The organisational diversity of cooperative federations: A challenge for the EU*

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The cooperative movement in Europe plays a very significant role in reality but has a weak collective identity and lacks political clout. This situation is largely the result of how the movement's representative organisations have evolved in individual European countries. They have developed in very different ways, mixing and promoting sector and cross-sector organisations depending on the case. Briefly examining three national experiences, we identify the different models and their evolutions. These national analyses help us compare the way representative organisations have developed and determine possible future directions for representing cooperatives at the European level.

La diversité des modes d'organisation des associations coopératives : un défi pour l'Union européenne

Le mouvement coopératif en Europe est une réalité très significative, mais avec une faible identité collective et une très modeste capacité de représentation politique. Cette situation est en bonne partie le résultat de l'évolution des organisations coopératives dans les différents pays européens, qui se sont développés de manière très différente, en mélangeant ou en privilégiant, selon les cas, organisations sectorielles ou organisations intersectorielles. Une rapide analyse de trois expériences nationales nous permet d'identifier différents modèles et leur évolution. Ces analyses nationales nous aident à confronter les parcours et à déterminer des orientations possibles pour l'organisation coopérative au niveau européen.

La diversidad de los modos de organización de las asociaciones cooperativas : un desafío para la unión europea

El movimiento cooperativo en Europa es una realidad muy significativa pero con poca identidad colectiva y una muy modesta capacidad de representación política. Esta situación se debió en gran parte a la evolución de las organizaciones cooperativas en los distintos países europeos que se han desarrollado de manera muy diferente, mezclando o centrándose, según los casos, organizaciones sectoriales o intersectoriales. Un rápido análisis de tres experiencias nacionales nos permite identificar diferentes modelos y su evolución. Estos análisis nacionales nos ayudan a confrontar los trayectos y determinar las posibles direcciones para la organización cooperativa a nivel europeo.

The International Year of Cooperatives celebrated in 2012 was a huge opportunity for making the cooperative movement better known and recognized and the culmination of a decade that saw a multitude of official positions from European institutions and international organisations (Pezzini and Pflüger, 2013).

However, 2012 and the accompanying events [1] also revealed the cooperative movement's limited influence on international and European social and political policy. This lack of political clout and visibility reflects neither the movement's economic importance nor its ambition to develop a different kind of economy. It seems increasingly obvious that the movement must have solid organisations that can rise to the challenges of the major economic, political and social changes that face us.

The very uncertain and unstable international economic and political climate and the resilience of cooperatives, i.e. their ability to withstand economic crises and find innovative solutions, present an opportunity for the cooperative movement to redeploy itself on the condition it arms itself with the means to be heard and seen. The cooperative movement in Europe plays a very significant role (160,000 enterprises, 5.4 million jobs, 123 million members) [2] but it has a weak collective identity and limited lobbying power. This situation is largely the result of how the movement's federations have evolved in individual European countries. They have developed in very different ways, mixing and promoting sectoral and cross-sectoral organisations depending on the case. The federations of the cooperative movements in France, the United Kingdom and Italy, for example, have very different pasts, structures, positions and lobbying capabilities. By analysing the national apex organisations, we can identify the different models and envisage possible future directions for representing cooperatives at the European level.

We could have also examined the cooperative movements in Germany and Spain (and even in Quebec), which are very interesting and have rich histories, but the three examples chosen represent in our view the two extremes and the middle position of the complete spectrum of possible models of cooperative structures and are thus the most likely candidates for showing the main trends. These observations are meant to be a starting point for thinking about the organisational horizon of the European cooperative movement. They are made without passing judgement and with the complete awareness that each country has developed its own model as a result of its history and the traditions of the national cooperative movement.

(1) The most important initiatives internationally were the opening (31 October 2011) and closing (20 November 2012) of the Year of Cooperatives at the United Nations in New York; a research conference in Venice in March; the international summit in Quebec in October; and an international convention for cooperatives, immediately followed by the International Cooperative Alliance's congress, in Manchester in November.

(2) www.coopseurope.coop/about-us.

