



**International
Cooperative Alliance**
International Cooperative
Entrepreneurship Think Tank

Cooperatives and their members: the opportunities and benefits of collective ownership

Report produced by ICETT and authored by



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Trento, November 2024

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Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by ICETT after an internal study was conducted amongst the group's members. We thank ICETT and the ICA for the raw data and Paola Delvecchio from Euricse for the survey data analysis. Thank you to Joseph Njuguna from the ICA and Ilana Gotz from Euricse for project coordination.

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Foreword by Prof. Hans Groeneveld, Chairperson of ICETT

I am pleased to introduce this insightful report, which captures the core discussions within ICETT on the unique value that cooperatives bring to their members and communities. Authored by EURICSE, this work not only highlights the advantages cooperatives provide but also places these benefits within a rich historical context, emphasizing the enduring impact of the cooperative model.

The report addresses an important challenge for cooperatives today: maintaining their distinctiveness. The point is that there is a considerable degree of isomorphism. Firms with different ownership structures are more and more mimicking each other, either because of their own strategic considerations or forced by market forces, regulation pressures, etcetera. It is a major challenge especially for large cooperatives to be and remain distinctive in this environment of forces. Active member participation and a strong sense of ownership are essential to uphold the cooperative identity. The key is that their member-based governance must function well. Enough members must retain a sense of ownership in large cooperatives and participate actively in democratic processes.

By preserving these characteristics and expanding their focus to benefit broader communities, cooperatives can become even stronger agents of change in a world facing growing inequality and social fragmentation. In doing so, they not only reaffirm their values but also contribute meaningfully to building a more equitable and resilient society.

1. Cooperatives and their members: the opportunities and benefits of collective ownership

From its inception, the cooperative movement has been characterized by a distinctive approach to benefit-seeking, which sets it apart from other forms of enterprise. Primarily, cooperatives have facilitated access to services or markets for individuals who would otherwise have been disadvantaged or excluded. This is exemplified by agricultural cooperation in geographically peripheral or fragmented land ownership contexts, where market access barriers for individual farmers were significant. The most effective method for overcoming the disadvantages faced by individual farmers in their own business was through cooperation. This enabled them to manage investments and unforeseen events, gain access to more distant markets and achieve greater bargaining power in their commercial dealings. The concept of cooperation provided a means of social redemption for individuals and communities that would otherwise have been left to their own fate. It enabled them to embark on a path of endogenous development, which was largely dependent on the limited resources available and their capacity for self-government. In essence, the key benefit was the opportunity to alter one's life trajectory.

A further example, which is not coincidental, is the process that led to the formation of consumer cooperation. Similarly, the initial impetus was the search for instruments to mitigate the constrained bargaining power of the individual purchaser, particularly in remote locations and beyond the primary commercial networks. The cooperative principle enabled the formation of genuine 'buying groups', providing an alternative to conventional commercial channels. In areas with limited local provision and the absence of competitive options, individual consumers lacked the means to counterbalance the seller's power. Consequently, consumer cooperation was established in imperfect markets where the mechanism of affordable product price competition was ineffective. Once more, cooperation proved an effective instrument for personal growth and the formation of a critical mass resulted in enhanced economic circumstances. Additionally, it afforded the opportunity to select goods according to one's own necessities rather than being constrained by the interests of the vendor.

The aforementioned examples, along with the cases of credit and labor cooperation, and other forms of cooperation that have emerged over time, illustrate how the advent of cooperation has been oriented towards the objective of establishing what Amartya Sen refers to as 'capabilities'. "Capabilities" can be defined as the potential to cultivate opportunities for personal fulfillment and the pursuit of one's own well-being. This implies the ability to actively exercise a power of choice over the directions of one's life. It is evident that well-being has multiple dimensions, with monetary factors representing only one aspect. Consequently, the initial benefits of cooperation were primarily focused on the creation of opportunities that were previously unavailable due to circumstances that imposed limitations on individuals. Therefore, it can be argued that the primary appeal of cooperation for its early adopters was not solely economic. Instead, the key benefit was the liberation from constraints that significantly diminished individual capabilities. In this sense, the fundamental objective of the cooperative approach is to enhance access to the resources that facilitate a fulfilling life, which represents the most significant benefit.

