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Trento International Research Colloquium on Cooperatives

KEY-WORDS

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF COOPERATIVES, TRANSFORMATIVE POWER, COOPERATIVE RESEARCH, SUSTAINABILITY, WORK AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, NETWORKS

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1. Aims and key challenges

On May 30 and 31, 2025 EURICSE, in collaboration with the International Cooperative Alliance Global Committee on Cooperative Research (ICA CCR), the EMES International Research Network, CIRIEC International, and the University of Trento organized a Research Colloquium¹ to celebrate the 2025 UN International Year of Cooperatives. The Colloquium benefited from the financial support of the Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione, on the occasion of its 130th anniversary.

The rationale of the Trento Colloquium, which involved 50 scholars from Europe, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Africa, was threefold. First, to reflect on cooperatives' capacity and limitations in tackling pressing challenges. Second, to critically discuss new research avenues that could be explored over the next years, given the aim of capturing the distinguishing features of the

¹ <https://euricse.eu/en/events/international-research-colloquium-on-cooperatives/> [Accessed: 24 June 2025]

cooperative model, including its legal and economic structure, principles and values, strengths, limitations, opportunities and future scenarios. Third, to explore the differences and similarities of the participating networks, with respect to topics and areas of research, methods, theories, funding, organizational structure and reach, and supporting institutions.

Participants were invited by the participating networks and organizers and included scholars that are researching cooperatives from different disciplinary angles, including economics, law, sociology, business and management, political science, history, and geography. Likewise, the approaches used by participants are very diverse, comprised of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as comparative studies based on inter-disciplinary perspectives. Participants confirmed their growing interest in methodological integration and inter-relationships across disciplines, as well as towards expanding research techniques and bridging diverse theoretical approaches. These should include action research, grounded theory, comparative case studies, social networks analysis, mixed methods, geographic information systems and comparative methods. Methodologically, interdisciplinarity is crucial: combining legal, economic, and sociological approaches with transdisciplinary and mixed-method research. Cooperative research could also be reinvigorated via the appropriation and development of critical approaches and conceptual frameworks. Among these, behavioral economics, political economy, epistemological turn and epistemic justice, pragmatism, complexity and system theory, critical theories, intersectional approach, power structures, institutional and evolutionary economics, and law and economics.

As a preliminary exercise to the Colloquium, participants identified regional patterns and country contexts. While cooperatives' underpinning principles of solidarity have been demonstrated throughout history, over the decades cooperatives have become extremely diverse across the globe and within regions and countries. In several European countries cooperatives have strengthened their social and environmental commitment up to the point that new cooperative forms have been recognized in some countries and new cooperatives are emerging in various domains of general interest to ensure access to renewable energy, locally-produced food, and affordable housing. Meanwhile, these are several cases of cooperatives that have approximated investor-owned enterprises or have disappeared altogether from key sectors such as consumption and agriculture.

A different narrative emerges in the African context, where cooperatives are the most dominant social and solidarity economy form, with financial cooperatives in particular experiencing fast growth. However, in some countries cooperative legislation remains largely unchanged from its colonial roots, whilst in others, the utilization of cooperatives by the state has created distrust. Consequently, cooperative-like entrepreneurship is common practice, but is often done informally, outside of the regulatory mechanisms of the state.

Asia is attracting wider attention from different perspectives. Cooperatives in the Asian Pacific region took different paths from the West. The idea of cooperation arrived in the late 19th century to the British offshoots while Japan introduced the cooperative law in 1900 after the German Model. The British Indian pattern of cooperation spread throughout Asian colonies and its top-down pattern was inherited by the new independent states seeking socio-economic development.

In this context, cooperatives have evolved in two directions as top-down entities strongly controlled by governments and bottom-up entities grown from grass roots.