The French cooperative movement

Supported by theoreticians like Charles Fourier, Philippe Buchez and Louis Blanc, the first cooperatives were started in the early 19th century by skilled workers. The cooperatives were involved in organising work, defending members' interests, providing mutual aid and training. The consumer cooperative movement started in 1830. In 1834, the Christian Association of Gold

Jewellers was created in Paris. Based on Buchez's idea of an association of workers, it was the precursor of the worker cooperative.

The movement culminated with the 1848 Revolution and was then suppressed under the Empire. In the following decades worker cooperatives began to be developed, followed by the growth of consumer cooperatives during the last quarter of the century (Draperi, 2006). In 1884, the worker cooperative movement formed the Chambre consultative des associations ouvrières. Charles Gide, who began organising the Nîmes School in 1885, laid the foundations that would later enable unifying the cooperative movement. The Union coopérative and the Bourse de coopératives socialistes would merge in 1912, giving birth to the Fédération nationale des coopératives de consommation (national federation of consumer cooperatives). Agricultural cooperatives also appeared in the late 19th century. In 1908, the Fédération nationale des coopératives de production et de vente (national federation of producer and marketing cooperatives) was founded and, two years later, it included the Fédération nationale de la mutualité et de la coopération agricole (national federation agricultural cooperatives). In 1926, the Caisse nationale de Crédit agricole was established.

After the First World War, cooperatives began to play an important role in social affairs. The return of the cooperatives with Alsace and Lorraine strengthened the consumer cooperative movement, which tripled its membership in twenty years. In 1937, the Confédération générale des Scop (national federation of worker cooperatives) replaced the Chambre consultative.

After the Second World War, under the premiership of the socialist Paul Ramadier, a friend of the cooperative movement, the Council of Ministers passed the law on cooperatives in 1947, which set out the main principles shared by all cooperatives irrespective of their business sector.

A new wave of interest in cooperative theory began in 1953 thanks to Henri Desroche and Claude Vienney, who emphasised the cooperative movement's ability to adapt to changing socio-economic circumstances. The agricultural cooperative movement, which benefited in the early 1960s from the laws modernising economic organisation and then from the European common agricultural policy, continued to be a large component of the movement.

The significant role of cooperative banks also needs to be underlined. Their origins go back to the late 19th century when Raiffeisen's ideas were taken up by Ludovic de Besse, the founder of the Banques populaires, and Louis Durand who, in 1893, started the banks that would become Crédit mutuel. In 1893, the Banque coopérative des associations ouvrières de production was created, followed by Crédit agricole at the very beginning of the 20th century and by the Caisse centrale de crédit coopératif in 1938.

There are now 21,000 cooperative enterprises in France with 24 million members and over a million employees in every business sector. In 2012, their total combined turnover was nearly 300 billion euros, including subsidiaries. Cooperatives are leaders on many markets in France. Agricultural cooperatives represent 40% of the French agri-food industry, cooperatives of retailers represent 28% of retail distribution, and cooperative banks represent 60% of retail banking (Crédit agricole, BPCE, Crédit mutuel)[3].

(3) www.entreprises.coop/decouvrir-les-cooperatives/chiffres-cles.html

Cooperative federations in France

The Groupement national de la coopération (GNC) was officially created on 21 November 1968 on the initiative of five national cooperative organisations: Union du crédit coopératif (cooperative banks), Confédération des organismes du crédit maritime (commercial fishing), Confédération générale des sociétés coopératives ouvrières de production (worker cooperatives), Fédération nationale des coopératives d'HLM (low-rent housing cooperatives) and Fédération nationale des coopératives de consommateurs (consumer cooperatives).

This was actually the result of a process of bringing the different cooperatives sectors closer together that had started after the war with the creation of the Comité national d'entente et d'action coopérative in 1946, the Confédération nationale inter-coopérative in 1948, and then various educational and research institutes from across the cooperative movement in the 1950s. During the GNC's early years, it set up twenty-one regional cooperative organisations for promoting the movement in the Regional Social and Economic Councils. However, it was only in October 1973, as part of the restructuring of cross-cooperative organisations jointly agreed by the founding cooperative movements, that the GNC was genuinely recognised as the national apex organisation and properly funded to implement its mandate. The GNC is legally recognised by government and the entire cooperative movement across all business sectors.