As historical and economic conditions underwent transformation, the centrality of the cooperative principle as a means to combat poverty - in the sense of capability deprivation - also evolved. It is important to note that the discourse does not apply in the same way and

at the same time to all regions of the world. In some contexts, contested conditions continue to drive the adoption of a cooperative model whose primary objective is to facilitate opportunities in unfavorable circumstances for individuals. Pooling of resources and energies remains a pivotal strategy for effecting positive transformation in these circumstances. Conversely, there are countries where economic and social development over recent decades, also facilitated by the presence of a lively cooperative movement, has contributed to the alleviation of some of the factors that have previously led to exclusion and disadvantage, particularly affecting the most marginalized and underserved communities.

It appears that, although the extent of this trend varies depending on the specific geographical context and level of economic development of a given country, there is a general trend towards greater access to goods and services for all citizens in an increasing number of countries and for the benefit of an ever larger part of the world's population. This depends on the availability of a sufficient range of goods and services to meet the different needs of consumers, including those in lower income brackets.

One example to illustrate this point: historically, a consumer cooperative in certain peripheral areas, not directly linked to the primary markets, was the sole means of procuring quality food and consumer goods at favorable prices. However, the revolution in the retail system in many countries today has resulted in a significant increase in the availability of goods at competitive prices, offering consumers a wider range of options and suppliers. The competition between different retail chains employs a plethora of loyalty-building tools, including discounts, premiums, and other incentives, which diminish the convenience previously derived from patronizing one's cooperative. It is evident that if the benefit of joining a consumer cooperative were to be evaluated solely in terms of enhanced purchasing power, this criterion would no longer be sufficient. The disparity has diminished to a point where the economic advantage for those who choose a cooperative supermarket over a low-cost supermarket could be irrelevant. Consequently, to justify joining a consumer cooperative, additional factors must be taken into consideration.

Against this backdrop, the role of the cooperative model in addressing the opportunity gap that disadvantages the most vulnerable citizens is less central. On the contrary, the function of cooperation as an economic actor promoting social cohesion within the community takes on greater importance.

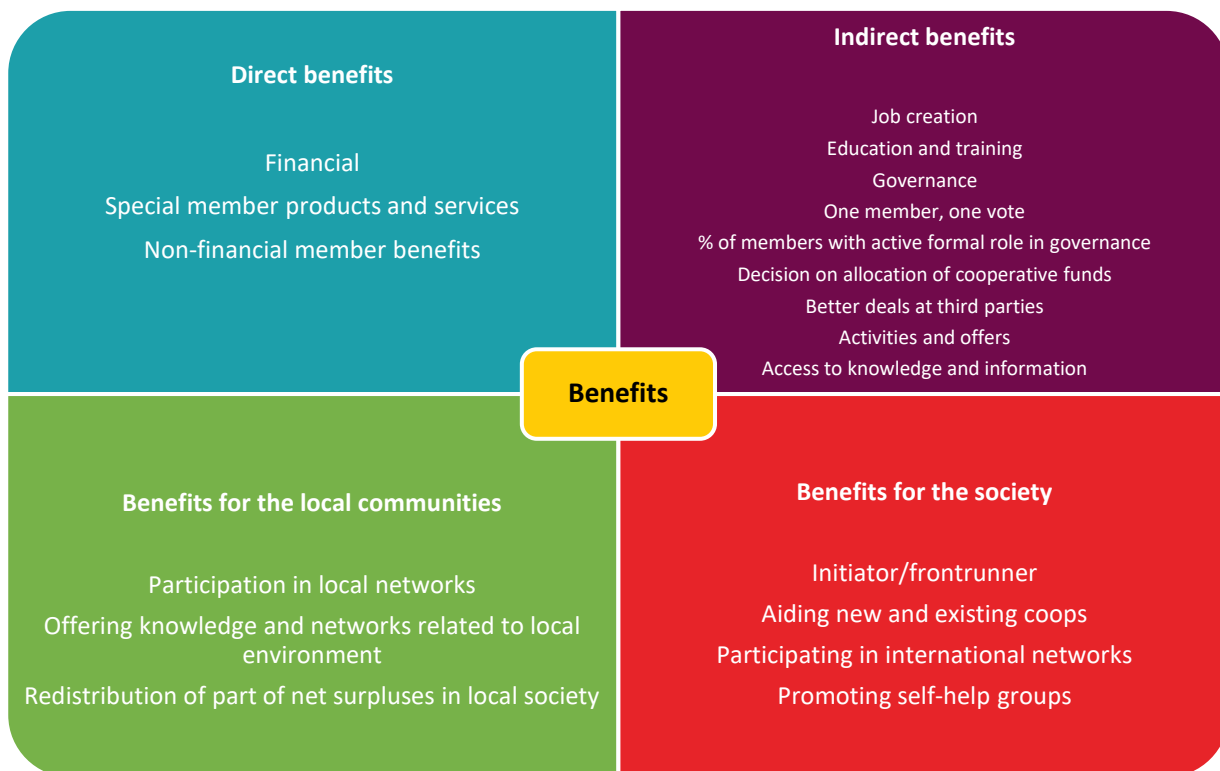
To highlight this role of cooperation, the International Cooperative Entrepreneurship Think Tank (ICETT)³ has focused its recent initiatives on demonstrating the unique contributions cooperatives make to improving the well-being of members and communities. This paper presents the results of a recent survey conducted by ICETT, which assesses the benefits ICETT members provide to their own members and communities across four key dimensions: direct benefits to members; indirect benefits to members; benefits to local communities and society at large; and contributions to national, regional and international development agendas. These contributions are examined through the findings and analysis of the ICETT survey and four case examples, which lead to recommendations to guide future strategies.

