



Going back to go forwards? From multi-stakeholder cooperatives to Open Cooperatives in food and farming



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ABSTRACT

Many authors have proposed cooperatives as one of the preferred governance structures for realising alternative food systems, being recommended both in farming and also downstream at consumer level. However, recommendations for the cooperative model still draw dividing line between producer and consumer cooperatives. As opposed to conventional agricultural cooperatives (ACs) made up of farmer members only, the multi-stakeholder model brings together producers, consumers and/or restaurateurs under one single enterprise. This paper analyses multi-stakeholder cooperatives' (MSCs) potential to recreate more sustainable food flows between rural and urban areas and to overcome the limitations of conventional farmer cooperatives focused more on economic than social and environmental benefits. As part of this research, historical data from cooperative archives is used to look at the history and early attempts of multi-stakeholder cooperation in food and farming. Additionally, current supporting evidence from Spain and UK, in the context of European food policy frameworks, is also presented. A four-fold proposal for open cooperatives is discussed and applied to the analysis of the case studies in the framework of global transformative networks and alliances. The introduction of different types of members seems to both complicate and enrich the cooperative mission, both theoretically and in practice. Their networks with other social movements reveal how the MSCs presented are trying to change, rather than adapt to the market economies they struggle to survive in. The findings suggest MSCs in food and farming are striving to achieve more-than-economic benefits and are moving into the arena of the open and pro-commons economy and other global social movements.

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1. Introduction

Multi-stakeholder cooperatives (MSCs) are a relatively new form of cooperative that has been emerging over the last two decades in Europe and North America (Lund, 2012). These cooperatives allow and bring together different types of membership, often consumers and providers of services and goods, but sometimes also workers and buyers (Kindling Trust, 2012). In Europe and Canada, MSCs are growing strong in social services and the healthcare sector (Münkner, 2004). In the US, the movement for relocalisation of food production and consumption has found a useful organisational and legal tool in the MSC model (Lund, 2012). However, little empirical research has been done to explore and

discuss how the MSC movement is developing new models of food production and provision. Furthermore, very scarce academic literature has dealt with MSCs in the specific context of food and farming initiatives and existing publications focus on the US context only (Lund, 2012; Gray, 2014). This paper makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to this literature. Empirical, by analysing two European case studies, one from Southern Europe (Spain) and one from Northern Europe (UK). In a time when many conventional farmers' cooperatives are focusing on the economic benefits of the cooperative model, forgetting their transformative origins (Gray and Stevenson, 2008; Berthelot, 2012; Gray, 2014), this research asks whether the MSC model can re-inject cooperative principles and the movement back into food and farming cooperatives.

The paper starts with a review of historical records, academic literature and current thinking from the MSC movement on multi-stakeholderism in food and farming. After discussing how the MSC model is not a new idea but that it is re-emerging in the context of

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globalised food and globalised social movements, data from two MSCs based in Europe are presented in the framework of the Open Cooperative (OC) model. This framework is used to explore the type of MSCs that are emerging in food and farming in Europe, specifically in Spain and the UK. The theoretical contribution of this paper relates to analysing the extent to which contemporary MSCs in the UK and Spain conform to the OC model, and in doing so, reflecting on how this fosters their success in maintaining sustainable practices and the more-than-economic benefits associated with such a model. Can these MSCs be considered open cooperatives? How do they reconcile the different interests of different groups within an organisation? Are they successful in serving the interests of the two weakest links in the food chain, i.e. producers and consumers? Putting them in the context of the globally connected pro-commons movement, the OC framework helps investigate whether the MSCs studied have the potential to connect with other pro-commons initiatives across the world in an attempt to change, rather than adapt to, the food economies they struggle to survive in (Gray et al., 2001). The paper ends with a discussion on the dynamics and challenges facing these new cooperative arrangements as well as the more-than-economic benefits they are reproducing through their practices by pushing the cooperative movement beyond survival mode in current market economies.