The government's reinstatement of the Higher Council of Cooperation encouraged broadening the GNC. Over the years, nine other national cooperative organisations joined the five original founding members: Confédération nationale de la mutualité, de la coopération et du crédit agricole; Confédération nationale du crédit mutuel; Chambre syndicale des banques populaires ; Fédération française des coopératives et groupement d'artisans (which became the Confédération française des coopératives et groupement d'artisans, representing cooperatives of sole traders); Office central de la coopération à l'école (schools); Union fédérale des coopératives de commerçants (retailers); Fédération nationale des coopératives et groupements du transport (transportation); Coopération maritime (commercial fishing); and the cooperative section of the Comité de coordination des œuvres mutualistes et coopératives de l'éducation nationale (cooperatives working with schools ; source: GNC, 1993).

During a national cooperative conference organised by the GNC on 25 October 2010, the name of the French cooperative movement's apex organisation was changed from the GNC to Coop FR – Les entreprises coopératives. Coop FR is a non-profit organisation governed by the law of 1901 on associations.

France: prototype of the sectoral model

The French model of cooperative representation is probably the most differentiated by sector. Virtually all of the cooperative sectors have reached an advanced stage of development at the individual level and are considerably integrated at the sector level. However, the model has not managed to integrate the third level organisational structure. The situation is still

largely segmented organisationally. This is due less to a choice or lack of political will than to history. The sectoral cooperative federations were created before Coop FR. The organisational fragmentation of the French cooperative movement is apparent in the composition of its national office, which only employs three people.

The British cooperative movement [4]

(4) A large part of this section comes from the entry on the United Kingdom in the *Historical Dictionary of the Cooperative Movement* (Shaffer, 1999).

Organised cooperation in the United Kingdom goes back to the early 18th century, and its beginnings are associated with the establishment of a mutual insurance company, Mutual Fire. In the 1770s, building societies appeared, a type of cooperative organisation that sought to tackle the problem of poor housing conditions linked to the rural exodus. The first tailors' cooperative was formed during this decade and was a precursor of the cooperative textile mills. At the end of the century, Robert Owen played a very important role in the development of the cooperative movement with the creation of New Lanark in 1799 as a model of industrial cooperation.

In the early 19th century, there were various experiments in organising shops along cooperative principles, culminating in 1820 with the creation of the first consumer cooperative, founded in Brighton by Dr William King, also known for publishing *The Co-operator*, the first cooperative newspaper. In 1830, there were 300 cooperatives and 12 cooperative newspapers officially registered. The following year, the first Co-operative Congress of the United Kingdom was held in Manchester. The founding of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844 is regarded as inaugurating the modern cooperative movement. In reality, there had already been nearly one hundred years of cooperative thinking and experimentation in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, out of which grew the Rochdale cooperative.

The period from Rochdale to the First World War was a time of dramatic growth and development. The government supported the cooperative movement by establishing the cooperative registry in 1846, followed by the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1852 (the first cooperative legislation in the world), which was amended in 1862 to allow for the formation of cooperative unions. New cooperatives began to appear in various sectors, including manufacturing (1850), wholesale distribution (1862-63), insurance (1867), agriculture (1867), banking (1868, 1872, 1876), building societies (1884) and housing (1900).

Cooperative federations and other support groups started to appear, including the Co-operative Union in Manchester (1869), a federation of worker cooperatives (1882), an agricultural cooperative federation (1901) and a federation of cooperative fisheries (1914).

The inter-war period was a time of institutionalisation. In 1919, the Co-operative College in Loughborough and the Co-operative Party were founded. The production activities of the consumer cooperative movement were developed. The Plunkett Foundation for Co-operative Studies, established in London in 1919, became the principal instrument for information about the activities of agricultural cooperatives.

After the Second World War and the return to a peacetime economy, cooperatives re-established their networks. Consumer cooperatives faced stiff competition, which necessitated radically rethinking their way of operating. Small shops were often replaced by more modern supermarkets.