³ ICETT is a network of cooperatives and cooperative groups under the International Cooperative Alliance dedicated to strengthening the entrepreneurial performance of cooperative enterprises through innovation, research, education and collaboration.

2. The ICETT Survey

The survey engaged 10 ICETT members, including cooperatives from various sectors and regions⁴, representing a total of 64 million members across the world. Table 1 lists the types of benefits studied.

Figure 1 - Member benefits investigated in the survey by type of benefit, 2023



In terms of **direct benefits**, a significant number of the surveyed cooperatives offer financial benefits that typically include discounts on products or services offered by the cooperative, which are often linked to the organization's annual financial performance, such as patronage refunds and the redistribution of dividends. In addition to financial advantages, many ICETT organizations provide specialized services exclusively for their members, including medical coverage, health insurance, and various other forms of insurance, such as life and auto insurance. Furthermore, all the ICETT organizations interviewed extend a range of non-financial benefits to all members. These may include access to supportive and management services, retail assistance, operational and marketing support, and opportunities for peer networking.

⁴ Rabobank (NL); National Co+op Grocers (USA); CIC Insurance Group (KE); Midcounties Cooperative (UK); Indian Farmers Fertiliser Co-operative Limited (IN); National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (KR); Kibbutz movement (IL); CCA global partners (USA); Smart (BE); Mondragon (ES).

In addition to direct benefits, cooperative membership offers a range of **indirect benefits** that arise as collateral benefits of joining the cooperative.

CIC Insurance Group: empowering members with financial benefits and governance rights

CIC Insurance Group, established in 1968, is a prominent Kenyan insurance and financial services provider with a focus on cooperatives. Offering a range of services across East Africa, CIC covers general insurance, life insurance, and asset management, and it is listed on the Nairobi Securities Exchange, further attesting to its stability and cooperative values.

With over 20,000 shareholders, including cooperative societies and individual investors, members receive share certificates, preferential rates, and discounts on insurance products like medical, motor, fire, and liability coverage. These financial benefits are further enhanced by CIC's patronage dividends, which are distributed based on the cooperative's profits.

Members of CIC also gain access to Co-opCare, a medical benefits program offering subsidized rates for cooperative members. Governance rights are a significant part of membership; each member has voting rights, allowing them to elect directors, influence bylaw changes, and determine the cooperative's surplus distribution. This inclusive governance structure, based on a delegate system, ensures that each delegate has an equal vote, promoting transparency and collective influence over decision-making.

In addition to these financial advantages, CIC's membership structure promotes community-driven values. Through participatory governance, members can actively shape the cooperative's future, allowing it to evolve according to their collective needs. The cooperative's investment in medical and insurance benefits, alongside structured governance rights, reflects CIC's commitment to supporting financial security and well-being within Kenya's cooperative community.

The indirect benefits associated with cooperative membership are significant, promoting personal development, active participation in governance, and community involvement. These advantages collectively reinforce the cooperative model's commitment to empowering its members and fostering a supportive and collaborative environment.