North America has a diverse mix of cooperative histories and initiatives across many sectors. Mainstream cooperatives include large and well developed agricultural and credit cooperatives, initially founded to address market failures and to obtain economies of scale. Other initiatives include worker, energy and renewable energy, housing, and care cooperatives. There is increasing emphasis that cooperatives should help to bolster what some see as a deterioration of democracy, as well as more commitment to environmental and climate issues, and the circular economy.

Latin America has had a history of cooperativism that has extended out from indigenous ways of organizing and from colonialism, moving on to the growth of its modern cooperative movements. Cooperative enterprises in Latin America have been furthermore reinforced in recent years and a wave of new cooperatives, especially worker cooperatives, has emerged in countries hardest hit by economic crises. However, a great heterogeneity characterizes Latin American countries' cooperative movements concerning origins, dimensions, legal recognition, economic impact, and number of organizations.

The diverse geographical scope of participants made discussions extremely stimulating. Two pressing challenges were highlighted by participants: on the one hand the need to reframe some theoretical questions guiding cooperative research to properly include current challenges such as fighting against climate change and seizing the potential of economic democracy; on the other hand, the importance of overcoming the predominantly Western perspective, which has so far inspired the design of many international cooperative research projects.

2. Four main research themes

The Colloquium was organized around four research themes, regarded as priorities by the organizing networks and institutions, namely:

1. Cooperative evolution: cooperative transformation and new forms of cooperatives;
2. Cooperatives' role in transitioning to more ecological and democratic societies;
3. Cooperatives, work and democratic participation;
4. Cooperation among cooperatives and a transformative cooperative movement.

3. Structure of the colloquium

The Colloquium consisted of three plenary and four thematic sessions, whose architecture was designed to foster active participation of both experienced scholars and early-career researchers.

After a short presentation by the Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione, which illustrated the history and widespread consolidation of cooperatives in Trentino, the first plenary session

highlighted differences and similarities in the participating networks. Presenters referred especially to the diversity across networks as their organizational structures and reach, topics and areas of research, methods and theories, and funding. ICA CCR focuses on cooperatives; EMES International Research Network on a broader domain defined as the “SE field”² which comprehends cooperatives. CIRIEC International focuses on the social economy and hence on cooperatives as one of its key and most longstanding components. In this International Year of Cooperatives, the cooperative enterprise model was the point of encounter in the Colloquium.

Following four parallel thematic sessions (results described below) at the end of day one, Prof. Jean-Louis Laville provided some critical insights on the role, potential and limitations of cooperatives both from a historical and theoretical perspective. His speech questioned the linear way whereby cooperatives are normally portrayed and proposed an alternative interpretation of cooperative evolution. He started from the rediscovery of cooperatives’ roots in diverse geographical contexts, retraced their institutionalization and shed light on the emergence of a new wave of cooperatives, reactivated by voluntary collectives. Laville highlighted the need to develop new lines of research, given the aim to contribute to an economy in contrast to the failures generated by an extractivist and productivist system.

For each thematic session the organizers appointed a chair, a facilitator and two rapporteurs. Participants, independently from the role covered, were asked to fill a template beforehand where they briefly described their disciplinary background and the scholarly, policy, and societal relevance of their research work, including its progress in relation to existing knowledge. Based on the completed templates, the four groups mapped the current state of research from the lenses of contributing scholars and their institutions/networks. This preliminary map was hence enriched by the participants’ inputs, who actively contributed to the discussion under the guidance of a facilitator. Facilitators guided participants to set the aims to be achieved by each thematic group and ensured an environment conducive to creative and critical thinking. Collective discussions paved the way for the identification of key areas of collaboration within each thematic group, with attention paid especially to synergies and overlaps. To foster shared understanding and collaborative insights, each thematic group self-organized its work, drawing either on rotating parallel group discussions, or on discussions in smaller working groups sharing the same research interests.

4. Main outcomes of thematic sessions

The final plenary session consisted of two distinct parts. In the first part, each thematic group communicated the main outcomes of group discussions, with an emphasis on developing a forward-looking research agenda.

² The “SE field” encompasses different research themes, including social enterprise, the social and solidarity economy, social entrepreneurship and social innovation.