In the 1990s, following the rapid loss of market share by the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) and a takeover bid by a private firm, CWS merged with the second largest consumer cooperative in the United Kingdom at that time, Co-operative Retail Services (CRS). The Co-operative Group was thus created and became the country's biggest consumer cooperative and includes CIS (insurance) and the Co-operative Bank. The Co-operative Group undertook an enormous rebranding exercise of the cooperative name for its 4,500 outlets, whose range of businesses covers food retailing, travel agencies, banks, insurance, pharmacies, funeral services and legal services.

There are 6,169 cooperatives in the United Kingdom. Since 2008, there has been a 28% increase in the number of cooperatives in the United Kingdom, turnover has risen by 23%, and there has been a 36% increase in membership, which currently numbers 15,353,000 members (Co-operatives UK, 2013)[5].

(5) For a detailed presentation of the British cooperative movement's key figures, see: www.uk.coop/sites/storage/public/downloads/home-grown_co-op_economy_2013_final_0.pdf

Cooperative federations in the United Kingdom

Co-operatives UK is the central organisation for cooperatives in the United Kingdom. It is the descendent of the Co-operative Central Board, the cooperative federation founded in 1870, which changed its name to the Co-operative Union and then finally became Co-operatives UK following the 2001 merger between the consumer cooperative movement and the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) of worker cooperatives.

The new organisation began to take shape when Dame Pauline Green became the chief executive of the Co-operative Union on New Year's Day 2000. While she was chief executive, the Co-operative Commission was set up, which published its final report, *The co-operative advantage: Creating a successful family of co-operative businesses*, in 2001.

The immediate operational response to the report was closer ties, increased visibility and a new role for the Co-operative Union, which would lead to the merger between the Co-operative Union and ICOM. The cooperative movements – consumer cooperatives and worker cooperatives – joined together for the first time since their split in 1880. Co-operatives UK is a cooperative federation which includes others (currently 19 in total), but their economic importance is considerably less than consumer cooperatives.

The staff of Co-operatives UK is composed of 27 people covering a range of responsibilities including policy, consultancy, communications and membership[6]. The staff of the Co-operative College (around 30 people) can also be considered as part of publicity and lobbying activities.

(6) www.uk.coop/about/staff.

The United Kingdom: prototype of the cross-sectoral model

In this brief description of the evolution of the organisation of the British cooperative movement, the gradual development of a cross-sectoral model

(7) www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk.

can be seen. The most dominant feature of the movement is consumer cooperatives, and business activity is concentrated in two large companies, the Co-operative Group and the John Lewis Partnership[(7)]. The board of directors has 19 members divided as follows: 9 seats for the big consumer cooperatives (Co-operative Group, Midlands Co-operative Society and Midcounties Co-operative), 5 seats for elected representatives from smaller consumer cooperatives (for each of the four geographical regions of Scotland, the North, the Midlands and the South), 2 seats for elected representatives from worker cooperatives, 1 seat for the Co-operative Development Bodies, 1 seat for federations, and 1 seat for remaining members.

The Italian cooperative movement

The first consumer cooperative was formed in 1854 in Turin, the first worker cooperative in 1856 in Altare (province of Savona), and the first cooperative bank in 1864 in Lodi. In 1883, Leone Wollemborg created the first cooperative rural savings and loan association in Loreggia (province of Padua), and Nullo Baldini founded the first agricultural cooperative in the province of Ravenna. In 1886, at the Milan Congress, attended by one hundred delegates from 248 cooperatives representing 70,000 members, the Italian cooperative movement formed its first representative organisation, the National Federation of Italian Cooperatives, which became the National League of Italian Cooperatives in 1893 (Legacoop today). Mazzinians, socialists, liberal Giolittians and Catholics brought together their own views and approaches about cooperatives. In 1919, the Catholic faction of the cooperative movement formed an independent organisation, the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative), which, along with the other organisations, was absorbed into a Fascist cooperative organisation in 1926. Confcooperative and Legacoop were re-established in May 1945. In 1952, the republican and social-democratic wing left Legacoop and set up the General Association of Italian Cooperatives (AGCI), while in 1975 a group from Confcooperative formed the National Union of Italian Cooperatives (UNCI). Lastly, in 2004 the Italian Union of Cooperatives (Unicoop) was created.