SMART Coop: empowering the self-employed with security, support and opportunities for growth

The Smart Cooperative (Smart Coop) is an initiative that offers voluntary insurance to its self-employed members by pooling risks and benefits without seeking to make a profit. As a shared enterprise, Smart Coop provides access to various services to develop members' economic activities and enables them to obtain employee status, which brings the best social protection. Founded in Belgium in 1998, the cooperative was initially intended only for freelance artists, but its membership has since been extended to all sectors and it is now active in 40 towns and cities in 9 EU Member States: Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Sweden and Hungary.

SMART creates an environment where all members can actively participate and benefit from shared services based on the principles of openness, democracy, autonomy, cooperation, protection and innovation.

Members of SMART enjoy many benefits as a result of their membership. Firstly, the cooperative offers centralized administrative services, such as invoicing and payroll management, which simplify the working life of each member. In addition, the cooperative offers risk coverage, which ensures that members are protected against unforeseen events such as accidents or economic difficulties. This is particularly important in an unstable work environment, and SMART has highlighted that the diversity of activities within the shared enterprise helps to mitigate the economic impact of temporary sectoral challenges. SMART has shown resilience in times of crisis, most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, when all services were maintained and salaries

paid, despite a drop in sales in 2020.

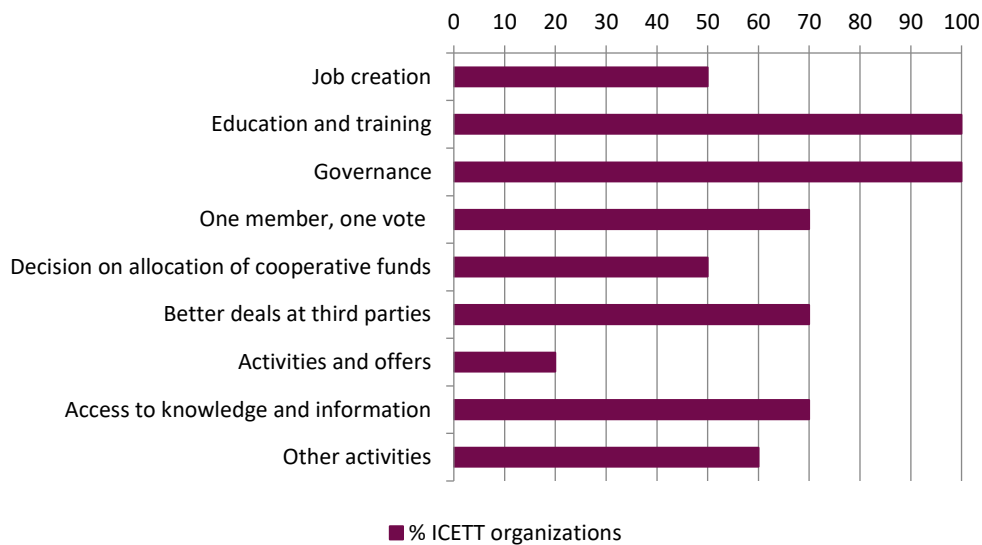
Another key benefit is access to training and individual support so that members can develop their skills and progress in their careers.

The cooperative also fosters collaboration between members. This encourages exchange and interaction, which can lead to new job opportunities. Finally, SMART's mutualist approach promotes a trusted, empowered environment where each employee is encouraged to make an active contribution to collective success. In this way, membership of SMART not only provides a sense of security, but also promotes the personal and professional development of each member.

All ICETT organizations responding to the survey prioritize the education and training of their members, providing programs aimed at enhancing both higher education attainment and talent development within the cooperative framework.

Members have the opportunity to elect representatives to boards and councils, which is a fundamental aspect of cooperative governance. Furthermore, as seen in Figure 2, 70% of ICETT member respondents facilitate access to valuable resources and knowledge, allowing members to secure better deals from partner organizations. Additionally, a unique indirect privilege offered by 20% of the cooperatives involves member-organized activities, such as lectures, music events, or sports activities.

Figure 2 - Percentage of ICETT members by indirect benefits offered to members, 2023



When considering the benefits to local communities, cooperatives play a pivotal role in fostering socio-economic development. All the respondents actively participate in local networks, strengthening connections within the community and supporting local development and all redistribute a portion of their profits back into the community, which helps fund local projects and initiatives, driving further community growth and well-being.

