez summarizes: “cooperatives do not exist in a policy or economic vacuum, but as today struggle to survive in capitalist societies rules by the laws of the market” (Gonzalez, 2017: 279). Also, he finds that the MSCs are more motivated to change the market than to adapt to it, showing their institutional entrepreneurship. Considering these assets, the MSC may hold real potential as a foundation for the postgrowth economy.

### **5. Community-driven or market-driven?**

Traditionally, agricultural cooperatives' emergence is understood as the compilation of numerous producer collaborations by farmers attempting to improve their socio-economic position and find access to a competitive market. The driving element in the

establishment of the cooperative is the economic justification for collective action (Cook and Burrell, 2009). Cooperative ideology, however, is also considered an important factor as the history of most agricultural cooperatives involves more than just making good on market failures. Farmers forming cooperatives are also concerned about the larger economic, political and social environment they were part of. In countries like Canada, the United States and The Netherlands, political movements associated with class struggles and a resistance to the capitalist economy were at the roots of cooperative formation (Fulton, 1999). Typically, in these Western countries was the bottom-up nature of the cooperative movement. In emerging nations, in contrast, cooperatives are often established based on top-down governmental interference. Nevertheless, these cooperatives, also are prone to politicking and class struggles.

### **5.1. Thailand: a centralized dairy sector**

Wijers (2019b) published her research on the ways in which institutional barriers hinder innovation in the cooperative dairy sector in Thailand. Findings include the conclusion that the competition between dairy interest and government control does not lead to an efficient and well-functioning internal dairy market. In practice, the friction between these interests seems to result in the politicization of the cooperatives as well as dependency relations that impede farmer entrepreneurship. As in examples presented in the last section, in Thailand the cooperative organizations, to a large extent, have been imposed on the agricultural sector as a preferred organizational model by the government. Ideas on development, poverty reduction and social inclusion stimulated the adoption of the cooperative for the implementation of governmental strategies to support the dairy sector. However, the relative success but lack of follow-up on this government support is said to have contributed to a distinct lack of capacity at the farmer level on the one hand and a fragmentation in support services by different stakeholder groups on the other hand. Wijers concludes that this combination of fragmentation and strong government control is

currently still ailing the dairy sector and may inhibit progress and innovation (Wijers, 2019b).

The Thai example shows how context-dependent our general understanding of the balance between individual and collective priority in the cooperative sector can be. While the cooperative is hailed as an important instrument for agrarian change and emancipation, often, the innovation and efficiency needed to optimize its performance may be hindered by a centralized government. Also, the politicization of the cooperative organization can affect its solidarity- and community-based nature. The Thai cooperative leadership seems primarily motivated by individual interests rather than collective outcomes. The overemphasis on economic gains seems to appeal to the 'elite' members and can thus impede the farmers' capacity for collective action. These elements of 'elite capture' of the cooperative's governance structure have been identified by other authors in a range of cooperatives around the world (See, for instance: Basu and Chakraborty 2008; Dasgupta and Beard, 2007; Minah and Carletti, 2019; Paraque and Willmott, 2014; Wynne-Jones, 2017).

## **5.2 The Netherlands: a facilitative institutional environment.**

The Netherlands is a country with a long-standing tradition of growth in the cooperative sector. Smaller agricultural cooperatives have developed and then merged into large cooperatives most of which are now holding significant market share. Dairy cooperatives have existed in The Netherlands for more than 130 years. They hold a joint market share of more than 80% since the 1950s. Based on the finding that most farmers are member of, at least, one cooperative, Bijman (2018) concludes that Dutch farmers, in general, are very cooperative minded (Bijman, 2018: 16). This is facilitated by an institutional environment formed through a long history of decentralized government and the need for self-organization that may have helped form this cooperative mentality.

Bijan's research shows that collaboration out of self-interest is a dominant characteristic of the Dutch farming industry. Moreover, the Dutch cooperative movement has benefited from flexible cooperative law which offers flexibility to internal governance structure, financial structure as well as the type of activities the cooperative can take up. In addition to favourable elements in the tax system and competition law and a relatively high level of agricultural education this leaves much space for the cooperative sector to develop their business. While, as Bijman, states, it is hard to attribute the performance of Dutch cooperatives to one or two factors, the complementary attributes that have formed itself into a fertile institutional system for agricultural, and other, cooperatives are a defining characteristic of The Netherlands (Bijman, 2018).

