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BOOK REVIEW

Andrea Bernardi, Massimiliano Mazzanti, Salvatore Monni (Eds.): Innovations for Circularity and Knowledge Creation: Participation and Cooperative Approaches for Sustainability

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Innovations for Circularity and Knowledge Creation: Participation and Cooperative Approaches for Sustainability, edited by Andrea Bernardi, Massimiliano Mazzanti, and Salvatore Monni, represents a necessary and essential contribution to the contemporary discourse on sustainable economics, focusing particularly on the role of cooperative models in advancing circular economy practices.

The book stands out for it steering the scientific debate onto non-ideological grounds. Indeed, while not explicitly stated, the book, through the tone of its contributions, actually distances itself from proving whether cooperatives are inherently more sustainable market actors than others. Instead, it focuses on examining the practical and theoretical reasons that make the cooperative model particularly suitable and functional compared to other business models in the practical application of eco-innovation and environmental and social sustainability.

In its 12 chapters, the book explores the principles and theoretical aspects that uniquely qualify the cooperative model for integrating social and environmental concerns into production systems.

Through detailed case studies, it examines recent theoretical advancements in circular economy models. Each chapter builds on the one before, weaving together a detailed narrative that illustrates the dynamic relationship between cooperation, sustainability, and innovation.

The initial part of the book primarily focuses on theoretical aspects, providing a solid foundation for the readers' understanding. The introductory chapter emphasizes the historical significance of the cooperative movement in addressing the challenges and social inequities produced by an economic model based on linear growth and capital accumulation. For this reason, the rest of the book seeks answers to contemporary challenges within the cooperative model.

The interpretive key is a detailed exploration, in chapter 3, of the concept of circular economy, highlighting its strategic and political roles. Here, the circular economy is embraced as an advanced economic model that goes beyond the traditional "end-of-life" approach to products and reintegrates social equity into strategies for sustainable development. This is achieved through the active involvement of various actors in the political, social, and productive sectors, on a micro, meso, and macro scale.

Based on these premises, the authors' contributions focus on the cooperative model's ability to center on the individual and preserve collective interests. This is ensured through democratic cooperative governance along with an effective active participation, internally and externally, while at the same time operating within a market framework. This ability, which in the book edited by Bernardi, Mazzanti, and Monni clearly emerges as the distinctive trait of the cooperative enterprise compared to other economic players, is explored in the contributions of various authors across multiple facets of sustainability.

On the one hand, the book emphasizes the ability of cooperative enterprises to act as catalysts for Hirschman's "social energy" and to innovatively meet community needs. This can be seen in community cooperatives and cooperatives that in Italy manage confiscated mafia assets for the good of the local community or in *contribution cooperatives*¹ as in the Trentino valley that allow for more wide-spread emancipation for the local farmers. On the other hand, through Buchanan's *club theory*, it identifies the inclusiveness of cooperatives, which are envisioned as "clubs" of non-rival members, where the sharing of limited resources becomes non-exclusive, allowing all members to benefit optimally. However, this inclusivity is not guaranteed without genuine active participation from the members, which often diminishes as cooperatives expand. The authors, therefore, offer a series of recommendations aimed at supporting and maintaining this essential democratic practice. Moreover, on this same topic, the final chapter suggest adopting innovative solutions, such as the implementation of design thinking, creating a problem-solving approach that can be easily mixed and meshed to address the needs of the specific context in the cooperative democratic processes.

Effective participation becomes even more crucial if, as hoped in chapter 6, there is a need to restructure cooperative governance to incorporate a broader range of external stakeholders in

¹ The authors refer to "contribution cooperatives" as agricultural cooperatives for production and marketing.

order to enhance the cooperatives' capacity to meet more complex sustainability goals and generate greater social value. It is in this area that the authors see the potential for cooperatives to serve as a link between the circular economy and social development.

The final chapters of the book feature three case studies from Italy, Argentina, and Chile, offering a concrete perspective on how the discussed theories can be implemented in practice. Additionally, in these chapters and throughout the book, the need for a favorable regulatory and financial framework recurs. This framework is essential for enabling cooperatives to fully perform their role in a sustainable and inclusive economy. The Italian case highlights a steady increase in the number of cooperatives engaged in the circular economy sectors and presents three significant examples of cooperatives that are actively adopting effective ecological transition practices in various economic sectors (energy, wine, and textiles). Similarly, the case of rural water cooperatives in Chile illustrates the significant impact these organizations can have on sustainability practices, especially in areas where the welfare state is often absent or where economic interest from private enterprises is limited. Although not directly addressing cooperatives, the Argentine case demonstrates that the concept of individual interest appears as a cage that can only be broken through necessary economic "socialization" and the rediscovery of the theoretical concept of meso-economics. Specifically, the concept of "meso-economics" refers to an economic dimension that sits between the micro level (individual interest) and the macro level (generic demand for goods and services). This dimension is the space where interactions between organizations, businesses, civil society, and the state are articulated, creating a socio-economic fabric based on community values. It is a space that enables the formation of an "ethical social capital" which allows the economy to shift from "relations of interest" to "relations of values", from responding to consumer demand to responding to a demand for rights.

The book thus provides actionable insights for scholars, professionals and policymakers. It effectively bridges the gap between theoretical research and practical application, making it a valuable resource for those involved in managing cooperatives, sustainability planning, and policy formulation. The analysis includes various cooperative models, such as worker production cooperatives, community cooperatives, agricultural cooperatives and consumer cooperatives across different cultural and economic contexts, offering a robust framework for understanding the versatility and adaptability of cooperatives in promoting sustainable development. Moreover, the book does not shy away from complex discussions, such as the challenges of aligning cooperative business models with strict environmental regulations and market dynamics. The choice to combine theory with practical case studies and to include authors with diverse research interests, such as economics, social sciences, engineering, business development and governance structures, sustainable development and circular economy, not only broadens the academic discussion but also makes this book a thought-provoking work that can open new avenues for research. On the other hand, this choice inevitably leaves limited space for an in-depth examination of individual topics discussed. Moreover, from a general perspective, the book, while expanding the scope of the discussion by addressing secondary

topics, fails to provide a detailed exploration of the main topic and does not present a clear and unified vision on the subject.

There is, for example, a need for further case studies, not only in different geographical contexts but especially on innovative cooperative models such as platform cooperatives. Such a contribution could further strengthen the evidence presented and provide additional insights into future trends in cooperative sustainability practices.