Midcounties Co-operative: Strengthening Local Communities Through Collective Action

The UK based Midcounties Co-operative has a long tradition of community support. In September 2024, in response to the desire of its 700,000 members to give even more back to their local communities, the cooperative launched the 'Doing Good Together Fund'. Through this fund, Midcounties Co-operative aims at supporting a wide range of community projects, such as dinner and dance sessions for those with dementia, plants for parks, biscuits for book clubs, kits for cricket teams, and much more.

Every time that members shop in their local Midcounties Co-op Store, they will earn reward points that will increase the money available for local causes, with the first 1,000 points going directly to the Doing Good Together Fund. To encourage sustainable and socially responsible choices, members also earn extra points by buying Co-op branded, Fairtrade and other ethical products.

Members can apply for grants to support causes that are important to them, and local store managers are empowered to select the initiatives that best meet the needs of their communities. This approach deepens the bond with the community by allowing the decision to be made by those who know local needs best. The fund has already received over 60 grant applications, demonstrating the strong commitment of both members and staff.

The fund is part of the wider "Doing Good Together" initiative, launched in 2023 to provide greater benefits to members and direct a larger portion of profits toward local communities. This initiative reflects the cooperative's commitment to building a fairer, more sustainable future, showcasing the powerful role of collective action in strengthening local communities.

Moreover, eight out of ten are open to sharing and spreading their knowledge, serving as mediators and creators of connections.

NCG – Keeping local roots in a national market

Founded in 1999, National Co-op Grocers (NCG) is a cooperative network connecting 165 food retail cooperatives across the United States. NCG provides strategic business support to help local cooperatives optimize resources and increase their competitive presence in the grocery industry.

With more than 230 locations nationwide, NCG helps members achieve economies of scale on national goods and services so that its members can focus their resources on serving their local communities.

NCG members have helped launch thousands of local small business owners, providing a market for their product and telling their story, demonstrating that it's possible to build a resilient and equitable local supply chain from the ground up. By supporting a wide range of small, local producers - more than 160 local farms and suppliers per co-op - NCG members strengthen local economies and bring community-based products to the forefront of markets across the country. This approach enables small-scale farmers and producers to gain visibility and to compete with larger, more established brands, thereby stimulating economic growth and supporting local livelihoods.

In addition to economic support, NCG advocates for policies to help small, regional farmers and producers thrive, including in the United States Farm Bill and legislation that promotes food co-op priorities in areas including local food and farming, racial equity and food justice, hunger and nutrition, climate action and organic agriculture. Through NCG, food co-ops support initiatives such as the National Farm to School Network, an organization bringing the benefits of locally grown food into public schools, strengthening connections between communities, schools and local farmers, expanding markets for small producers and integrating local foods into everyday life.

Through the collective strength of NCG, retail food cooperatives build vibrant local economies and sustainable supply chains that benefit both producers and consumers, creating a unique, community-centered model of resilience and mutual support.

Finally, ICETT members provide significant benefits to society at large, extending beyond their immediate members and communities. They often act as initiators or frontrunners in implementing innovative solutions to broader societal issues, including environmental sustainability and social inclusion. They are also deeply engaged in **international networks**, such as the International Cooperative Agricultural Organization (ICAO), National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA - International (NCBA International), promoting collaboration and knowledge-sharing on a global scale, which enhances their ability to address challenges that transcend local or national boundaries. Additionally, the large

majority (90%) plays a role in **supporting new and existing cooperatives**, fostering a spirit of mutual aid and ensuring the continuous growth of the cooperative movement worldwide.

Empowering rural communities: the role of NACF in enhancing farmer welfare

The National Agricultural Cooperative Federation, known as NongHyup in South Korea, is an agricultural cooperative representing 2.1 million farmers. Established in 1961 by merging former agricultural cooperatives and the Agricultural Bank, the Federation was created to develop a national cooperative system to support Korean farmers, then facing challenges of low production capacity and limited financial resources. In order to achieve these objectives, the organization operates through the Extension and Support Unit, the Agribusiness Group and Financial Services.

The National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (NACF) has played a critical role in supporting rural development in South Korea, particularly by improving living conditions for farmers and fostering urban-rural harmony. Facing challenges like aging populations and population decline in rural areas, NACF has implemented various welfare projects designed to boost local welfare infrastructure. These include creating community centers, senior facilities, and nursing homes, alongside services like the Farmer's Happiness Call Center and elderly companionship initiatives. Additionally, NACF partners with institutions like Seoul National University Hospital to bring essential healthcare services directly to rural communities, reaching thousands each year. In 2023, nearly 12,000 rural residents received family portraits through an NACF outreach program, strengthening community bonds.