4.1 Theme 1. Cooperative evolution: cooperative transformation and new forms of cooperatives

The first thematic session scrutinized three trends characterizing cooperatives: the emergence of new types of cooperatives addressing general interest aims and/or the needs of fragile stakeholders; the enhancement of the social commitment of traditional cooperatives following the management of common goods and the delivery of services for the entire community; and, in line with the Colloquium's aim of keeping a worldwide perspective, informal cooperatives that operate in country contexts with high informality.

When approaching new cooperatives pursuing general interest aims, participants in the first group highlighted the importance of acknowledging regional differences, which are often overlooked by current research. Trends and challenges vary indeed in the case of community cooperatives dramatically across regions and countries, calling for more accurate analyses that properly reflect the diverse histories and contextual conditions.

In Europe new cooperative forms that are strongly rooted in forms of collective awareness have been legally recognized over the past decades. These have come to the fore to tackle social exclusion, fill gaps in welfare services and support the revitalization of sparsely populated areas—just to name a few—in Italy, France, and Spain. In many instances, cooperative evolution has gone hand in hand with the opening of their governing bodies to the participation of different groups of stakeholders, having different relations with the enterprise. This has paved in some instances the way for the development of multi stakeholder cooperatives, which question one of the key features of traditional single stakeholder cooperatives, namely their aim of promoting the interests of members.

Conversely, African countries are still today affected by a strong influence of colonialism and Western approaches in cooperative evolution and interpretation, which sometimes hampers the identification of informal cooperatives whose activity aligns with cultural, community and indigenous practice. Asia Pacific countries—the region with by large the highest number of cooperatives—is nonetheless distinguished by extremely diverse historical contexts and cooperative types, whose development is influenced by rapid urbanization, reduced agricultural productivity, and climate change-induced extreme weather events. Finally, cooperative enterprises in Latin America have been reinforced in recent years by the economic crisis, as the number of cooperatives continues to increase. A typical pattern of Latin American cooperatives is their strong political dimension which has a role in explaining the transformative power of many cooperative initiatives. To capture the richness of community-based cooperatives and cooperative-like initiatives from a global perspective, participants agreed to rename their sphere of analysis as: “community-based cooperatives (where community is intended both as place and interest-based) and cooperatives for the common good”.

At the same time, to properly understand the patterns of evolution of these initiatives, participants underlined the need to adopt a three-level analysis, involving the organizational, community and institutional levels.

Concerning the design of a forward-looking research agenda, participants identified three overarching themes. The first one concerns the drivers of community-based cooperatives and cooperatives for the common

good. The second one refers to the cooperative advantage—if any—in community-based cooperatives and cooperatives for the common good, including the benefits, as well as the risks and conditions of cooperatives' inclusiveness and exclusiveness. This implies investigating the conditions for community-based cooperatives/cooperatives for the common good transformative potential, their contribution to wealth creation and distribution, and how these initiatives affect power structures. The third overarching theme concerns the conditions shaping an enabling ecosystem for the emergence and development of community cooperatives and cooperatives for the common good.

4.2 Theme 2. Cooperatives' role in transitioning to more ecological democratic societies

Theme 2 was inspired by the assumption that given their “concern for the communities” (ICA Principle 7) cooperatives should be naturally suited to be on the frontline of the transition to more environmentally sustainable practices. However, this is unfortunately not always the case, as some recent analyses show. Participants' research interests ranged in this case from understanding the interlinkages between cooperative enterprises and positive environmental outcomes up to measuring and assessing cooperatives' economic, social and ecological production. Group discussion focused on the potential of cooperatives to contribute to ecological and democratic transitions. Participants highlighted the importance of exploring how cooperatives can actively support these transitions, what specific roles they can play based on their unique characteristics, and which factors enable or constrain their contribution.