This brief historical overview reveals that cooperatives in Italy are a business form made up of different cultures and ideological traditions – Mazzinian liberalism, socialism and social Catholicism. The strong ideological divisions of the Italian cooperative movement are unique in the international cooperative context.

Cooperative federations in Italy

Traditionally, cooperatives in Italy have been organised into central cooperative federations (*centrale*) that are involved in lobbying, assistance, protection and monitoring. Each federation has member cooperatives from different sectors (agriculture, banking, retail distribution, housing, etc.). The central federations are legally recognised by government, which has delegated them the supervisory function of periodically carrying out the cooperative audit.

On 27 January 2011, the Italian cooperative movement formed the Italian Cooperative Alliance, the national apex organisation for the three most representative central cooperative federations – AGCI, Confcooperative and Legacoop. On 29 January 2014, a further step was taken with the clear shift in policy from simple coordination to structural integration.

The Italian Cooperative Alliance brings together 43,500 cooperative enterprises with 12 million members, 1.1 million jobs and a total turnover of around 127 billion euros, which is 7.3% of GDP. These enterprises represent 12.9% of retail banking and rank fourth in the sector, 30% of distribution, 50% of agri-food, and 90% of the cooperatives in the social sector (Pezzini, 2012*a*).

Italy: prototype of the integrated model

Thanks to its tradition of central federations, the organisation of the cooperative movement in Italy is highly integrated and has recently been strengthened by the formation of the Italian Cooperative Alliance.

According to a precise strategy, the central federations organise political representation on two levels. The first level, which could be called "horizontal", is geographical (province, region, country) irrespective of the business sector. The second level is based on the business sector.

This also enables the federations to play a role in strategic planning and promoting the cooperative economy by optimising the use of the whole network and the different sectoral specialisations. In this integrated framework, entrepreneurial development functions like knowledge transfer, training, coordinating strategic planning, research and financial instruments can produce more effective results for cooperatives. This especially enables better channelling the energies, resources, and know-how of the whole system so that cooperatives can explore and try out new developments.

Analysis of the three models

The three models/prototypes are representative of the range of possible models that can be found in the rest of Europe and around the world.

The French model (prototype of the sectoral model) remains highly segmented by cooperative type with a very light coordinating structure that efficiently combines the resources of the federations. In recent years, there has not been any particular trend towards strengthening this coordination. If anything, there seems to be a weakening of the organisation, which is less structured and less unifying than in the past when it provided services like training and research funding. A remarkable innovation concerns the 2001 regulation allowing a new cooperative form, the community-interest cooperative (*société coopératives d'intérêt collectif,* or SCIC), which is a multi-stakeholder cooperative that produces and provides goods and services for the collective interest. However, this project was especially promoted by CG Scop (the federation of worker cooperatives) to which SCICs are attached (Margado, 2004). Even in its organisational segmentation, Coop FR is able to have a structural conversation with political bodies through the Higher Council of Cooperation and, in the current political context, can count on

the support of the Deputy Minister attached to the Department of the Economy and Finances in charge of the social and solidarity economy. The recent passage of the bill on the social and solidarity economy reflects the ability to have a strong political relationship even if worker cooperatives are the sector that emerges as innovative and the area that interests lawmakers the most.

The British model (prototype of the cross-sectoral model) has driven a "cooperative renaissance" related to the new cross-sectoral organisation. The dominant sector, consumer cooperatives, has become the base and support for a wider function. The model has incorporated other structured sectors with their staff and has turned into a platform for representing the country's entire cooperative movement. This also involved changing its name from the Co-operative Union to Co-operative UK after more than a century. The recent and devastating crisis of Co-operative Bank and of the Co-operative Group has tainted the reputation of the whole movement. Generally speaking, there are two cooperative cultures – one is characterised by financialization and greater scale in the retail and supermarket sector, and the other by an emphasis on participation and a political commitment that is found more in worker cooperatives.