Furthermore, NACF focuses on supporting migrant wives and multicultural families integrating into rural life, offering vocational training, cultural education, and agricultural management courses tailored for new residents. Programs aimed at multicultural harmony include language training, traditional food workshops, and youth camps, which help bridge gaps between local and migrant communities.

NACF also advances rural-urban cooperation by promoting direct trade, lowering costs, and supporting joint projects that enable rural farmers to reach urban markets. For instance, initiatives like the "Urban-Rural Co-Prosperity Joint Project" create new business opportunities for farmers, who can market products directly to urban consumers at competitive prices. Additionally, NACF's "I Love Farm" campaign has established partnerships between rural villages and urban companies to strengthen mutual support and resource-sharing. This includes appointing honorary village leaders to build lasting relationships and facilitate cooperative projects, ensuring that both rural and urban areas benefit from sustainable development practices. Through these efforts, NACF promotes a balanced, interconnected development model that links the strengths of rural and urban communities for mutual growth.

3. Empowering individuals, strengthening communities: the cooperative advantage

The considerations emerging from the ICETT survey should certainly be read in the light of the responses of a small number of cooperatives, which are heterogeneous in nature, but contain some broader indications that deserve further investigation. This small exercise presents a series of elements that should guide a more structured reflection on the role and nature that benefit-seeking plays in the relationship between a cooperative and its members.

The categorization of benefits according to four distinct criteria, ranging from the direct and indirect benefits to members to the benefits to communities and society at large is necessary since a single reading encompassing all cooperative sectors is not possible, given the evolution of specific industries and the increasing diversification of the motivations

behind members' decisions to join a cooperative. This diversification also affects the benefits that members perceive they receive from their cooperative. In the case of consumer cooperation, as mentioned, competition from other players has arguably had the greatest impact on the necessity to rethink competitive advantage in terms other than pure access to goods or as economic convenience. In other sectors, the dynamics are different. For example, cooperative credit is still perceived as distinct from other financial institutions because of the way in which it assesses credit. This is known as 'relational credit', and it allows for a personalized approach to credit evaluation, which is not possible in a large commercial bank where procedures are standardized and sometimes automated. In this instance, the economic benefit (for example, the greater ease of obtaining a mortgage) retains its value in the scale of motivations for the member's decision to join. Similarly, another example can be found in the case of Mondragon or SMART, two ICETT member cooperatives. In a labor cooperative, the main benefit, consisting of the employment opportunity, retains an extremely high value and can be considered of a direct nature. However, it is not an exclusive benefit, as it can also contribute to motivations and considerations regarding a broader benefit that spills over to the community it belongs to, in terms of collective well-being and social stability.

The key point to be highlighted is the growing inclination towards prioritizing collective benefits over exclusive individual gains. Of the four categories identified in the survey, the benefits derived from an action aimed at improving the condition of one's own community or society as a whole are those that most differentiate cooperatives from other enterprises. It is in this area that cooperatives must pay particular attention, as the capitalist enterprise is currently seeking to reposition itself strongly on this very ground. There is a need for a more decisive and clear communication of the benefits of the cooperative model to avoid falling victim to a strategy that claims all enterprises are on an equal footing with regard to social impact.

This phenomenon can be attributed to a number of underlying causes. A more general factor concerns the evolution of behaviors and attitudes that have contributed to a shift in the balance between materialistic and non-materialistic factors in the evaluation of human welfare over time. In particular, younger generations no longer assess their quality of life solely in terms of material or monetary possessions. The significant decline in social cohesion resulting from an extreme market-oriented economic system has created a void that negatively impacts individual expectations. The vulnerability of the networks that previously provided individuals with a sense of connection raises the question of how to rebuild solidarity and social ties as a prerequisite for a better quality of life. It is therefore understandable that the principle of 'concern for community' has become a priority, when at one time it was considered so self-evident that it did not even need to be mentioned among the cooperative principles.