A key theme that emerged was the need to move beyond siloed approaches. Much of the current research and practice tends to focus on individual sectors—such as energy, social farming, and banking—which limits a systemic understanding of how cooperatives can drive wider change. Participants suggested that adopting a territorial perspective could help overcome these silos by fostering integrated approaches at the local level, while also connecting local actions to broader political frameworks.

Collaboration with other actors—including public institutions, private enterprises, and social movements—was seen as crucial. Building partnerships can strengthen the role of cooperatives within larger ecosystems of change. In particular, participants stressed the value of a systems approach, where cooperatives engage more actively with ecologists, environmental scientists, and other disciplines to better address complex social and ecological challenges. The discussion also addressed the importance of governance and democracy within cooperatives. While cooperatives are grounded in democratic principles, concerns were raised about how emerging trends—such as EU-level policies or the growing use of digital technologies—may impact internal governance and decision-making processes. There is a risk that these trends could undermine the democratic ethos of cooperatives if not carefully managed.

Scaling impact emerged as another important topic. Participants reflected on whether cooperatives can amplify their influence using existing financial institutions or whether there is a need to develop new, cooperative-led financial mechanisms to better align with their values and

objectives. The potential of circular economy practices, especially within smaller organizations, was discussed as an area requiring further exploration. Education was recognized as a fundamental enabler of transition. Participants emphasized the need to integrate cooperative and social economy values into education systems—from primary and secondary schools to higher education and policy training—to foster greater awareness and capacity for action. Linking education to real-world cooperative initiatives was seen as a promising way to cultivate future changemakers.

The discussion also touched on the need for cooperatives to clarify their position within broader transformation agendas. While some cooperatives are pursuing progressive paths aligned with concepts like degrowth and the commons, others may be more conservative in their orientation. Without a more critical and reflective stance, there is a risk that cooperatives could lose relevance, particularly among younger generations who seek more radical forms of change.

Finally, participants of Theme 2 underlined the importance of conceptual clarity when addressing key terms such as “circular economy” and “sustainability”, to avoid superficial interpretations. Structural barriers—including limited access to finance and a lack of education and training—remain persistent challenges that must be addressed if cooperatives are to play a stronger role in democratic and ecological transitions.

4.3 Theme 3. Cooperatives, work and democratic participation

Theme 3 scrutinized the cooperative potential for creating employment and safeguarding employment, empowering people as well as on reconfiguration of ownership and governance structures when cooperatives become larger, on digital platforms, multinational and multistakeholder. Before delving into the debate on the relation between work and democracy in cooperative organizations, the third group decided to frame the results in a template encompassing four dimensions: research questions, themes, conceptual frameworks and methods. They used this template to guide the reflection with the more general discussion of the group as well as the discussion in the three sub-groups identified. Results of the group discussion were then presented to the plenary accordingly.

Informing research questions are: How cooperatives and social enterprises drive transformative cooperation to get civic engagement and participation? What is the perception of worker members in relation to management and innovation in governance that leads to effective transformation over time for large cooperatives? What are the governance mechanisms that assure participation in large and multinational cooperatives? What is the evolution of governance in large cooperatives? What are the failures and pathologies of democracy in cooperatives? What are the ecosystems that foster workplace democracy? Are cooperatives providing quality work and jobs for member and for non-members workers? What is job quality for non-members workers? How do we compare job quality of cooperatives across time and place, and with traditional companies? How can we tackle procedural fairness in cooperatives? These overlooked research questions informed the discussion on topics, methods and conceptual frameworks.

Key themes emerging from the discussion include governance, participation, engagement, ecosystems, the relationship among ownership, governance and management, and failures. Partially, these topics are already central in cooperative research; yet, not all of them have been adequately addressed. For example, democratic, multi-level and inclusive governance remains central in cooperatives and worker cooperatives more precisely. But it is also difficult to sustain in large or digital cooperatives where trust, voice, and co-responsibility are harder to ensure. Participation varies widely, from formal ownership to effective voice in decision-making, and is often uneven, with legal, organizational, and cultural constraints. Similarly, ecosystems—geographical, institutional and social—are key for cooperative development and diffusion. Indeed, cooperatives do not operate in a vacuum but influence and are shaped by their broader context; spillover effects and network interactions matter for scaling impact and resilience.