2. Multi-stakeholderism, an old idea coming of age?

It is important to acknowledge that multi-stakeholderism is not a new idea and that early cooperators soon realised that bringing members together to cooperativise as many areas of their lives as possible made sense at least in theory (Reymond, 1964). Historical data on the early attempts to create MSCs reveal the common underlying acknowledgement shared by present day MSCs of how cooperatives do not operate outside the market, but within it, and as such, are strongly compelled to imitate capitalist relations as a way to survive in the dominant economic context within which they exist.

The cooperative social movement began in the early 18th century with the realisation that the power of organised cooperation could have the potential to transform society and reverse structural conditions that produce high inequalities (Shaffer, 1999). Food has always been a core element in cooperativism since the very beginnings of the movement in the 18th Century (Burnett, 1985; Birchall, 1994; Garrido Herrero, 2003; Rhodes, 2012).

The earliest records of cooperative enterprises date back to the 1750s (Shaffer, 1999). In terms of food producers' cooperation, the Jumbo Cooperative Society near Rochdale founded in 1851 was the first recorded worker cooperative farm, dissolving after 10 years (Birchall, 1994). Jumbo and the famous Rochdale Cooperative Store were experiments that highlighted the active role of urban citizens in developing a new identity as workers, consumers and producers. In this sense, Jumbo Farm can arguably be considered the first formal organisation of 'cooperative prosumers', as engaged consumers also took an active role in food production.

Historical records show that cooperators soon realised the potential benefits and limitations associated with the possibility of merging different types of members into multi-stakeholder (MS) ventures and the topic was in fact discussed at several cooperative congresses (Reymond, 1964). The integration of different types of members into one single association is the defining difference between multi-stakeholder cooperatives (MSCs) and the more conventional and common single-membership cooperatives (Münkner, 2004). The internationally accepted definition of the latter describes cooperatives as: 'an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and

democratically-controlled enterprise' (ICA, 1995). Conventional cooperatives are run by and for the benefit of their members. The introduction of different types of members in MSCs both complicates and enriches the cooperative mission as Lund has pointed out:

"MSCs are coops that formally allow for governance by representatives of two or more "stakeholder" groups within the same organization, including consumers, producers, workers, volunteers or general community supporters [...] The common mission that is the central organizing principle of a multi-stakeholder cooperative is also often more broad than the kind of mission statement needed to capture the interests of only a single stakeholder group, and will generally reflect the interdependence of interests of the multiple partners." (Lund, 2011:1)

The UK's Cooperative Wholesale Society (CWS), founded in 1863 to supply the more than a thousand consumer cooperatives already operating at the time in the UK, was one of the first attempts to bring together worker and consumer members and the challenges were soon evident, as this excerpt from an Economic and Social Consultative Assembly report reflects:

"For some time there were difficulties with the British CWS which had its own creameries in Ireland: was the purpose of the creameries to market the produce of the Irish peasant on the best possible terms, or was it to supply butter to British consumers at the lowest possible price? The conflict of interests led Plunkett and his colleagues to resign from the Cooperative Union and found the Irish Agricultural Organization Society in 1894". (ESCA, 1986:525)

The issue of "fair prices" is still largely unresolved today, as will be discussed when introducing the case studies. Nearly a hundred years later, in 1959, another MS attempt took place in France through an agreement between its central agricultural and consumers' cooperative organisations. A commission was set up to report on the difficulties encountered, summarised as follows (Reymond, 1964):

1. The system proved unwieldy for handling operations through the central organisations and it was recommended that the largest number of transactions were better carried out locally
2. A process for ensuring compliance with quality standards and agreed prices had to be improved
3. Price-fixing was a long-standing problem, and despite being in a closed, cooperative "full circle", ignoring the normal market to negotiate prices proved impossible
4. Price variations complicate the purchasing side of the relationship
5. There is a problem associated with the fear of damaging existing relations with suppliers-dealers.

The above points highlight how cooperatives do not exist in a policy or economic vacuum, but as today struggle to survive in capitalist societies ruled by the laws of the market. Nevertheless, the French commission also noted how the will to succeed from both sides was a significant strength of the model. The ideal endured, at least at the theoretical level, and more modern cooperative thinkers continued to write about the economic benefits they identified would occur when linking production and consumption:

"if a considerable proportion of farm crops could be sold directly by farmer-owned enterprises to consumer-owned ones, the 'spread' between what farmers receive and what consumers pay would

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