Concerning the Italian model (prototype of the integrated model), it would be hard to understand and explain the recent innovations of Italian cooperatives without taking into account the integrated system of federations. For three emblematic cases, which are at very different stages of development – social cooperatives, healthcare cooperatives and community cooperatives – the role of the federations has, in different ways, been of great importance. In the case of social cooperatives, their promoters had the political intelligence to guide these new organisations towards the cooperative movement. This choice was not at all obvious (Borzaga and Ianes, 2006). Participating in an organised cooperative movement has unquestionably had a positive effect for social cooperatives at the institutional level, culminating with the law on social cooperatives (law no. 381/1991). In the case of healthcare cooperatives as well as the new community cooperatives, it seems rather obvious that without the backing, support and organisation of the federations, the initiatives might not have succeeded or at least not in such favourable conditions (Pezzini, 2012*b*). The pace of legislative activity for cooperatives has continued unabated. In addition to the law on social cooperatives in 1991, the following year saw the introduction of new rules for cooperatives with law no. 59/1992, which contained particularly significant innovations regarding financial instruments (funding members and mutual development funds). In the beginning of this century, four fundamental changes had to be made: a transitional tax rule, the reform of the cooperative audit, the reform of company law, and changes in rules on worker cooperatives (Pezzini, 2003). This matrix system, invaluable as it is, is not without its shortcomings. The sectoral federations have very limited autonomy and resources. The way regional sectoral organisations operate, are funded and represent cooperatives should be greatly improved in comparison with the central federations.

Even with a very rapid and inevitably incomplete analysis, it is possible to see the importance of the role played by the organisations in each of the countries examined. When conditions have favoured grouping cooperative

sectors in more structured and integrated associations, there has been a greater ability to represent the movement, deliver services, innovate, and promote new cooperatives, in particular in new sectors. The staff employed (which is obviously not the only indicator) by the umbrella cooperative organisations in France, the United Kingdom and Italy is telling. In France, Coop FR has three employees, Co-operatives UK has around fifty people at its headquarters in Manchester, and the three organisations of the Italian Cooperative Alliance employ around 250 people at the main office in Rome alone. If the staff of the regional and provincial organisations are included, the figure reaches nearly 2,000 people.

In the French model, all of the resources, not just personnel, remain concentrated at the sectoral level (banking, agriculture, transport, etc.), which is highly specialised, but cross-sectoral integration is very weak or even absent. In Italy, it is the opposite with a strong cross-sectoral dimension. Representation comes before sectoral interests. Between the two, there is the British model, which is resolutely oriented towards strong cross-sectoral integration despite an enormous concentration of economic and political weight in the consumer cooperative sector alone and in the Co-operative Group in particular.

These national analyses help us compare the way the national organisations have developed and determine possible future directions for representing cooperatives at the European level.

European challenges: Cooperative organisations in Brussels

The cooperative organisations located in Brussels, close to the institutions of the European Union, are strictly sectoral in origin. The presence of cooperative organisations in Brussels dates back to the late 1950s with the formation of the European Community of Consumer Cooperatives (Eurocoop) in 1957 and the General Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives in the European Union (Cogeca) founded on 24 September 1959. Over the years, other sectoral cooperative organisations were formed at the European level. In 1961, the European Union of Social Pharmacies was created (EUSP), and in 1970 the European Association of Cooperative Banks (EACB) was formed. The European Cooperative and Mutual Insurance Association (ACME) was founded by the International Cooperative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF) to become its European arm in 1979. CECOP, the European Committee of Worker Cooperatives, was created in 1982 with an office in Brussels, was transformed into a confederation in 1997 and is today CECOP-CICOPA Europe (European Confederation of Workers' Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises). CECOCHDAS (European Federation of Public, Cooperative & Social Housing) was established in 1988 by Italian, French and German housing cooperatives.

The establishment of European organisations representing cooperatives has followed a pragmatic and sectoral route in response to the growing influence of European policy in different areas. There is thus no overall strategic vision but rather opportunistic positions by sector.