The Dutch example shows that an important requirement for the cooperative as a community-based form of organizing may be a cooperative mindset within a decentralized governmental system that leaves room for self-organization out of entrepreneurial self-interest. In a recent Swedish research this same self-interested motivation was found also to drive the leadership of the cooperatives that were part of the study. Morfi, Nilsson and Österberg (2018) have shown how these representatives involve themselves mainly to get personal benefits, and not because of a co-operative belief or social concerns (as is often assumed).

In comparison to other countries, this example goes to show, that a civic culture based on trust and solidarity that grows out of the necessity for self-organization, can be considered a part of a social business ecosystem. With this, it merits noting that entrepreneurial cultural may be most difficult to establish in fragile or post-conflict nations as well as countries in which authoritarian governments are prolonging their rule based on the principle of 'divide and rule' (Haddad et al., 2017). This implies that countries in which political regimes are gaining and maintaining power by breaking up larger concentrations of power into pieces will not produce a facilitative environment for cooperatives as social

organizations.

### **5.3 Italy: a government-based cooperative**

Fonte and Cucco (2017) publish an important example of the more-than-economic motivations that can drive the adoption of a cooperative business model. In Italy, the social-goals-cooperative model has been formally separated from the mainstream cooperative sector. Fonte and Cucco discuss the ways in which the multi-faced nature of cooperatives as both social and business organizations can cause tensions and frictions. While the cooperative movement has always played a large role in the agricultural sector, its social economy projects were separated from the mainstream by the government in 1990 through a formalized regulatory system for social cooperatives. This enforced separate rules and also a separate sectoral position for the social initiatives. In bottom-up projects, however, over the years since then the social functions have been reclaimed by community-based agricultural initiatives to once again be part of the cooperative sector (Fonte and Cucco, 2017).

In conclusion to this section on the cooperative as a community-driven or a market-driven business, we need to acknowledge the false dichotomy in this question. Rather, based on the examples it seems that the cooperative is distinguished by being both a social and commercial business, depending on the stakeholders' commitment and support for these functions. As the Thai situation shows, a centralized controlling institutional context leaves little space for genuine social action, rather, the cooperative becomes an instrument for policy implementation. In The Netherlands, in contrast, the cooperative mindset in both its farmers and the institutional context has evolved over history and seems deeply engrained. Convincingly, the Italian situation of the cooperative movement reclaiming its social functions after these have been artificially separated through regulations show the importance of the two faces of cooperatives, leaving the question to what extent these two faces can find a place in the postgrowth economy.

## 6. Conclusion

We can carefully conclude that cooperatives are not effortless emancipatory and redistributive structures. In the cooperative business model, there are no mechanisms that enforce inclusiveness. The structure of a democratic membership-based organizations can even be said to stimulate exclusion of those with other interests or substandard production. Being emancipatory for marginalized groups can even be at odds with community development. We also found that the dichotomy between market- and community-driven business does not do justice to reality. Separating market-driven business from social business cannot be accomplished in the real world as even a social organization will need to make a profit to make the investments needed for survival. This raises the question if and how, in a postgrowth economy, we can 'return' to a world with limited market-drive and shrinking roles for market demands?.

As this study has illustrated, it is possible to limit the play of market forces and help cooperative organizations to survive within a competitive economic context. For this, we need governments to take considered actions to mediate market effects. By neutralizing market effects detrimental to emancipation, inclusiveness and cooperative solidarity, we can choose to stimulate the social and solidarity segments of a postgrowth economy. The only actor who seems able to achieve this is the government as cooperatives themselves, currently, tend to develop towards the market if not restricted.

Paradoxically, thus, as this study has shown, for the transformation of a postgrowth economy, governments seem to have to play a central role. As this article has shown, a dedicated support of the community-driven is needed as the natural tendency of even the cooperative is to maximize its benefits, be homogeneous in membership and unequal and exclusive in its organization. This is a paradox, as the centralized governmental control this implies can also be said to impede the cooperative movement that is based on solidarity and trust. Assuming a democratic regime, it seems that the actions of strong and



responsive government institutions can be important enforcers of the social, solidarity and equality aspects of the cooperative that could form building blocks for the postgrowth economy.

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