4.4 Theme 4. Cooperation among cooperatives and a transformative cooperative movement

Cooperation amongst cooperatives is a fundamental element of the cooperative philosophy and is expressed in Principle 6 of the ICA Cooperative Identity. The group noted the need to improve cooperation amongst cooperatives, both within local communities and on an international scale. As a result, participants' research interests concerned the potential for cooperation among cooperatives, whether through organizational structures such as federations, associations, or apex structures, collaborations, joint ventures, economic and knowledge and education exchanges, etc. Financing was also noted as an important issue, and thus the role of innovation approaches to financial and credit cooperatives should be explored. This cooperation amongst cooperatives was widely recognized as a key mechanism for the development of a transformative cooperative movement across all levels: local, national, and global.

According to participants in the Theme 4 group, a fundamental aspect that needs to be considered before analyzing possible pathways for cooperation amongst cooperatives relates to the actors involved and to the contextual factors influencing their relationship. While cooperation between cooperatives is the common interpretation of the term, it is worth noting that part of the scholarly community has found that building collaborations with other actors (either in the social economy or outside of it) allows for extending the reach of the cooperative principles and exerting a cultural influence on the wider economic system. However, while noting the importance of collaborations with cooperatives and other social economy, and other actors, participants to the Colloquium agreed to focus more narrowly on cooperation between cooperatives for considering Theme 4, as it more closely follows Principle 6. In addition, a more intense collaboration between cooperatives is one way to reduce their dependence on the capitalist economy.

Moreover, participants underlined that cooperatives are not the same in every corner of the world. Cooperatives situated in the global North and in the global South have indeed different perspectives, purposes, and face different challenges and institutions, so that the opportunities and hindrances of North-South cooperation should not be the only focus of study, as it tends to be, with its roots in

development studies. The North often focuses on economic benefits, while social and humanistic aspects can be observed in the South. South-South cooperation should be more deeply studied.

Another important question relates to the purpose of cooperation among cooperatives. Should it benefit the cooperatives, or their members? The question is far from being merely rhetorical if one considers, for instance, that cooperatives might be concerned with economic sustainability and market competitiveness, whereas members might have more social, ethical or even existential reasons for participating in a cooperative. There still seems to be a divide between the actual motivations driving participation of members and their perception by the cooperatives. In this perspective, participants of the Colloquium underscored that cooperation among cooperatives should be functional to preserve the potential of cooperatives for societal transformation, rather than strictly economic gains. As expressed during one of the sessions, the pressing question is not what a cooperative can do for its members, but rather what members can achieve through an enterprise based on cooperative principles. The same question should guide cooperation between cooperatives.

Notably, participants in the Colloquium Theme 4 also highlighted the relevance of the mechanisms for cooperation among cooperatives, including in this area possible legal configurations, economic incentives and trans-boundary organizational structures, policy frameworks, as well as the role of associations, and second- or higher-degree cooperatives as facilitators. In particular, the legal-policy framework, which is currently built around the idealtype of the capitalist firm, should be better shaped to reflect the unique structure, operations, governance, and mission of cooperatives.

5. Final plenary and future steps

In the second part of the final plenary discussion, participants worked together in small groups and in plenary to identify a series of concrete actions, project ideas and proposals and shed light on the intersections with the other thematic groups.

Proposed actions that were highlighted as relevant include the creation of a common repository, the connection of the existing young and emerging scholars' networks to share research agendas and collaboration opportunities, joint publications of research results, the creation of "affinity groups" open to the participation of scholars from different networks, collaboration between networks on timing and topics of networks' initiatives such as conferences and seminars and the promotion of joint events on urgent topics. All these proposed actions will be discussed over the next year. Networks will co-design a method for future collaborations, planning of projects and joint funding opportunities.