A second factor is the tendency of capitalist companies to adopt models of engagement with their customers that draw inspiration from social community building. There is a growing tendency for companies to embed their products within experiences, which in turn become the unifying element of consumer communities. The influence of social media has accelerated this phenomenon, giving rise to communication strategies that seek to overcome the traditional separation between producer and user. In many instances, user involvement manifests as co-creation, whereby the company makes itself available to design its products and services, placing the user at the center and assigning them a role in the design and development process. It is evident that this strategy has the consequence of reducing the distinction between a capital enterprise and a collective

enterprise such as the cooperative, in which member engagement is a fundamental component. This suggests that cooperatives are required to enhance the quality of their relationship with their members, thereby distinguishing between the capitalist model of enterprise, in which member engagement is an optional, reversible decision, and the cooperative model, in which it is a fundamental and therefore irreversible aspect.

A similar argument can be made with regard to the third factor, namely corporate social responsibility. In recent years, and particularly in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, capitalist enterprises have devised strategies and tools with the aim of establishing a reputation as actors of social change. These strategies and tools, which adopt different names and forms—such as Corporate Social Responsibility, Shared Value Theory, Benefit Companies, and ESG-oriented Impact Enterprises—have seen a progressive commitment from companies of varying sizes and sectors to accredit their own role for the benefit of social welfare. The implications of this trend are that companies can all generate a positive social impact, thereby reassuring consumers and users of their willingness to integrate economic goals with social and environmental ones in their strategies. This approach posits that such integration is the result of a free decision by top management and does not require legal formality. In other words, the market will self-regulate and identify optimal strategies for balancing all relevant interests. This is, however, precisely the same principle by which the market has been permitted to determine its own trajectory over the past decades. This has resulted in a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots and the emergence of significant social issues.

These points are pertinent to our analysis as they highlight the pressing need for the cooperative world to consider the issue of benefits for its members, while avoiding two potential pitfalls. The initial temptation is to assume that direct benefits to the individual are the primary factor in maintaining membership levels. This is an area in which even non-cooperative enterprises are becoming increasingly attractive, through the implementation of loyalty strategies that incorporate monetary incentives, cashbacks, personalized products and services for members, and other methods of fostering a sense of belonging and identity around the company and its products. While it is unlikely that they will ever be able to achieve the same level of strength and depth of relationship as authentic cooperatives, it is evident that capitalist companies have also learned that the relationship with their customers must be emotionally engaging and foster a sense of affinity towards the brand that can be enduring. They have consequently adopted effective strategies to achieve this.

A second potential pitfall is the assumption that "concern for community" is a characteristic exclusive to cooperatives, thereby protecting them from competition with other enterprises. In recent years, however, large capitalist enterprises, which in the past were inflexibly oriented towards profit maximization, have begun to pursue more articulated strategies. These strategies do not exclude concern for stakeholders other than investors and managers. It is unclear to what extent this attitude is deeply entrenched and to what extent it is merely opportunistic. What is evident, however, is that these corporations engage in a range of activities aimed at promoting the welfare of their employees and the communities in which they operate. They offer themselves as partners for social projects, establish foundations with philanthropic aims, claim to be committed to diversity, equity and inclusion, and declare that they are guided by ESG sustainability criteria.

It remains to be seen how much of this commitment is genuinely enduring and how much is contingent on the necessity to regain the trust of citizens who have developed an

understandable attitude of suspicion towards companies that, until recently, have been guided by the prevailing objective of satisfying the interests of their shareholders, relegating all other legitimate interests to secondary importance. It is evident that there is considerable pressure on public opinion to view these companies as forces for good, which presents a significant challenge to cooperatives. The challenge is to rethink how to make the distinction between the cooperative model and other business models more evident to their members.

In this regard, as previously stated, some of the benefits that the surveyed cooperatives provide to their members may not be sufficiently distinct from those offered by conventional enterprises to their clientele. In order to achieve a competitive advantage, it is essential to identify the priority areas where the cooperative difference is most significant and where other companies are least able to bridge the gap.

4. Driving the cooperative difference: priorities in governance and community relations

It is recommended that particular attention be paid to two specific areas.

The initial area of focus is that of governance. The cooperative enterprise is distinguished by a distinctive and irreproducible model of democratic governance. This has consistently constituted an essential element of the cooperative enterprise, yet it has not always been fully exploited. This is particularly pertinent in large cooperatives, where the sheer number of members can present a significant challenge to the efficacy of participatory mechanisms. The revitalization of democratic governance, especially in large cooperatives, and the effective participation of members in decision-making and strategy formulation represents a priority area that requires innovative and creative approaches to the utilization of procedures and tools, including digital ones. It is also the single most powerful element in distinguishing a cooperative enterprise from other forms of business. It allows members to participate in defining the strategic direction of the enterprise and the allocation of resources. In terms of benefit, this represents a significant advancement in the provision of new capabilities that were first seen in the formation of cooperatives. It is a power given to members that can help them feel they have control over a part of their economic life, which is often lacking in many other everyday circumstances.