A European umbrella organisation was established in Brussels in 1983 with the creation of the Coordinating Committee of European Union

Cooperative Associations (CCACC which then became CCACE). CCACE was a simple organisation without a formal legal status nor its own staff. The most developed European organisations took it in turns to run the office. Although it was a very flexible and light organisation, that did not prevent it from working closely with European institutions and producing some important results such as the regulation on the statute for a European Cooperative Society and the European Commission's "Communication on the promotion of co-operative societies in Europe" (Pezzini et Pflüger, 2013).

At the same time, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) began a process of decentralisation in 1992 with the creation of offices in the four regions of Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. ICA Europe set up offices in the same building as the ICA with a remit to promote and represent European cooperatives and maintain a dialogue with cooperative organisations and European governments. In the beginning of the 21st century, there were thus two different centres for European organisations representing cooperatives – the office of ICA Europe in Geneva for the European continent and the CCACE for the institutions of the European Union in Brussels.

Some events have changed the situation. Firstly, the European Union has grown from 15 to 25 member states, then 27, and today 28. Most of the countries of continental Europe are now part of the European Union. A second factor that has increased awareness about the need for structural change in the cooperative movement has been the increasingly frequent policy debates that concern all cooperatives in general (the international accounting standard IAS 32, the drafting of European company law, etc.). This has revealed the urgency for a single organisation speaking for cooperatives with European institutions. This last problem was connected with the cost of transferring the ICA Europe headquarters to Brussels. It was solved by Confcooperative, who lent its offices in the European quarter of Brussels for free for four years. ICA Europe's presence in Brussels since 2004 has enabled the rapid creation of a joint platform with the CCACE. During the regional General Assembly in Manchester on 11 November 2006, the two bodies merged to form Cooperatives Europe, a new cross-sectoral organisation representing all cooperative organisations in Europe.

Conclusion

There is a vast body of literature on lobbying in Europe (Grossman and Saurugger, 2012) and on the number of interest groups in Brussels (Greenwood, 2011), which vary from 1,450 to 2,600 depending on the source. Cooperatives Europe is faced with a multitude of competing lobbies that often have infinitely greater resources at their disposal. Furthermore, it was created a few decades after the European sectoral cooperative organisations, which in most cases are better structured and have a long tradition of working with other socio-economic organisations and European institutions.

In this difficult context, Cooperatives Europe does not yet have a roadmap nor a clear political vision. Its policies often remain tied to arguments focused on the values and virtues of cooperatives and not enough

on the real situation, politics, strategies and practices of cooperatives. Currently, each European federation has its own strategy while there is still no discernible strategy for the whole cooperative movement.

There are surely external reasons for the movement's lack of visibility and recognition, in particular the domination of an economic theory backed by powerful lobby groups that play an increasingly decisive role today. However, internal factors should not be under-estimated. The history of the organisations representing and supporting cooperatives has shown the prominence of sectoral experiences. In most countries and at the European level, cooperatives have historically organised themselves thanks to the homogeneity of their businesses. The choice is understandable, but the model has reached its limits.

The consolidated experience, as in Italy, recent developments in the United Kingdom and Germany, and the historical experience of the ICA at the international level, show that strong cross-sectoral and integrated umbrella organisations are indispensable in addition to sectoral organisations. They can concentrate more on defending and promoting the actual cooperative experience, which is crucial today in their relations with national governments and European institutions and for developing appropriate legal and tax regimes.

Until now, the cooperative movement has very probably underestimated its systemic dimension by allowing the trade-sectoral dimension to dominate (Sibille and Ghezali, 2010). This has severely hampered the ability to put forward a strong collective message by rallying together as a unified movement (Favreau and Molina, 2011). The main challenge today is giving the cooperative difference a single voice so that cooperatives can be better appreciated and better heard.

If the cooperative movement wants to meet the enormous challenges and seize the great opportunities that are open to it, the organisational model in the future needs to move decisively towards greater regional and cross-sectoral integration. The analyses of national cases have shown that in countries where the model has moved beyond strictly sectoral interests, the ability to innovate and promote and support new cooperative sectors is greater as is political influence.

It is not a question of resources but of political will.

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