A further area in which the advantages of joining a cooperative can be seen to diverge from those of conventional enterprises is in the domain of the relationship with the local community and, more generally, the commitment to issues of social relevance and public benefit. As has been previously stated, the distinction between this approach and that of other companies does not lie in the mere inclusion of social activities on the agenda, which is a standard practice among businesses seeking to enhance their reputation. Rather, the key differentiating factor is in the manner in which these activities are conducted. For a cooperative, the relationship with its community and with the social dimension is of significant consequence and is a defining aspect of its identity. This implies that such activities cannot be sporadic, unilateral, or solely distributive in nature. A cooperative is an integral part of the community, rather than an external entity addressing the community from a distance. This implies that the method by which projects are chosen and implemented is not that of a philanthropic body or a CSR office. Rather, it requires the sharing of the entire process of defining objectives, instruments and expected results. This

entails the collaborative construction of knowledge through the utilization of one's own expertise. This entails the utilization of projects as a conduit for cultural and educational advancement, with the objective of benefiting all members of the community and of reinforcing its collective resilience. This signifies a commitment to the community as a long-term entity, rather than a transient involvement limited to a few consultation meetings and subsequent delegation to other parties. In this context, the benefits for the member, the community and the cooperative are aligned and mutually reinforcing. It is essential to ensure that this convergence is transparent and comprehensible. Consequently, this aspect of the cooperative's activity must be meticulously planned and monitored, recognizing it as a pivotal strategic element, both in terms of its social objective and its distinctive participatory approach.

5. Conclusion

Reflection on the cooperative benefits offers insights into the future of cooperation. The survey of ICETT members reveals that the cooperative model must adapt to a changing context. While historically the cooperative model was designed to address the material needs of disadvantaged communities, the current social and economic landscape has shifted. Contemporary societies are grappling with a complex set of challenges, including social exclusion and inequality. In this context, the cooperative model must evolve to meet the demands for greater social cohesion and solidarity. It is becoming increasingly evident that benefits centered on material and individual advantage must be complemented by intangible benefits offered to a community that may not necessarily coincide with the membership base. Cooperatives have the potential to play a role in fostering a sense of purpose and shared vision in a social context where these values have been eroded or even lost. This transition is already underway, as evidenced by the survey results which indicate that the benefits related to governance and training are the most highly rated among ICETT organizations. The way forward is already mapped out, and there is a pressing need for greater incisiveness in response to the alarming decline in social cohesion in many of our countries.

About ICETT

The International Cooperative Entrepreneurship Think Tank (ICETT) was created in 2018 by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) to foster cooperation among large cooperatives and cooperative groups and create a platform for peer-to-peer learning on how to leverage their cooperative identity and boost their entrepreneurial performance.

Objectives

ICETT's objective is to serve as a strategic hub for the cooperative movement. It provides valuable information to strengthen cooperatives' competitive advantage, which allows to improve the positioning of the cooperative movement as a key actor in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. ICETT develops its main goals through the following specific targets:



Providing a space for debate and exchange



Leveraging cooperative entrepreneurship



Promoting business cooperation



Inspiring youth cooperative entrepreneurship

ICETT Members

The ICETT members are large cooperatives and cooperative groups that are directly or indirectly members of the ICA. They are entrepreneurial entities, differently from representative organisations and associations of cooperatives.

They include:

1. Banco Credit Coop (Argentina)
2. CCA Global Partners (USA)
3. CIC Insurance Group (Kenya)
4. Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (India)
5. Kibbutz Movement (Israel)
6. Midcounties Cooperative (UK)
7. Mondragon Corporation (Spain)
8. National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (South Korea)
9. National Co+op Grocers (USA)
10. Rabobank (Netherlands)
11. Smart (Belgium)
12. UP Coop (France)

International Cooperative Entrepreneurship Think Tank (ICETT)

A working group of the International Cooperative Alliance.



Learn more about ICETT!

<https://ica.coop/en/icett>



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